



BOOK REVIEW:

*Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance:
Abanindranath Tagore's The Make-Believe
Prince and Gaganendranath Tagore's Toddy-cat
the Bold*

Abhishek Sarkar

Sircar, Sanjay, translator. *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore's The Make-Believe Prince and Gaganendranath Tagore's Toddy-cat the Bold*. Oxford UP India, 2018. ISBN: 978-0199486755.

This volume presents deft translations of two Bangla children's stories with a scholarly apparatus of admirable amplitude and depth. In its dual capacity, this volume is an unprecedented contribution to scholarship published in English on children's literature and/or fantasy fiction from South Asia. It includes translations of two Bangla literary texts, *Kheerer Putul* or "The Make-Believe Prince" (1896), which is the more widely known of the two among the native speakers of the language, and *Bhondar Bahadur* or "Toddy-cat the Bold" (1926). The authors of these two fantasy stories are the brothers Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938) respectively, who were famous painters and nephews of the Indian cultural icon Rabin-dranath Tagore (1861–1941). This is the first time that *Bhondar Bahadur*, the only literary work by the elder Tagore brother, has been translated into English.

Kheerer Putul has as its central character an anthropomorphised monkey, the pet of the neglected, childless Elder Queen. He tricks the king into believing that she has produced an heir and later acquires a ready-made 10-year old son for her by blackmailing the Venerable Shasthi, Hindu goddess of procreation and protectress of children. As Sircar points out in his introduction

to *Kheerer Putul*, this fantasy novella is located somewhere between an “old, anonymous, orally transmitted folk tale now written down” – a Buchmaerchen – and a “fully original, newly written Kunstmaerchen” (29). Sircar convincingly demonstrates that *Kheerer Putul* is a variation on AT Tale Type 459, which deals with “The Make-Believe Son (Daughter)” (17). He also relates this novella with *bratakatha*, or Bengali Hindu women’s ritual tales, providing a 15-item table comparing the Bangla (comic) Kunstmaerchen with the (hortatory, reverential) *bratakatha* (39–41). Altogether, rather than just a knee-jerk mode of template-matching, Sircar’s volume initiates a dialogue between Western-style theories of folklore studies and a painstaking survey of Bengali culture and Bangla literature. It sets a salubrious example for future researchers in the field.

Bhondar Bahadur, in contrast, reworks in a creative way the Carrollian model of the there-and-back-again dream quest, infusing it generously with elements of folktale, literary fairy tale, mock-heroic romance, and SF. Taking a delicious bit of liberty, Sircar names the narrator the “Old Boy”. This character travels with “Elder Brother” Bhondar to rescue the latter’s son, Nichua, who has been kidnapped by the Two-Faced Rakshasa-demon of the Chutupalu Jungle. They are accompanied by Buddhimanta (a wise hare) and subsequently joined by Parrot Saheb (a railway official). After receiving cheerful tidings about Nichua and Parrot Saheb’s son from the “Top-Knotted Old Mother” (this is how Sircar translates *Jate-buri-ma* from the original), the questers dine and go to sleep. When the Old Boy wakes up, he realises that he has dreamed the entire adventure. As Sircar astutely points out, Lewis Carroll’s monsters and card/chess characters possess an individuality that is denied to the more decorative equivalents in *Bhondar Bahadur* (186–88), but Gaganendranath Tagore’s story reflects the ethnically and culturally variegated society of contemporary Bengal as a lived experience that was beyond the ken of the Alice books (191).

Sircar’s translation is immensely readable, imitating the rhythms and registers of the original Bangla prose while also reaching after cultural equivalence. On the whole, the translation exemplifies what Lawrence Venuti would call “domestication” (rather than “foreignisation”). One strategy adopted by Sircar is to transliterate a Bangla word or give a literal translation for it, or supply a descriptive tag, followed immediately by the corresponding or approximate English term. For example, “my Tal-Betal-siddha Lathi” in *Bhondar Bahadur* is followed by the appositional phrase “my Ghoulie-Ghostie Magic-Mastery Staff” (269), which gestures towards its significance among the native speakers despite the different cultural fields of the two terms. This device is seen more clearly in the following paragraph from the same story describing the Top-Knotted Old Mother in a glamorous avatar:

Her garb was a sari of needle-flower jasmine [English name for *jūi*], on which was set a border of “moon-bright jasmynes” [literal translation of the Bangla name *chandramallika*], *chrysanthemums* [conventional English name for the same flower]. On her neck were seven coils of *night jasmine flowers* [English name for *shiuli*]. On her head was a wonderful crown of fresh blades of *bent grass* [English name for *durba*], on which lay drops of dew that shimmered like diamonds. In her two ears were ear hoops of the flowers of “*eternal married good fortune and its caresses*”

[literal translation of the Bangla name *sadasohagini*], *the cayenne jasmine* [English name for the flower] – and on her forehead effulgently glowed an *auspicious dot* [descriptive tag for *tip*] of the “*evening star*” [literal translation of the name *sandhyatara*], *the rock jasmine flower* [English name for the flower]. (293; italics added)

The translated paragraph has 89 words as opposed to the 39 of the original Bangla text, but it still makes for unimpeded and enjoyable reading – a remarkable accomplishment indeed.

