

Bengali Children's Fiction Is A Cultural Tradition: An Analytical Study.

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Abstract:

In terms of cultural tradition, Bengal is one of the leading places, where innumerable cultural heritage are spread in different times and places. Among such traditions, children's fiction is considered as one of the significant traditions in Bengal. Generally every child is a citizen of the world by birth. Initially they have no nation, religion and not even any particular language. When they grow up, they start creating all kinds of division and difference. At first they learn their language from their mothers, fathers and near ones. Mental and physical growth also develop day by day. Besides intellectual ability, imaginary power and other creativity progress simultaneously. It is often we see that a child who is reluctant to eat, listens to the story very eagerly. Even he does not feel tired hearing the same story again and again. Usually, grandmothers and grandparents are the main storytellers. They take their grandchildren in their lap and tell them all kinds of stories and tales very interestingly. Most of these stories were created and spread orally. In the same way, Bengali children's fiction is considered as one of the extremely rich and important part of the main stream literature. It included a lot of stories, rhymes, poems, plays, tales, Folktales, Folklore, fables, legends, myths and many others oral traditions, which existed in India as well as in Bengal as our cultural tradition for centuries. It has a long and prestigious background that has stretched over various stages and periods since ancient time.

Keywords: Children's fiction, Bengali children's literature, cultural tradition, Folktales, Myths.

INTRODUCTION:

Bengal is celebrated in the world for its rich cultural tradition, which have been creating a great influence among the people and society for generations. Among such numerous cultural traditions, children's literature and folk literature occupied a prestigious position throughout India as well as in Bengal. Also, it has been considered as a significant resource of the society for ages. Bengali children's fiction is an extremely rich and important part of the main stream literature. It includes a lot of stories, poems, plays, tales, Folktales, fables, myths and many others oral traditions, which existed in India as well as in Bengal for centuries. It has a long and prestigious background that has stretched over various stages and periods. Therefore, we are going to present a brief discussion about the various aspects of children's fictions of Bengal which has been marked as a glorious chapter of cultural tradition in the perspective of Bengal for generation after generation.

Objectives: Objective of the study is to explore how children's fiction of Bengal played a vital role to promote the cultural tradition in Bengal as well as in India. The Bengali Children's literature is a very significant part of the humanities literature which is full of all kinds of literary values. The most excellent of these values is to provide a peaceful atmosphere in every society for all human beings. Through this study, I investigated the long historical background of Bengali children's fiction through which a cultural atmosphere has been highlighted. It has also been tried to find out how many institutions, magazines and writers have contributed to enhance and beautify this tradition.

Methodology: This paper analyze the historical background of Bengali children's fiction highlighting the facts that how it promoted the cultural atmosphere in Bengal for generations. The analysis targets the developments of Bengali children's fiction and various aspects of its resources. Some well-known institutions, magazines, writers and scholars and their valuable contributions are also presented here in descriptive manner. All the items are investigated using a theoretical model that is developed based on authentic frameworks.

Discussion: "In every society, the nation of children's literature involves only after the 'child' is understood as a separate category with its own distinct needs, demands and desires" (B.Chatterjee, 2009). Children's Fiction is considered one of the most delightful part of humanities literature, through which a child can be introduced and exposed to the real world. It is a social product which is characterized with specific signs. It provides the little learners with opportunities to respond to literature regarding to their own cultural traditions as well as others. It helps children to develop their emotional intelligence, imaginary power and creativity. It nurtures the growth and development of children's ethic, moral values and social skills, and it transfers one generation to the next.

