Apart from the writings on science, technology, travel, adventure and sport discussed in the earlier chapters, a substantial portion of the Bengali juvenile periodical literature was made up of what might collectively be termed as ‘histories’. Of the assorted materials that constituted the miscellaneous magazines, those concerned with reclaiming and rebuilding an indigenous history were most prominently associated with the politics of nationhood. It was through these varied ‘histories’ that the agenda of ‘swadesh’ and ‘swadeshi’ were most forcefully articulated in Bengali juvenile literature. Given the rich traditions of indigenous history, such writings not only proliferated in the pages of the periodicals but eventually began to be published as books intended for children’s leisure-time reading. Being popular as serials in magazines, the articles were often compiled into anthologies and sold as children’s books. This chapter considers these ‘alternative’ histories from the two major sources through which they became available to Bengali
children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period – one, the children’s magazines where they appeared in abundance and two, the numerous books of rhymes and tales that began to be published for children as compendiums of folktales, mythologies and other traditional histories.

Similar to the literature discussed in the previous chapters under the areas of science and geography, the discipline of history too became a contended space and underwent a rapid change through the nineteenth century as it emerged into a ‘new’ form of colonial knowledge. This new discipline, as opposed to the older one, was informed with the positivist and rationalist perspectives of a modern Western or European historiography that derided traditional Indian histories as moribund and archaic. It was not only Macaulay who had declared that the totality of historical information in Sanskrit texts was “less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England” but also James Mill whose History of British India “dwelt on the complete lack of historical understanding among Hindus”.1 From his rationalist standpoint, grounded on the logic of imperial dominance and racial superiority Mill had pointed out that “rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity . . . where fable stands in place of fact, the time over which memory has any influence is rejected, and the imagination riots in those in which it is
unrestrained.” As extensions of the old and the new, the ancient and the modern divides, that came to distinguish the classifications of the East and the West, Mill perceived Indian history to be primitive, fabulous and imaginary vis-à-vis European history which was scientific, rational and real. Reflecting on the hegemony implicit in Mill’s thesis, Indira Chowdhury states,

> [w]ithin the framework of the Enlightenment it was the capacity or incapacity of a race to exercise reason that identified it as ‘civilized’ or ‘barbaric’. Accordingly, the privilege of writing history which required the exercise of rationality belonged to the ‘civilized’ European alone.” (42)

With the ideology of initiating ‘useful’ branches of arts and science for the natives, it therefore became a mandatory agenda in colonial education to overthrow the prejudices of such a fabulous history “abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long” and to urgently overwrite it from a Western and empirical perspective (Macaulay, 110).

The intriguing frictions of colonial and anti-colonial historiography in the context of Bengal and India have been traced and examined by scholars like Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee. Both Guha and Chatterjee have marked out similar trajectories of Indian historiography.
by identifying similar textual landmarks and have largely focused on the same historical turning points. Both the critics feel that the production of a colonialist historiography was clearly an act of imperial assertion which dissociated the people from their traditional past and “served the project of imperial dominance by annexing the past . . . as a site on which to assert their own identity” (Guha, 20). This dissociation was brought about through a break of the past with the present, by a progressive and steady demythologising of the Indian past, or in other words, by sifting facts from fables and by ordering each neatly in separate categories of ‘Mythology’ and ‘History’. Historiographies written on pre-colonial lines, like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar’s Rajabali (1808), Guha observed, interlaced Puranic [mythological] matter with modern history in a seamless narrative within a single continuum. Through the course of the century, the Westernisation and colonisation of the Indian past “continued to gather momentum over the decades”. The re-excavation of the oriental past, through modern procedures of science created a rupture in the indigenous historical tradition with a gradual distinction of Puranic time from historical time and a separation and relocation of mythic narratives from the annals of recorded facts. According to Partha Chatterjee an English education together with a cultivation of subjects like European history, political science and sociology among educated Bengalis helped to redefine and reframe narrations of history from a new perspective. Like the other Western disciplines, this new and scientific history
asserted itself not only through college texts and schoolbooks and other pedantic volumes but also through a popular literature that aimed at diffusing ‘useful knowledge’. “Sikh Itihas” [History of the Sikhs] in *Bibidhartha Sangraha*, the first of a series of articles on indigenous races, displayed this tension in trying to forge separate and definitive areas for ‘Mythology’ and ‘History’:

Our sensibilities are quite underdeveloped in matters of history, the reason being that the histories narrated in the recent and ancient texts of our country are filled of marvelous incidents. Valmiki’s *Ramayan* and Veda-Vays’ *Mahabharat* and such other texts have been enshrined in the place of history and has attained a great importance amongst learned men and the general populace alike, but since these [texts] are replete with divine characters and absurd descriptions it is difficult to accommodate such matters with the human history.⁴

With successive issues publishing articles on the Rajputs and on Chandragupta and Asoka, the periodical made an attempt to popularise a factual, ‘Western’ historiography that was unclouded by fantastic and mythological amalgamations.

A second major turn in Indian historiography came in the late nineteenth century when “there was a voice, an educated middle-class voice, that could be heard through the second half of the nineteenth
century urging Indians, to write their own history” (Guha, 1). “The most remembered of these voices”, states Guha, “was that of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote in Bangadarshan of 1880: ‘Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal’.” Citing a reaction against Indian histories written by foreign authors in 1875 Indira Chowdhury points out that “even as the Hindu’s lack of historical understanding became an issue for the colonial historian, history writing came to be viewed by Indians as a means of articulating a different genealogy for themselves” (43). The project of reclaiming the discipline of History from the clutches of a foreign authority and of articulating an anti-colonial discourse through it, had to rest inevitably upon the very elements that the West had repudiated and expunged from the traditional historiographies. Chowdhury observes,

The Indian claim on history sustained itself differently by a strategic focus on methods and sources . . . of Indian/Hindu historiography: legends and stories, fables and myths . . . Within colonial constraints, the enterprise of writing an indigenous history was marked by a quest for a different archive of facts. This exploration entailed the incorporation of the very elements which the Western notion of history had rejected. (47)

In such a context of conflicting historiographies and cultural empowerment, when the popular juvenile periodicals flourished in the 1880s, along with the historical segments informed by rational Western
notions of dated time, there appeared a growing body of indigenous or alternative histories in the guise of myths, legends, epics and folk tales. Reflecting the reformed and rationalist ideas, these periodicals presented the ‘mythological’ and the ‘historical’ as generically different topics and placed them under distinct segments. For example, in *Sakha* and *Mukul*, the mythological and the antiquated belong to the fictional realm of “Pouranik Kahini” or “Mythological Tales” whereas history constitutes the dated, the purely factual (and therefore the ‘real’) like the series “Bharater Samratgan” [The Great Kings of Bharat] or “Bharater Prachin Katha” [The Ancient Bharat]. However in spite of retaining these colonialist classifications, the corpus of the children’s magazines bear a collective testimony to the voluminous ‘fabulous’ histories that gained in popularity and increased in quantity by the day. The periodicals reflected the new endeavour to tap the old, oral archives and drew to the children’s print domain what had been a part of indigenous childhood since pre-colonial times. Sharing an equal space and importance with the new sciences and geographies, and surpassing articles of factual history by an overwhelming majority, were the ‘fantastic’ histories of epics, mythologies, folklore and fairy-tales.