Sircar’s footnotes do more than just elucidate culture-specific expressions: they also point out his decisions about transliteration, translation, and the introduction of paragraph breaks. In addition, Sircar provides fully annotated translations for all the Bangla nursery rhymes to which the two stories allude, performing a challenging task with ease and finesse. Peter Hunt in his foreword places the volume in the category of “children’s texts, along with folklore and fairy tales” that are “increasingly being published in annotated editions for a dual (although primarily adult) audience” (x). Given the fluency and accessibility of Sircar’s translation, these stories can also appeal to child readers – that is, if they are not scared away by the massive scholarly apparatus.

To give a measure of the daunting amount of scholarship inserted into *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance*, the two translated texts (including Sircar’s copious footnotes) form less than one-fourth of the book’s total length. Apart from a long preface that identifies the time-place coordinates and the intended audience for the original texts, as well as for Sircar’s translation, the volume features an introduction to *Kheerer Putul* (with 10 sub-sections) accompanied by an annotated bibliography, plus an introduction to *Bhondar Bahadur* (with 16 sub-sections) and nine accompanying appendices (several of them having their own substantive and bibliographic notes). In the appendices, Sircar meticulously discusses – among other things – why the *Bhondar* should be recognised as a toddy-cat, an animal similar to the civet cat, and not as an otter; throws light upon plants, musical instruments, and physical measures mentioned in the story; discusses Gaganendranath Tagore’s career as a painter and the affinity of his paintings with the story; and records the variations between *Bhondar Bahadur* and its earlier unpublished version, “Dadabhay-er Deyala” (“Grandfather’s Infant Dreaming Smiling Movements”). One might complain that the commentaries reek of the midnight oil and involve much Xanaduist hair-splitting. But what shines through is a personal attachment to the texts over a lifetime. Sircar clearly does not labour under the numerical tyranny of the “publish or perish” regime, or he would have fashioned two separate books and about 20 peer-reviewed articles out of this material.

One problem with the volume, though, is the difficulty of navigating it. The table of contents shows the chapter breaks (which are not in the source texts, but have been added by the translator) in the two already quite brief stories. However, the table of contents does not mark out the divisions in the introduction and appendices, although they are often quite fulsome and densely packed with information. An index would have been immensely helpful. This volume would work better as an eBook with hypertexts, even though that would take away much of its laidback, old-world charm. Furthermore, Sircar transliterates Bangla names inconsistently. For example, he uses diacritical

marks selectively, ignoring the standard protocols for transliteration already in use. He does not provide a chart for the pronunciation of Bangla phonemes or try to indicate the sound of Bangla words in the glosses, although it would not be uncalled for in a volume of such erudition. Although Sircar explains why he renders the name of the *danava*-demon in *Bhondar Bahadur* as “Maiy” and labels this transliteration as a compromise (234), this decision is still far from cogent. “Moy”, an option he considered and discarded, would appear much less egregious to the native Bangla speaker. Elsewhere, the Bangla word *hattamala* (translated by Sircar as “Hurley-Burley”) becomes “Hatta-mals” in a footnote (143). There are also a few, albeit rare, slips in information. For example, Vijaya Dashmi Day is not on a full moon (217), as Sircar himself indicates on his previous page. Further, the worship of the goddess Durga in Bengal is a five-day affair, not a 10-day festival as Sircar seems to suggest (234; also 268). Apart from this, the preface has fewer endnotes than necessary. Sircar does not cite any authority for the periodisation he offers for the highly contentious cultural phenomenon called the “Bengal Renaissance”. On a different note, Sircar explains later why the volume features no illustration for *Bhondar Bahadur* (as opposed to nine for *Kheerer Putul*), but one still longs for some glimpse of Gaganendranath’s enigmatic and tantalising visual expressions between the covers of the volume.

However, the merits of the volume far outweigh its errors and omissions. It inaugurates a model for translators and researchers to emulate. Sircar should be thanked, too, for acknowledging that Abanindranath Tagore derived the plot kernel for *Kheerer Putul* from a folktale written down by Mrinalini Devi (1874–1902), Rabindranath Tagore’s wife, in an exercise book (3). He also discusses two folk-based plays (49; also 288) written by Jnanadanandini Devi (1850–1941), Rabindranath’s feisty sister-in-law, who is remembered by Bengalis today chiefly for defying gendered seclusion and travelling to England without any male guardian. This gives the Tagore women the literary recognition they deserve but are so often denied. Could one perhaps expect Sircar to produce a similar volume on Jnanadanandini Devi’s writings for children?

Biography: Dr. Abhishek Sarkar teaches at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India. His areas of specialisation are the literatures and cultures of early modern England and colonial Bengal.