Almost all the historians and literary scholars are unanimous on this view that, in ancient time there was no written form of literature found, especially the children's literature. Then, it was primarily in oral form, which had been told by mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, and other family members specifically at bed time. The main features of the stories were

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different narratives, including folktales and folklores which had continued through one generation to another.” A large portion of ancient Indian literature is a manifestation of the spoken word and it belongs to the oral tradition as far as preservation is concern,” observes Chandrasekhar Kambar in his article “ Oral Tradition and Indian Literature” (Kambar, 1994)

In addition to this, children were considered as an integral part of the family and never considered them as a distinct unity. In that sense, separate children’s fiction was not produced then in particular, only the different kind of tales, folktales, folklore and oral traditions are considered the main resources for entertaining the children. “For both readers and authors the genre provided a space of (imaginary) interaction between the individual and society. For the reader of old folk tales the genre (re) connected with cultural roots and provided the experience of an imagined community based on shared values” (Khatofer, 2009). Thus, West Bengal has a glorious tradition of folklore and oral tradition which are considered as rich resource of cultural tradition. Ashutosh Bhattacharje in Folklore of Bengal has stated, “Bengal’s is a pre-eminently idyllic culture. Her extensive green fields, flowering rivers, ever-varying clouds and distinct seasons with their panorama of nature’s manifestations have conferred on the land a certain vitality which has moulded the character, mood and philosophy of its people. The effect of geography, history and tradition is manifest in an essential tenderness and lyricism of temperament. The life of every individual beginning from the moment of birth up to the moment of death is covered in songs.” (Bhattacharjee, 1978)

Bengali children’s fiction is a recent phenomenon, it appeared as a separate category of literature in 19th century (Ranjan, 1978). In colonial India, the British had introduced European literature containing the different kind of religious and moralistic writings by intentionally, establishing many publishing institutions for fulfilment of their aims and objectives. Later on, with the progress of time, the old thought has been changed and a lot of creative thinkers and social reformers emerged in the Bengali society, who deeply thought the utmost necessity of children’s literature should not depend on the British colonial rule. Hence, a number of dedicated writers came to light and they took initiative steps to create the Bengali children’s literature to explore the field of culture.

Manorama Jafa, the eminent Indian writer, points out her view in an article entitled “The Indian Subcontinent” (Jafa, 2004) that, in the development of children’s literature in Indian subcontinent, there are three phases. The first is related to the ancient period when oral tradition was the main sources of children’s literature, which contained various types of mythology, folktales, and legends. The Sanskrit and pali-Puranic collections, Panchatantra, Hitopodesha, Jataka Tales, Brihat-Katha, Kathasaritsagara were the most popular stories on which children were fed from the earliest of times. The second phase was the phase of initial interaction with British children’s literature, which had mainly adaptation and translation. The third one is obviously original writings by Indians. However, these phrases are also alike and same, applicable in the perspective of origin and development of Bengali children’s fiction.

In previous time, as we mentioned before, the literature was basically in Sanskrit language and that were contained different type of myths, folktales and legends. The stories were formed by symbolic animal characters along with high entertainment. The main objectives of the stories were the moral values which teach us knowledge and the real way of life. The stories of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* were the most favourite with the children. *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, *Hitopodesha*, Brihat Katha and Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara* were such popular narratives that are considered as excellent pieces of cultural traditions of Bengal for ever.

However, these well-known stories have been translated and adapted into different languages throughout the World, as for example, *Panchatantra*, one of the best collection of Indian stories, went to Arab and Persia and it was translated and adapted in different names like ‘*Kalila Wa Dimna*’ written by the famous Abbasid writer Ibnul-Mukaffa (Mukaffa, 724-759). And ‘*Bidpai*’ by Pahlavi respectively. Besides, under the Muslim reign, there are many famous Arabian and Persian stories and narratives were imported to the Indian literature, such as ‘*Gule Bakowli*’, ‘*Hatim Tai*’, ‘*Bahre Danesh*’, ‘*Alibaba Forty Thieves*’ that contained different flavour of romance and adventures, which were a great attraction to the children. Thus, all these are considered as precious resources of Bengali children’s literature as well as tradition of Bengal. Modern Bengali children’s fiction can be divided into three major periods, like- The Age of school book Society (1818-1846), The Age of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1847-1891) and Age of Rabindranath Tagore or post Vidyasagar (1891-1942). Although, some literary scholars remarked that the Bengali Children’s fiction has obtained its goal of successful perfection by three different ways, such as Institutional contributions, contributions of different magazines and contributions of individual writers and scholars. Thus, both ideas are seemingly one and the same that would be followed in our present study

Contributions of different institutions and organisations.