Epic stories such as “Ramayaner Upadesh” [Lessons from Ramayan], “Jajati Upakhyan” [The Story of Jajati], “Mahabharater Upadesh” [Lessons from Mahabharat], and “Balak Bhisma” [The Child
Bhisma] appeared side by side with folk and fairy tales like “Bhuter Galpa” [Ghost Stories], “Sheyaler Galpa” [Tales of the Fox] and “Thakurmar Galpa” [Grandmother’s Stories] in *Sakha*. Not only were these narratives re-telling indigenous tales from ancient myths and folk stories embedded in an antiquated oral practice, they were also drawing attention to the fact that foreign systems of education and changing social conventions had estranged modern children from these staple traditions of childhood culture. The series “Thakurmar Galpa” for instance, started with a preamble where the author lamented the decline of the popular story-telling tradition in modern Bengali households. In such a context, he stated, the periodical would take up the task of collecting and publishing a series of authentic fairy stories for its readers (who, being modern children, were deprived of the oral culture):

> We all know how much children enjoy listening to fairy tales told by grandmothers. In the evenings, when the grandmother sits at leisure and unravels her stock of comic and tender tales, the boys and girls listen with rapt attention and become oblivious of the day’s toils and troubles as they get immersed in the enchantment of stories. In modern times such old grannies are becoming scarce by the day, and with them, the treasure-houses of these pleasing tales are shrinking. As a measure to compensate this loss to a little extent for our child readers, we have decided to collect and publish traditional fairy tales for them. (*Sakha*, April 1890, 58)
In the same year (1890), Gaganchandra Hom concluded “Sribatsya Upakhyan” [The Tale of Sribatsya] - one of the numerous shorter narratives within the epic Mahabharat – with similar concerns and an identical agenda:

The narrative [of King Sribatsya] as told here, faithfully reproduces the [corresponding] episode in Kashiram Das’ Mahabharat. There is no significant difference between this and the version authored by Veda Vyas. There were such days when in every Bengali household, the aged and the young alike eagerly read the Kashi Das Mahabharat and the Kirttibas Ramayan. How unfortunate it is that nowadays our children read volumes of such absurd story books like Arabyopanyas [Arabian Nights’] or Parasyopanyas [Persian Tales] – and utterly neglect the indigenous chronicles*. They know nothing of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat – texts that are our everlasting treasures! In such terrible times, we wish to present the readers of Sakha with abridged episodes from the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. Like the other ancient mythological tales of our country there are some unrealities in the “Sribatsya Upakhyan”, but the Godly devotion of King Sribatsya or the chastity of the Queen’s thoughts as delineated by great poet of Mahabharat, stand out as lofty ideals that are to be admired and followed.⁶

“Sat Bhai Champa” [The Seven Brothers and the Sister Champa], a narrative poem by Rabindranath Tagore that appeared in the third issue of Balak was fashioned from a traditional fairy tale while the very first

⁶ The author uses the phrase “swadeshiya itibritta”.

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verse in the maiden issue of the magazine celebrated a childhood
pervaded by wonder-tales and enwrapped in the magic of charmed
realms. The very rhythms of this poem “Bishti Pore Tapur Tupur”
[Pitter-patter Raindrops] were steeped in a deep-rooted nostalgia of story-
telling bedtimes, fairy-tale characters and legends of yore:

Mone pore Suo-rani         Duo-ranir katha,
[I remember the tales of Suorani and Duorani]
Mone pore obhimanee         Kankabatir batha,
[I remember the sorrow of the wronged Kankabati]
Mone pore gharer kone       mitimiti alo,
[I remember the flame flickering in the corner of the room]
Charidike deyalete          chhaya kalo kalo.
[Throwing dark shadows on the walls]
Baire kebol joler shobdo   jhup-jhup-jhup –
[With only the pitter-patter sound of the rain outside]
Doshyi chhele galpa shone  akebare chup
[The naughty boy listens spellbound to the tale]
Tari shonge mone pore        meghla diner gaan –
[Along with these I remember the childhood song]
“Bishti pore tapur tupur      nodi elo baan”.
[“The rain falls pitter-patter the river is in tide”]
(Balak, April-May 1885, 2)

Both of these writings were later reprinted in Yogindranath Sarkar’s
miscellaneous compilation Chhabi o Galpa [Pictures and Tales, 1897].
Some stories from Hemendraprasad Ghosh’s *Ashare Galpa* [Absurd Tales, 1901] – probably the earliest fairytale anthology to be published for children in Bengali - were first printed in the periodical *Sathi* in 1893.8 “Pouranik Kahini” narrating the histories of Puranic characters like Dronacharya, Kach o Debjani, Ekalabya, Ruru o Pramadwara, Bhisma o Ambalika, Nal o Damayanti, Kaushalya, Dasharath, Bharat, Lakshman, Ram, Sita and so on by Labanyaprabha Basu had been one of the longest running serials in *Mukul*. Like *Ashare Galpa*, these too were later compiled in an anthology for children and published in 1902.9 Similarly, many among Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri’s retellings of Bengali folk tales – like “Dhushto Bagh” [The Wily Tiger], “Ghaghashur”, “Sheyal Pandit” [The Wise Fox], “Lal Suta ar Nil Suta” [The Red and the Blue Threads] had first appeared in print in juvenile magazines like *Sakha*, *Mukul* and *Sandesh* before they were compiled in entertaining volumes for children.10 Parts of Upendrakishore’s *Chheleder Ramayan* [Ramayan for Children] had been published in *Mukul* in 1896 before it appeared as a book around 1897-98. This again was followed by a revised edition in 1907.11 The folk tale “Brahman and Brahmanir Galpa” [Story of the Brahmin and his Wife] by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was also published in *Mukul* in 1902, a few years before its publication in the historic *Thakurmar Jhuli*.12 In 1904 an issue of *Mukul* paid a tribute to the poet Krittibas and celebrated his verse translation of the *Ramayan*
in the vernacular as a great work of literature that had cut across social
classes and touched the hearts of millions down the ages:

In our country, any man or woman with the slightest
knowledge of letters, desires to read [Krittibas’] Ramayan with
great solemnity and a deep devotion. The poet-of-all-poets
Madhusudan, who had been an expert in many highly-developed,
foreign languages, could not forget the taste of Krittibas’ Ramayan.
Even the modest shopkeeper, in his meager spare hours managed
in between his daily barters, eagerly reads this book. You can
easily imagine the immense impact of such a text on our national
character.

We have selected a short excerpt from the Krittibas Ramayan
for the readers of Mukul. In this episode Bharat has come to the
Chitrakoot hills seeking Ram in order to persuade him to come
back [to Ayodhya]. The passage is so sublime in its simple
expressions of beauty that the reader cannot hold back his tears.  

Other children’s magazines like Prakriti or Toshini too had sections on
the Purans. While Toshini recapitulated the tales under serials like
“Sekele Kahini” or “Tales of Yore”, Prakriti introduced each story through
a picture. The readers were asked to identify the mythological episode
from the illustrations and to send their answers to the editor. The next
issue not only printed the names of the readers who had answered
correctly but also narrated the entire story as illustrated in the picture.
Sandesh, edited by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, abounded in
mythological writings and regaled its readers with the dramatic tales of
Mahisasur, Chandi or Ganesh as well as with the fantastic feats of
warrior-heroes like Hanuman. Sandesh also unveiled a rich repertoire
of fables, folk tales and fairy stories filled with characters and motifs and
settings that were firmly grounded in Bengali culture and imagination.
The enchanted prince, the magical bird, a lost princess or the common
village weaver, the cunning fox and such other characters that had
resided in the hoary oral tales passed on by grandmothers and aunts in
every Bengali household appeared in print in tales like “Phul Pari” [The
Flower-fairy], “Chhoto-bou” [The Youngest Wife], “Cheel-ma” [The Eagle-
mother], “Banor-rajputra” [The Monkey-prince], “Dushto Sat-ma” [The
Wicked Stepmother], “Chhunch Kumar” [The Needle-pricked Prince],
“Boka Tanti” [The Foolish Weaver], “Garib Brahman” [The Poor Brahmin],
“Shap Rajputra” [The Snake Prince] and “Gupi Gayen”. As great an
artist as a storyteller, Raychaudhuri’s wonderful illustrations of fabulous
monsters and heroic princes heightened the appeal of the old stories for
the wide-eyed young readers.

Light-hearted poems and rhymed songs that had been one of the
regular entertaining features of the children’s periodicals, helped to make
way for the oral nursery rhymes in print. These humble verses, like their
kindred fairy tales, had been part of the patent culture of the household
women-folk who crooned these ditties to keep their little wards amused.
The rhyme “Khuku Jabe Shashurbari” [The Little Girl Leaving for her In-laws’ Home] by Yogindranath Sarkar was first published in *Mukul*:

*Khuku jabe shashurbari, shonge jabe ke?*
[Our little girl will go to her in-laws’ house, who shall go with her?]

*Barite ache hulo beral, komor bendhechhe!*
[The tom-cat who lives with us, dressed in a waistband!]

*Aam-kanthaler bagan debo chhayay chhayay jete*
[I will give Mango and Jackfruit orchards to shade her on the way]

*Shan bandhano ghat debo pothe jol khete.*
[I will give paved steps by the river where she can stop for a drink.]

*Jhar lanthan jele debo aloy aloy jete;*
[I will light a blazing lantern to brighten the way]

*Urki dhaner murki debo shashuri bhulate!*
[I will give her sweetened rice of Urki seeds to charm her mother-in-law]¹⁶

The wealth of nursery rhymes, folk ballads, lullabies and songs were soon to be harnessed in a series of children’s books like *Chhele o Chhabi* [Children and Pictures, 1898], *Khukumanir Chhara* [Rhymes for the Little Girl, 1899] *Tuktuke Boi* [The Pretty Book, 1900] and *Hashimukh* [The Happy Face, 1908]. The periodicals thus nurtured in print two immortal things from a popular oral culture — the folklore and the mythological tales — till they were retrieved later in book collections and anthologies for children. Reflecting the spirit of a wider folklore revival that was infecting the Bengali intelligentsia, *Mukul* also published stories from a
larger diversity of folk culture such as “Khanchawala Kanchanlal” - a tale from Kashmir, stories from Khasiya folklore by Nalinimohan Raychaudhuri and Santhali tales by Shashibhusan Basu. The last were from a collection of tribal stories originally compiled by Sukumar Haldar in English.

Such a proliferation of “upakatha” and “upakhyan” – forms that were structurally indigenous, as opposed to the genres borrowed from Western literature (like factual articles, short stories, novels) indicate the beginnings of a new literary trend - that of a reclamation of the oral cultures in print. Thus, in transferring the traditional oral narratives to print, the juvenile periodicals opened up new avenues in the children’s reading domain. An abundance of retellings of oral histories in the form of fairy tales, myths, epic stories and legends soon produced compilations and anthologies that signaled new areas in children’s books. As opposed to the earlier didactic and informative literature for children constituting mainly of moral stories, exemplary tales and schoolbooks, this new literature was reminiscent of pre-colonial traditions and popular oral cultures. Retelling old mythological stories and folk tales in the print medium, these indigenous histories ushered in a more imaginative literature for Bengali children.
Historicising Folklore: At Home and Abroad

Related to this sudden outburst of folk and fairy tales in Bengali children’s books was the new interest in folk studies that effected a folklorist revival in a wider literary sphere. Ironically, this enthusiasm to salvage indigenous literary relics was watered by the distant springs of a preceding bout of folklore excavation in some major European countries like France, Germany and England. Towards the end of the seventeenth century when in France authors like Charles Perrault, Mme d’Aulnoy and Mme de Beaumont were writing down the fairy tales, the stories were endowed with national significance as a result of their “defense of women, peasant culture and national culture against a learned tradition that scorned all these things”.\textsuperscript{18} In England, Perrault’s Mother Goose’s tales (\textit{Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe, or, Contes de la Mere l’Oye}, 1697) became popular in humble households as evening fireside entertainments. They had become widely and cheaply available all over the country in the form of chapbooks that were sold by itinerant peddlers.\textsuperscript{19} But the highpoint in European folklore was undoubtedly marked by the publication of \textit{Kinder-und Hausmarchen [Nursery and Household Tales]} by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm in 1812 (Vol 1) and 1814 (Vol 2) which instantly became best-sellers. The Grimms also saw “in the fairy tale the root of their cultural heritage and nationhood” and “believed
in political and cultural unity [of the German states] . . . used the fairy tale as a weapon in this fight” (Ostry, 11).

In England, as Jack Zipes observes, the fairy tale had a late flowering. Because of their chapbook association the tales were seen as lowly literature of the poor classes. Often being unrefined, risqué and bawdy they were shunned from respectable reading as well as from the children’s nurseries and were considered to be “engines of mischief”. The radical spirit of Romanticism, with its apotheosis of the creative imagination, a love for the remote in place and time, and a more democratic appeal in literature in general did much to revive the love for ancient ballads, romances and fairy tales. All the great Romantics like Clare, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Godwin forcefully spoke in favour of fancy, imaginative literature and fairy tales. Thus the Romantic spirit and the Romantic Movement as a whole did much to break the spell cast on the fairy folk in England by the rational, moral and evangelical pedagogies that ruled the British nursery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In 1802 John Harris of London published *Mother Bunch’s Tales* – an abridgement of Mme d’Aulnoy’s lengthy stories, in 1804 Godwin edited Benjamin Tabart’s *Collections of Popular stories for the Nursery*. Edgar Taylor’s English version of the Grimm Brothers’ *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* or *German Popular Stories* (1823-6) took England by storm. These in turn inspired the English
writers to collect and tell their own fairytales that were fading into oblivion and were being threatened to be replaced by their French and German counterparts. The antiquarian archiving of folklore as national history and cultural heritage had a lot to do with the ‘official’ relocating of the oral tales, rhymes and songs as desirable literature for children. In giving these humble compositions a place in the national discourse, in allotting them a respectable position in the literary hierarchy, the wider folkloric revival in England paved the way through which the banished fairy folk could come back to claim its ‘lost’ throne in children’s literature. Around the mid-nineteenth century, the fairy tale had come into its modern haloed status as an ideal literature for children in England. The tales now came to be seen as important, even essential ingredients of the English nursery. Far from being “engines of mischief”, they began to be promoted as ideal bedtime companions for children of all ages.22