The first initiative step was taken through the establishment of ‘*Fort William College*’ in 4th May, 1800 in Calcutta. It was an academy and learning centre for Oriental studies. The main objective of the collage was to train the British officials in the Indian languages to make their works smoothly and efficiently. Therefore, they translated a lot of books of different languages into the English, even they gave a special attention to Bengali language. In addition to this,” a group of Bengali writers were attached with the college’s activities, such as Ramram Basu, Goloknath Sharma, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, Tarinicharan Mitra, and Rajivlochan Mukhapadhaya” (Gangopadhaya, 1959) and they also published many significant books under the leadership of William Cary. Among such remarkable creations are ‘*Protapaditya Charit*’ (1801) written by Ramram Basu, ‘*Batrish Singhasan*’ (1802) and ‘*Hitopodesh*’ (1802) both were written by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar. Another ‘*Hitopodesh*’ was written by Goloknath Sharma in 1802. Even vidyasagar was written “*Betal Panchabingshati*”

for the same purposes. William Cary also wrote many notable writings such as “*Itihasmala*” (1812) and “*Kathopakathon* (1801). Thus, Fort William College played an important role to shape up the Bengali children’s literature.

Another strong attempt was taken by the British Missionaries. They established the first Bengali printing press at Serampore near Calcutta in 1800 A.D. “But the first leap towards consolidation of children’s literature was the establishment of the School Book Society (1817) to prepare and publish cheap books useful for schools. The members of the Society were- Radhakanta Deb, Ram Kamal sen, Maulvi Hyder Ali, Maulvi Mohammed Rashid and Mritunjoy Tarkalankar. The British paramount power assisted it to meet the ever increasing demand for text books in the schools, set up to produce clerks. The children’s literature in Bengal, thus had its roots in the text books and in the domain of education” (Ranjan, 1978, p. 1). The first publication of The Calcutta School Book Society was ‘*Nitikatha*’ (Moral Tales) that came out in 1818, was a completion of eighteen moral tales and it owes its origin to the joint effort of Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867), Tarinicharan Mitra (1772-1837), and Ram Kamal Sen (1783-1844), the three active Indian members of the Society (Swapna, 2017).

However, it is clear fact that, different institutions and organisations had a significant role in development of Children’s fiction, through which the cultural tradition of Bengal has been revealed and it spread out like pearls in different corners of Bengal.

Contributions of different magazines.

Bengali children’s fiction achieved its excellent position with the co-improvement of a number of literary sections. Among these one of the most significant sections is Bengali children’s magazine, which emerged in colonial India at the very beginning of 19th century. Many important magazines were published in this time, such as *Digdarshan*, ‘*Pashwabali*,’ “*Jnanoday*, “*Pakshir Britanta*,” *Vidyadarpan*, “*Satyapradip*,” “*Abodh-Bandhu* and so on. , In another side, Brahma Samaj and their many active members had taken initiatives in growth of Bengali children’s literature to enhance the cultural heritage. Therefore, “in 1878, Keshab Chandra Sen founded “*Balakbandhu*”, which was the first real magazine for children in Bengali and included stories, poems, riddles, in addition to more conventional pedagogical material” (Sengupta, 2016). Keshab Chandra Sen was a great religious and social reformer of India along with one of the deserving founder of Brahma Samaj, who played a remarkable role to enrich the cultural atmosphere in the societies of Bengal. In 1880, another monthly magazine for children was published named ‘*Balak-Hitashishi*’ under the editorship of Janaki Prasad De. Following the next year another magazine appeared under the name of ‘*Aryakahini*’ which is considered the first weekly children’s magazine in Bengal.