The conflict engendered in the late eighteenth century England between reason and imagination, between commonsensical moral and fairy magic, between respectable bookshops and the peddling chapmen, between the ideological and the popular, gave way to a resurgence of fairy tales and rhyme-books following the lighthearted and entertaining publications of Harris, Tabart and Taylor. Taylor had firmly aligned himself with the fairy-brigade in his preface to German Popular Stories:
The popular tales of England have been too much neglected. They are nearly discarded from libraries of childhood. Philosophy is made the companion of the nursery...this is the age of reason, not of imagination, and the loveliest dreams of fairy innocence are considered as vain and frivolous. (quoted in Zipes, xvii)

The preface to an edition of *Mother Goose’s Melodies* – a collection of English nursery rhymes, published in 1833, vanquished the pretentious pedagogies of ‘learned’ books and asserted the timeless authority of the naive and nonsensical rhymes:

Hear What Ma’am Goose Says!

My dear little Blossoms, there are now in this world and always will be a great many grannies besides myself...these old women... will tell you with long faces that my enchanting, quieting, soothing volume, my all-sufficient anodyne for cross, peevish, wont-be-comforted little bairns [sic] ought to be laid aside for more learned books, such as they could select and publish. Fudge! I tell you that all their batterings can’t deface my beauties, nor their wise pratings equal my wiser prattlings: and all imitators of my refreshing songs might as well write another Billy Shakespeare as another Mother Goose—we two great poets were born together and shall go out of the world together.

No, no, my melodies will never die,
While nurses sing, or babies cry.²³
Felix Summerly’s *Home Treasury* (1841-9) and Ambrose Merton’s *Old Story Books of England* (1845) included some of the best loved fairy tales of all times. A fresh wave of enthusiasm flowed in with Mary Howitt’s translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Wonderful Stories for Children* in 1846. Joseph Jacobs – a historian, folklorist and anthropologist all rolled into one, published five anthologies of fairy tales from 1890 to 1894 while Andrew Lang brought forth the twelve volumes of his famous colour fairy series for children between 1889 and 1910.

Such a wide spread study and archiving of folklore in Europe, though primarily aimed at preserving what was getting lost and towards constructing a sense of cultural identity, also initiated an interest in the folklore of other countries. In Bengal as well as in other parts of the Indian Empire, whiffs of this full-blown enthusiasm were carried over by British officers, Christian missionaries and their families. Some of the most prominent names in the context would include those of Rev. James Long, Richard Carnac Temple, Flora Anne Steel, Mary Frere, G.H. Damant, S.H. Stokes, Rev. Charles Swynnerton, Rev. J. Hinton Knowles, Sir George Grierson, Mrs. Georgina Kingscote, G.A. Campbell and William Crooke all of whom were part of “the intricate web of 19th century Indological research, scholarship and theorizing”. These imperial folklorists, somewhat handicapped in their collection and comprehension
of the folk materials in foreign tongues and of widely different cultures, played a key role in drawing the learned elites from the indigenous populace to the task of historicising these popular cultures. The colonial liaison and collaborations are apparent in the early works in the genre like *Tales of the Sun or Folklore of Southern India* and *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of India* (Sengupta, n.pag.). An instance of the imperial impact gets registered in Lal Behari Day’s preface to the *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883) – the first collection of Bengali folktales to be compiled and published as a book, where Day acknowledges the stimulus supplied by Sir Richard Carnac Temple, the British officer and enthusiastic folklorist:

> In my *Peasant Life in Bengal*, I make the peasant boy Govinda spend some hours every evening in listening to stories told by an old woman, who was called Shambhu’s mother, and who was the best story-teller in the village. On reading that passage, Captain R. C. Temple, of the Bengal Staff Corps, son of the distinguished Indian administrator Sir Richard Temple, wrote to me saying how interesting it would be to get a collection of those unwritten stories which old women in India recite to little children in the evenings, and to ask whether I could not make such a collection.25

Further, a wider European influence and Western model becomes explicit behind Day’s attempt at archiving some of the neglected oral tales told by humble rustic folk like “Shambhu’s mother”: 
As I was no stranger to the Marchen of the Brothers Grimm, to the Norse Tales so admirably told by Dasent, to Arnason’s Icelandic Stories translated by Powell, to the Highland Stories done into English by Campbell, and to the fairy stories collected by other writers, and as I believed that the collection suggested would be a contribution, however slight, to that daily increasing literature of folk-lore and comparative mythology which, like comparative philosophy, proves that the swarthy and half-naked peasant on the banks of the Ganges is a cousin, albeit of the hundredth remove, to the fair-skinned and well-dressed Englishman on the banks of the Thames, I readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials.

. . . After a great deal of search I found my *Gammer Grethel* – though not half so old as the *Frau Viehmannin of Hesse Cassel* – in the person of a Bengali Christian woman. (vii-viii) [italics inserted]

This process of literary excavation, initiated under imperial auspices was soon yoked to the rising winds of a nascent nationalism. These popular oral and practicing folkloric traditions like *rupkathas*, *geetkathas*, *chhara*, *panchali*, *paran-kathas* and *bratakathas*† that were untouched by foreign influence, were found to be the most fitting and authentic material for adumbrating an indigenous culture and for chalking out an independent identity. By the virtue of their intrinsic antiquity, because of their intimate association with the earthy folk and finally because these popular cultures essentially thrived outside the colonised spaces (affected by social reformation, education and printed literature) and

† These roughly correspond to folktales, song-narratives, religious narratives, mythological narratives and ritualistic rhymes.
were hidden from the public eye, they became, (as they had become in Germany in an earlier age) ideal tools in the project of nationalism.26

Bengal, with its rich folkloric traditions and a thriving popular culture of rituals and festivals and with many earnest intellectuals who were fascinated with this overwhelming wealth at home, soon became one of the fertile grounds of folkloric collection, preservation and dissemination. In the preface to her English translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s essay “Chhelebhulano Chhara” [Nursery Rhymes] SuchismitaSen notes that Tagore’s fascination with folklore had begun as early as 1883.27 Steeped in ideas of romantic nationalism during his younger days, the formation of the Bangiya Shahitya Parishat in 1894 provided Tagore and his contemporaries with an official platform for systematic and organised collection of Bengali folk literature. Like many other European folklorists, Tagore saw these oral tales, songs, riddles, proverbs and rhymes as “relics of national treasure” that urgently needed to be archived. He had set such a task of transcribing the household tales circulating orally among women and children to certain “educated ladies who were good storytellers” and also to his wife Mrinalini Devi.28 In the two essays on “Chhelebhulano Chhara” the poet not only transcribed a set of nursery rhymes but commented at length on the inherent characteristic traits that combined to produce the unique spirit of these rustic verses. Dineshchandra Sen, a keen antiquarian and one of the
most zealous folklorists of Bengal, opened wide the door that was
“pushed ajar by Lal Behari Day”. With the help of collectors like Beharilal
Chakraborty, Ashutosh Chowdhury, Jasimuddin and others he
published anthologies like Gopi Chandrer Gan [Song of Gopi Chandra],
Mymensingh Gitika [Mymensingh Ballads] and Purbabanger Gitika
[Ballads from East-Bengal]. Sen was also operative in publishing the
phenomenal fairy-tale anthology - Tkakurmar Jhuli. Dakshinranjan
Mitra Majumdar, the compiler of Thakurmar Jhuli [The Grandmother’s
Bag, 1907], Thakurdadar Jhuli [Grandpa’s Sack, 1909], Thandidir Thale
[Grandmother’s Pouch, 1909], Dadadamashaier Thale [Grandfather’s
Pouch, 1924] – all of which were published as authentic folklore
collections and which still remain classic volumes in the respective areas
– did his folkloric fieldwork in and around Mymensingh for twelve long
years. During this period he amassed a colossal collection of rustic lore
from peasants, boatmen, itinerant travelers and elderly village folk. The
sustained nature of his work, his patient ordering of the various forms of
oral folk culture into rupkatha, geetkatha, raskatha and bratakatha, as
well as his use of a certain model of the phonograph to record the rustic
dialects verbatim, speak of his serious and studied interest in the
matter. Many other well-known authors like Yogindranath Sarkar,
Gnanendrashashi Gupta, Shyamacharan Dey, Satyacharan Chakraborty,
Shibratan Mitra, Barodakanta Majumdar, Chandicharan Gupta,
Kalimohan Bhattacharya and Sudebchandra Chattopadhyay were also
involved in retelling folk tales and reproducing popular rhymes in print. The popularity of this new-found interest in folk is also visible in the several ‘Kuntalin’ collections issued by H. Bose from “Delkhosh House”. The initiative not only sought to compile traditional fairy stories, nursery rhymes and folk tales from common people, especially from household women, but also awarded prize money for the best entries. In the foreword to one such collection, Bose urged, “It is our earnest appeal to the authors and authoresses that they be enthusiastic in the collection of the near-extinct ancient tales and thus help us in enriching Bengali literature.”

Most of these folklore enthusiasts were either prolific writers of children’s literature or were authors who wrote for children at some point of time or other. For example, Rabindranath Tagore, Yogindranath Sarkar and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar were some of the most famous names in the sphere of Bengali children’s literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period. Dineshchanrda Sen, apart from his voluminous writings on the subject of folk studies, authored *Shanjher Bhog* [Evening Treats, 1919] – a collection of folk tales for children. Baradakanta Majumdar had been the editor of *Shishu* - a juvenile periodical launched in 1912 while Shibratan Mitra had been a regular writer in it. Other folk enthusiasts like Ramendrasundar Tribedi and Shibnath Shastri (the founder-editor of *Mukul*) were also important
participants in enriching the domain of children’s literature and were instrumental in shaping a modern culture of childhood towards the turn of the century. Because of this common link between folklorists and writers and editors of children’s literature and because much of this folklore was traditionally related to children and were a staple part of popular childhood culture, the oral narratives again found their way into the juvenile domain – this time as printed books for children’s leisure reading. Thus the wider interest of capturing the oral literatures through the technologies of print played an important part in bringing back the folk cultures and popular traditions in ‘respectable’ books for children. Secondly, it also helped in establishing these once looked-down-upon tales and histories as imaginative literature – as an essential literature for nourishing the minds of children. In the context of the young readers, this literature was seen not only as a cultural wealth reclaimed from the past, but also as an aesthetically-satisfying literature which alone could compensate for the acute deficit of fancy in modern (and colonialist) textbooks for children.

Folk and Fairy Tales

Even the collections not expressly meant for children – as Lal Behari Day’s Folk Tales was not – invariably called up associations of
childhood. More specifically, they referred to the voices of childhood—of tales and rhymes heard and recited during childhood, reminiscent of happy hours and homely storytellers. While recounting the difficulties involved in collecting such tales, Day observed:

But where was an old story-telling woman to be got? I had myself, when a little boy, heard hundreds—it would be no exaggeration to say thousands—of fairy tales from the same old woman, Shambhu’s mother—for she was no fictitious person, she actually lived in flesh and bore that name, but I had nearly forgotten those stories. . . . How I wished that poor Shambhu’s mother had been alive! (Preface, Folk Tales, viii)

The reference to children and childhood come up even more prominently as Day wraps up his preface in a truly indigenous style:

Shambhu’s mother used to end every one of her stories—and every orthodox Bengali story-teller does the same—with repeating the following formula:

Thus my story endeth
The Natiya-thorn withereth.

What these lines mean, why are they repeated at the end of every story, and what the connection is of several parts to one another, I do not know. Perhaps the whole is a string of nonsense purposely put together to amuse little children. (x)
Similarly Dineshchandra Sen’s series of lectures on Bengali folklore is interspersed with references to childhood: “We may imagine long before the introduction of the art of printing, primitive people sat by their blazing hearths in wintry nights at the close of their day’s labour, reciting nursery tales to their children” (D. Sen, 1). At other times he introduces a story by describing it as “a well known nursery tale which every Bengali boy knows” (13).

It is therefore hardly surprising that such a wealth of folk stories, songs and rhymes, traditionally used for entertaining little children, would soon be officially relocated to the space from which it was once displaced – the shrine of childhood. What was once discarded and devalued as superstitious rigmarole under a rationalist and utilitarian pedagogy imported from the West, was now recognized for its intrinsic historic and literary value, as a reclaimed cultural treasure and as a source of an independent cultural identity. Therefore, many of the numerous anthologies that were directed at children often bore elaborate prefaces that called attention to such salient features of the collected tales. Hemendraprasad Ghosh in Ashare Galpa rued that with the advent of English education children were losing touch with the indigenous folktales that form a part of the cultural history of any nation. It is intriguing to note how Ghosh in his page-long introduction
repeatedly asserted the idea that the folktales portrayed racial history and collectively constituted a national identity:

The traditional tales and narratives prevalent in a country tell of myriad episodes from its past history and bear traces of its national characteristics. They are components of History. All countries have such tales as part of their cultural traditions and children love listening to those stories. . .

The tales of each nation reflect the distinctive characteristic features of the inhabitants of that land. Certain differences will inevitably crop up between the tales of a frosted and wintry land and those born under a sunnier and warmer clime. So will there be dissimilarities in the tales told by the people of the plains and those narrated by the mountain-dwellers.