After that, the famous monthly magazine for children ‘*Sakha*’ was published in January, 1884, under the editorship of Pramadacharan Sen. In 1893, another juvenile magazine was published named ‘*Sathi*’ by Bhubanmohan Roy, which merged later with the name of “*Sakha O Sathi*” in 1894. One year later in 1895, came ‘*Mukul*’ under the editorship of Svanath Sastri” (Swapna, 2017). In the year 1885, an excellent monthly magazine for children appeared from prestigious Tagore family of Jorasanko entitled of ‘*Balak*’ under the editorship of the first woman editor Janadanandini Devi (1850-1941). In the first issue of Balak Rabindranath Tagore had composed his famous poem- “*Bristi pare tapur tupur nade elo ban*” including a collection of plays called ‘*Heyali*’ which was considered the first plays in Bengal for children. After only a year later Balak ended its independent existence and merged with “*Bharati*”, a famous monthly magazine of Tagore family.

Another famous juvenile magazine is “*Sandash*” published in 1913. The first editor of the Sandesh was Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury, who was a great pioneer of Bengali children’s literature, and after his death it was handed over to his son, World famous Bengali children’s writer Sukumar Ray. Later on, it had been published under the supervision of Upendra Kishore’s grandson Satyajit Ray, a renowned writers, musician and world famous film director. Besides, there are many children’s magazines in Bengal which have been preserving the cultural heritage for a long time, such as ‘*Prakriti*’(1907), ‘*Toshini*’(1910), ‘*Sishu*’(1912), *nMouchak* (1920), ‘*Amar Desh*’(1921), *Anjali* (1923), *Rajbhog* (1924), *Ramdhani*(1927) and so on.

Contribution of individual writers and scholars.

The cultural tradition of Bengal has come up in the writings of a large number of Bengali writer, scholars and educated reformers. They had made sincere and humble attempt to create different kinds of writings related to the juvenile literature, such as stories, poems, essays, plays, rhymes, folktales, fairy tales and so on, which are considered as quite responsible for the rapid growth and development of cultural atmosphere in Bengal. A notable name among them is Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). He was a great social reformer and also considered as the father of Bengali language. Most of his books were highly illuminated with different kinds of childlike elements like narrative, didactic, fantasy and entertaining. Some of his renowned writings are- ‘*Betal Panchabinsati*’ (1847), ‘*Jiban Charit*’ (1849), ‘*Bodhodaya*’ (1851), *Barnaparichay*(1855), one of his amazed creations, that has been popular its marvellous stories like ‘*Rakhal* and *Bhuban*’. *Kathamala*’(1856) which was translated from Aesop’s Fables. ‘*Charitabali*’(1856) and ‘*Akshay Manjari*’(1863) (Gangopadhaya, 1959, p. 57).

Other writers of his contemporary time Who highlighted the cultural heritage of Bengal through their works of children’s literature were Mrityunjay Vidyalankar (1762-1819) the writer of *Batrish Singhasan and Hitopodesh*, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar (1817-1858) the creator of famous children’s rhyme; ‘*pakhi sab kore rab/ rati pohilo*, *kanane kusum kali sakali futili*, and ‘*pan khay gan gay/shit pay,geet gay* and Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1886) the author of ‘*Charupath*’(1852) and editor of famous magazine ‘*Tattabodhini Patrika*’(1843). Along with this “the trend of lyrical

poems was manifested in modern period through Kavigan and Jatra. The trend-setter of lyrical poetry, Biharilal Chakravarty (1835 - 1894) became popular for his poetic work Saradamangal (1879)" (BALI, 2016).

Another famous literary figure in this field was Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873). He was not only one of the pioneers of Bengali language and literature but also was one of the leading personalities of the Bengali children's literature. He was the father of *Bengali Sonnet* and *Blank Verse* (Amtrakshar Chhanda). He contributed a numbers of outstanding writings for Bengali new coming generation. Some of his writings were translated and adapted from famous French poet Jean De La Fontaine's '*Selected Fables*' such as *Mayour Gouri*, *Kak O Srigali*, *Sinha O Mashak*, and *Oshwa O kuranga*. Apart from this, he wrote many unique stories and poems like '*Megh O Chatak*, *Deve Drishti*, and '*Surya O Mainak*, which were very didactic and well maintained the childlike phenomenon.