These tales, composed for entertaining innocent children, are always simple, unencumbered by any artificial trappings. They do not attempt to camouflage the distinctive ethnological traits, rather, they mirror national tenets, native livelihoods, indigenous thoughts and regional superstitions. Therefore, such tales are indispensable materials for the studying the history of a nation. There is, thus, a great necessity to collect and archive them.

There is no dearth of tales and narratives in our country. But unfortunately, because of the introduction of a new education and due to the various social reformations taking place under a foreign influence, even the womenfolk of our inner-apartments are forgetting these tales.

(Introduction, *Ashare Galpa*, n.pag.)
Similarly, Ramendrasundar Tribedi’s extensive introduction to Yogindranath Sarkar’s *Khukumanir Chhara* (1899), was a lengthy and deliberate articulation. That Tribedi was conscious of juxtaposing a pedantic introduction with a lighthearted collection of nursery rhymes, becomes clear in his conclusion. The elaborate introduction became essential, he writes, since “the book marked a radical endeavour in the history of Bengali literature”:

This introduction – rather lengthy and abstruse when compared to this little volume – will hardly be palatable to its [child] readers . . . I have not authored this for those little readers into whose tender, rosy hands the publisher wants to put the book. I hope that with this publication our intellectuals will start taking note of the Bengali folk literature that has so long been slighted and disdained.32

Like Ghosh, Tribedi too was emphatic about the immense worth of these “bones of history” buried in rural literature, and was aware of the necessity of exploring “other kinds of truth” latent in them:

We are too careless about preserving history, and I believe that the root of this is our complete lack of a scientific outlook. . .

Lofty spiritual philosophies may not be found in these rhymes but some historical evidences or a few social principles

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1 Tribedi’s words are "anyabadha satya".
might verily be lying embedded in them. Just as geologists have been able to unearth new chapters in the world’s history with the help of a tooth or a bone, in a similar way, out of these Bengali childhood treasures, some future Grimm or Max Muller might some day find some words or sentences that would help re-discover forgotten episodes in the ancient history of the Bengali people. . . .

The Bengalis do not have a history or rather there is nothing to be proud of in the Bengalis’ political historiography since the time of Lakshmansen. However, the traditional Bengali literature perpetuating down the ages since that time, echoes with the domestic, communal and social lives of the people. It is unique in the world for it overflows with feelings of sweetness, compassion and gentle tranquility. (421-22)

Significantly, it was in this very preface to *Khukumanir Chhara*, that Ramendrasundar Tribedi coined the phrase “*shishu sahitya*” or “children’s literature” that gained much popularity and went on to be the descriptive term for a versatile vernacular genre.

*Khukumanir Chhara* was compiled and published by Yogindranath Sarkar. The ‘Newbery’ of Bengali children’s books, he was one of the pioneers in writing, compiling and publishing attractive books for children’s recreational reading. Sarkar had been a regular contributor to magazines like *Sakha, Sathi* and *Mukul*. When *Sakha* was discontinued, Sarkar bought all the blocks and set up the office of the
City Book Society – his own publishing house at the premises of the erstwhile Sakha Office at 64, College Street. The City Book Society produced volumes of delightful publications for children, the best of which sold in thousands and ran into several editions. *Hasi o Khela* [Laughter and Games, 1891] – the first of his long list of entertaining anthologies for children, also becomes important in this context as it included several re-tellings of traditional tales and mythological stories like “Sat Bhai Champa” [The Seven Brothers and Sister Champa], “Majantali”, “Ramayan-Katha” [Stories of Ramayan], “Sheyal” [The Fox] and “Sheyaler Dhurtami” [The Cunning Fox].

When Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s *Thakurmar Jhuli: Bangalar Rupkatha* [The Grandmother’s Bag: Fairy Tales of Bengal] - perhaps the most acclaimed of all anthologies of Bengali fairy tales – was published in 1907, Tagore succinctly summed up its significance in his introduction to the book. His elaborate preface projected the volume as an archive of national treasures which were fast fading into oblivion and as a way of connecting to a pre-colonial history. But most importantly, he heralded *Thakurmar Jhuli* as an exponent of an indigenous cultural identity that was crucial for overwriting the English influence:

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§ In later editions, the book was advertised as “the very first book in Bengali children’s literature”, for eg. in the title page, *Hasi o Khela* (Kolkata: City Book Society, 21st ed. nd).
In our country, could there indeed be anything quite as swadeshi as this *Thakurmar Jhuli*? But alas! Nowadays even this wonderful bag was being sent to us manufactured from the factories in Manchester. These days, the English ‘Fairy Tales’ are increasingly becoming the only refuge of our children. Our very own indigenous Grandmother & Co. is rendered utterly bankrupt. If you shake their bags, Martin’s Ethics and Burke’s notebooks on the French Revolution might pop out now and then, but whatever had happened to the royal prince, to the minister’s son? Where have fled the Bangoma and Bangomi? Where is [lost] that precious jewel equaling the wealth of seven kings, that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen rivers? (Introduction, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, 9)

Tagore’s introduction as well as Dakshinaranjan’s authorial preface anchors the tales in the native soil of Bengal, in the inherent rasa [spirit] that shoots through the nature and the people of the land. Hence, the book argues, nothing could be more ‘swadeshi’ or more truly indigenous for the Bengalis than these tales. Around the time of the book’s publication, the term ‘swadeshi’ was the watchword in Indian nationalist politics. In Bengal, the word was especially charged with a nascent and fiery patriotism following the popular anti-partition agitations of 1905 that linked the Swadeshi movement with the Boycott Resolution, calling for a voluntary ban of all foreign goods.\(^{37}\) Thus with *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the folk tales of Bengal, being authentic and indigenous cultural artefacts, become inseparably linked with the politics of swadesh and swadeshi. They not only become the chosen tool which can effectively fight foreign
influence but also the cherished indigenous treasures that can give a people and a nation their distinctive cultural identity. To these again is linked the project of freeing childhood from colonial fetters and to give it back its primordial space. It is that sanctum to which the child belongs by birth, it is where maternal affections embrace him:

The fairy tales of our country - that perpetually flow over the mindscapes of Bengali boys through generations and pass undefiled through the midst of many revolutions and many changes in the regime – have roots in the maternal affections of entire land of Bengal. This affection has nurtured and reared at its breast the king of kings and the poorest farmer alike; it has charmed all children by pointing to the moon in the sky on luminous evenings and has pacified them by bedtime songs – these tales have sprung from this deep, eternal, subterranean tenderness that floods all regions of Bengal. (10-11) [italics inserted]

Digging out the ‘lost’ treasures of the past and by carefully replicating them verbatim in print, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s Thakurmar Jhuli brought back the authentic folk tales for modern Bengali children. The tales, as also the characters that animate them were fundamentally Bengali:

Hajar juger rajputra rajkonya shobe
[All the royal prince and princesses of a thousand years]
Rupsagare santar diye abar elo kobe!
[When did they return swimming across the sea of fairies!]
*How mow khow shabdo shuni rakshaseri pur-
[Fee fi fo fum cires are heard from the monsters’ palace -]
*Na jani she kon deshe na jani kon dur!*
[In some strange and far-off land!]
*Natun bou! hanri, dhak, sheyal pundit dake; -
[The bride! the cooking pot, the drum and howls of the wise Reynard]*

*Hente kanta upare kanta kon ranider pape?*
[Who are the queens that have sinned to bear thorns in their feet and thorns on their heads?](19)

These were the stories and such were the characters that the delightful bag of tales called *Thakurmar Jhuli* promised to unravel.

*Thakurmar Jhuli* was variously proclaimed as “the public book”, “an epoch in Bengali literature”, “Bengal’s eternal flute”, “Bengal’s rasa”, “a people’s identity” and “a Nation’s attractions” by respected nationalists and esteemed intellectuals like Surendranath Banerjee, Aurobindo Ghosh, Chittaranjan Das, Rabindranath Tagore and Rameshchandra Dutt to name a few. Apart form such magnificent endorsements, in the coming decades the fairy-tale anthology was widely advertised as “a golden book in the golden Bengal”, as “Our nation’s wealth”, as “the golden book of golden Bengal”, and as “the dream-castle of Bengali literature”. 38 Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was exalted as ‘the Grimm
of Bengal’ and “his wonderful volumes” were seen as “the Bengalees’ Books” and hailed with the fervent nationalist slogan “the Bande Mataram” [figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3]. Thus the formation of an indigenous culture in Bengali children’s books became intricately linked to the contemporary politics of Swadeshi nationalism.

Following the publication of Thakurmar Jhuli there was an earnestness in restoring to the realm of the children the indigenous folklore and mythologies that were once erased by colonial pedagogies and over-written by books of colonial education. The drift became manifest in Bengal towards the end of the nineteenth century through a flood of children’s books that collected nursery rhymes and fairy tales and retold epics and mythological stories. Determined efforts to construct a swadeshi tradition in children’s books can be seen in the persistent ways through which the late nineteenth century writers sought to recover the popular oral literature associated with their own childhoods. Not only did they zealously collect oral tales and rhymes but many of them also consciously reworked traditional folk stories and absorbed folk motifs and plot variants in their original writings for children. The Bengali Kunstmarchen or the literary fairy tale also grew into a popular children’s genre during this time. In 1892 was published Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay’s Kankabati – a wonder-tale revolving around the dream
Figure 4.1. Advertisement of Thakurmar Jhuli in Prakriti, September-October, 1908.

Figure 4.2. Advertisement of Thakurmar Jhuli in Arya-nari, 1908.

Figure 4.3. Advertisement of Thakurmar Jhuli in Amar Desh, 1920.
journey of the eponymous heroine. During the course of this journey, she encounters various adventures in order to save Khetu – her groom-to-be, to whom she is betrothed since her childhood. Using the framework of a popularly known story, Trailokyanath created a ‘modern’ fairy-tale, skillfully integrating contemporary allusions and raging debates about social reformation with the plot of the traditional narrative. The following year, Kankabati was reviewed by Rabindranath Tagore in the periodical Sadhana. In spite of a few faults, Tagore found the story to be refreshingly different from the run of the mill Bengali children’s books that were almost always heavily didactic and austere in style. With its absurd happenings, a dream journey and a lighthearted and playful spirit, Kankabati, he noted, reminded him of “an English book called Alice in the Wonderland”.

A dearly-loved classic in Bengali children’s literature, Kshirer Putul [The Cheese Doll, 1896] written by Abanindranath Tagore, was also fashioned out of a traditional oral tale. Urged by Rabindranath, his wife Mrinalini Devi had been inscribing some of the oral, household tales in a notebook. It is said that Abanindranath Tagore found the plot for Kshirer Putul in one such tale in his aunt’s notebook (Chitra Deb, 87). Abanindranath rewrites the story weaving together motifs from traditional nursery rhymes, strands of native folklore and practices from popular religion. His imagination rides on the wings of his childhood
memories as he fabricates a ‘traditional’ and an ‘authentic’ Bengal filled with its native characters and legendary landscapes:

It was a new land, a dream kingdom! Here one could run and play all the while – here there were neither schools nor teachers nor any canes in their hands. Across the deep dark waters of the still lake there lies a jungle of reeds, and beyond that, unending stretches of moorlands merge with the far horizons. Then there are dense groves of mango and jackfruit trees – their branches crowded with long-tailed parrots; there the round-eyed carp swims in the river and clouds of mosquitoes throng the arum bushes. Here the forest-dwelling aunt stays at the end of the woods, making sweets of puffed rice and nymphs frolic in the pomegranate tree. The janti tree by the river bears janti fruits, blue horses graze in the fields and golden peacocks of Gour flock on the pathways.42

Gnanadanandini Devi’s Sat Bhai Champa and Tak Duma Dum Dum, both published in 1910, were also dramatisations of prevalent folktales. Initially conceived as entertainments for her grandson, the publications were meant not only to be read but also to be actually performed by children. Tuntunir boi [The Tailor Bird’s Stories] by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, also published in 1910, presented a collection of twenty-seven oral tales from east Bengal. These stories, the author noted, were traditionally told by affectionate mothers to sleepy-eyed children, thus coaxing them to stay awake through supper.43
With the turn of the century, there was a surge of fairy and folk tales in print and most of them were directed at children in particular. *Upakatha* [Folktales, 1907] by Gnanendrashashi Gupta, *Rangadidir Rupkatha* [Fairytales by Rangadidi**, 1909], *Pismimar Galpa* and *Didimar Galpa* [Aunt’s Stories and Grandmother’s Stories, 1913] by Ambikacharan Gupta, *Sanjher Katha* [Twilight Tales, 1918] by Shibratan Mitra, *Thakurkmar Jhola* [Grandmother’s Pouch, 1918] by Satyacharan Chakraborty, *Sanjher Bhog* [Evening Treats, 1919] by Dineshchandra Sen and *Thakurmar Rupkatha* [Grandmother’s Fairytales, 1919] by Chandicharan Sen were some that were published prior to 1920. The fifth edition of *Thakurmar Rupkatha* records the growing popularity of fairy stories among readers - its first edition of 4000 print run was exhausted within a year of its publication forcing the publisher to print a second edition of another 4000 copies within the same year. The fifth edition, published in 1927 had a print run of 8000 copies. In the meantime, Srishchandra Basu’s *Folktales of Hindustan* had been translated into Bengali by Sita Devi and Santa Devi as *Hindustani Upakatha* (1912). The hugely popular volume ran into its fourth edition by 1925. Peopled with kings, queens, enchanted princesses and fearful ogres as well as with motley country folk like the old Brahmin and the foolish weaver, and funny animals like the cunning fox or the cheeky bird - the archetypal stories, for all their supernatural and non-rational