In this way, the great writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an unforgettable name. Despite a Nobel winner he successfully composed hundreds of poems, tales, stories, rhymes and plays for children. Some of his remarkable creations are *Shishu*' (1903), '*Shishu Bholanath*' (1922), *Sahajpath* (1930) and poems like '*Mukut*' (1908), '*Lakshir Protiksha*' (1885), *Prosno*, *Samo Byathi*, *Majhi*, *Choto Boro*, *Veer Purush* and *Lukochuri*. He also wrote many well-known short stories like- *Postmaster* (1891), *Ginni* (1891), *Chhuti* (1892) and *Kabuli Wala* (1892), including popular rhymes like- '*Chhoto Khoka Bole O-A/ Shekheni Se Katha Kowa*' (Tagore, 2014, p. 1) and '*Amader chhoto nadi chale anke banke/ Boishakh mase tar hatujol thake*'. He also left many humorous poems like '*Damodar Sheth*' to create a pleasant environment among the children of Bengal.

In other hand, Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury (1863-1915) is considered one of the pioneers of the Bengali Children's literature. 'He was remarkably gifted man – a prolific writer, a talented artist, a fine musician, a man of science and exemplary intellect' (Chaudhury, 2016, p. 11). He devoted his life for Bengali Children. His popular writings are; '*Tuntunir Boi*' (1910), *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (1963), *Sekaler Katha* (1903), *Chheleder Ramayan* (1907) and *Chheleder Mahabharat* (1909) Along with he published the popular Bengali children's magazine entitled of '*Sandesh*' in 1913. Some of his funny stories and rhymes are listened in homes of Bengal for the enjoyment of children, like '*Tuntuni O Beraler Katha*' '*Tuntuni O Rajar Katha*, '*Boka Kumirer Katha*, *Shial Pandit* and *Panta buri*. Moreover, some of his funny rhymes are also told and retold by the fathers, mothers and grandparents to their dear child for entertaining them, which are considered as rich cultural heritage of Bengal, such as- '*Baro Maja*, *Baro Maja/ Raja Khelen Bang Bhaja*' and '*Nak Kata Raja Re / Dekh To Kemon Saja Re*' (Chowdhury, 2008, p. 18).

Another prolific writer was Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) a nephew of the world famous poet Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote the famous children rhyme" *Sona jabe Sasur Bari Sange Jabe Ke?/ Barite Achhe Pushi Biral Komor Bedhechhe*" (Banu, 2010, p. 86). His another poem "*Ghum Porani Mashi Pishi Ghum Diye Ja*" (Banu, 2010, p. 82) is a very shining example of the cultural heritage of Bengal.

However, other remarkable figures in this field are Jogindranath Sarkar (1866-1937), Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar (1877-1957), Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), Shukhalata Rao (1886-1969), Kulada Ranjan Roy (1878-1950), Bande Ali Miya (1906-1979), Leela Majumdar (1908-2007), Satyajit Ray (1922-1992) and so on.

Conclusion:

Finally we can say, Bengal is the centre of cultural tradition. Innumerable cultural elements have been spread in the different parts of the soil of Bengal. Children's fiction of Bengal has captured a great part of this cultural heritage. Through ages, children are entertained by listening various funny stories, poems, rhymes, folktales from their mothers, fathers and grandparents especially at the morning and evening time. There have no child in Bengal grown up without listening such stories like the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, mysterious stories of giants and ghosts and interesting fables stories which are considered as an invaluable wealth of Bengali culture. In this way Bengali children's fiction has been shining its cultural field through ages. We should preserve this pearl of cultural tradition in the present multicultural society.

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