**This household appellation is commonly used for an elder sibling or cousin, usually for the fourth born in a large group of brothers and sisters.
embellishments, were felt to be permeated with a simple faith and earthy wisdom. Most importantly, they were seen to be acutely necessary for the imaginative liberation of the child, whose growth was felt to be stunted by a curriculum crammed full of dry factual data and a system of rote. Many of the folklore enthusiasts emphatically articulated a defense of these neglected tales as the ideal children’s literature, not only because they had been traditionally told to children down the ages and formed part of a cultural history, but because this literature alone could provide children with the wisdom and wealth underlying the vital faculty of imagination. In the preface to his compilation of folktales, Sanjher Bhog, Dineshchandra Sen, considered a major driving force behind the folklore revival in Bengal, stressed that the child had equal need of science and imagination. Speaking in defense of ghosts and fairies in children’s tales, he denounced the pedagogy that rested solely on scientific and empiricist criteria: “Whatever might be the dictum of Science, it is impossible to shut out the world of imagination from children. They have been traveling that realm since the beginning of time”. Interestingly, the English Romantic thinkers had voiced a similar defense of imaginative fairy stories about a century earlier, reacting to the primacy of rationalism and didacticism in contemporary British children’s literature. The popularity of fairy and folk tales grew and continued well into the next decade with attractively illustrated anthologies like Ho-der Galpa [Tales of the Ho-tribe, 1921] and Buno Gappo [Wild Yarns, 1922] by

In a colonial age, especially within the context of a rising nationalism, such a profusion of folk literature, apart from being a reclaimed indigenous tradition, might also, in cases, have served as a subversive political genre. Jack Zipes, in his work on the social history of fairy and folk tales, states that a transcription of the tales from the oral domain to that of the print culture marks “a significant historical turning point in the arts”. He noted that “with the rise of such technology as the printing press the possibility to instrumentalize products of the fantasy and govern their effect on the masses was made manifest.” Going by the general history of folklore, the tales which were often products of pre-capitalist, feudal societies, “were part of communal property” and reflected “the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes”. Zipes elaborates, “the magic of these tales can be equated to the wish-fulfillment and the utopian projections of the people, ie. the folk, who preserved and cultivated these tales” (13). Each age altered and appropriated the tales according to its own needs, for example in the case of the Romantics and later for the Victorians like
Dickens and Ruskin, the fairy tales became an effective weapon to counter the ill-effects of industrialisation and capitalism. In a similar fashion, in Bengal, the wealth of indigenous folklore embodying the motifs of oppression, injustice and finally restoration of order and harmony, could readily be appropriated as ideal allegories in designing an anti-colonial and nationalist discourse. The tales typically involved commoners like the farmer, the weaver or the little tailor bird who when pitted against a higher and stronger social authority, outwitted the latter by cunning and common sense. The familiar fairy-tale plot narrating the usurpation of the good king by an evil agency and the later deliverance of the kingdom from the ‘cursed’ state through magical powers could easily be relating a contemporary reality in thin disguise.49 Such lines as the following, often found in the fairy tales, could be emblematic of a dead and decaying state under a wicked and greedy potentate, where the good is rendered ineffective through a curse or a spell:

No birds sing – no wind blows – no flowers bloom in the gardens. The orchards are bare – the royal gardens have turned into deserts. There is not a single flower to offer to God – the temples are silent. The people are in utter despair.

The King is also at his wit’s end.

It was said that the kingdom was dying due to the sins of the King – the subjects were rebelling. The King sits and thinks hard -
what should he say, what should he do, to purge the evil spell and to make his cursed land fertile and prosperous once more?^{50}

The ending of a typical tale, often with the coronation of the rightful heir, and a marriage, signal a return of the once lost prosperity and happiness. In the same way as in crises of the plot, such ‘happy’ closures could be loaded with symbols identifying a cherished utopia and the possibilities for realising that utopia. In fact, not long after, in the 1930s, the literary fairytale was being consciously used by writers like Girindrashekhar Basu and Dinesh Mukhopadhyay as allegories to convey ideas of anti-colonialism and nationhood.^{51}

**Mythological Histories**

In this flood of indigenous culture that flowed into Bengali children’s books towards the end of the nineteenth century, no less important were the ancient Puranic histories. These mythological narratives had traditionally been part of a practicing folk culture and were carried on through festivals, rituals and popular entertainments like *jatra*, *kathakata* and *panchali*. While the first was a hugely popular form of itinerant folk-theatre, the latter were story-telling sessions among rustic communities and homely circles, with the stories varying from the
epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* to religious ballads. While surveying the
flourish of pre-print traditions in her article on early print culture in
colonial India, Anindita Ghosh documents “a variety of earthy literary
genres based on local rural ballads and religious cults” among which
were:

*Panchalis*, or rhythmic couplets set to music, based on
mythological themes and favourite epics featured prominently on
such occasions, as did a particularly popular genre of religious
literature in the form of lengthy narrative poetry spun around local
deities, known as *mangal kavyas*. . . *Kathakatas*, or collective
narrative sessions, where religious works based on Hindu religious
epics and mythology were read out by professional Brahmin
narrators, or *kathaks*, were in great demand during the period and
survived as a legacy well into the print age.  

Indeed, the numerous references to such traditional practices found in
most nineteenth century autobiographical writings indicate that these
customs and festivities were regularly and ritually carried out within
families as well as within larger social communities. Amritalal Basu
recollects eagerly awaiting the annual *kojagori*†† *jatra* shows as a child.  
The children, he remembers, were allowed to join the audience for the
night-long performances, and though they could hardly keep awake
through the length of it, the performance, the songs, the visiting troop

†† Hindu religious festival for the worship of Goddess Lakshmi, customarily celebrated
on the day of the auspicious full-moon (known as the ‘*kojagori purnima*’) in autumn.
with its musicians and players always brought a whiff of excitement in their autumn vacations. Prasannamayee Devi born into a liberal Hindu family in 1857 writes of the jatra performances that she had witnesses as a child, during the yearly monsoon festivities of her native village in eastern Bengal. As Amritalal vividly recalls Nimai Das and his “Raban-badh pala” [The Slaying of Raban], so Prasannamayee remembers the songs narrating the pain and sorrow of Jashoda, rendered in the unforgettable voices of “Gobindo Adhikari, Madhusudan Kan and Loka Dhopa”. She writes how she knew the Ramayan and the Mahabharat by heart, like the other children in the family, since every evening her elder brother used to read aloud from these sacred mythological texts. Rabindranath Tagore had been mesmerised in his childhood by “the soft slow chant of Krittivas’ fourteen syllabled payar” as well as by the “jingle of alliteration and the jangle of rhyme” in Dashuray’s verses. Abanindranath, living next-door in the “other” building of the twin Jorasanko houses, dwells upon the daily kathakata sessions by Mahim-kathak taking place in his younger aunt’s room. Later, looking for hours at the “deshi-style oil paintings” of child Krishna, Shakuntala or Kadambari that were hung in the same room, he would be wonder-struck to rediscover “the very pictures of kathak-thakur’s [story-teller] tales”.

Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay also writes about the stories he had heard during his childhood from a famous kathak from Hoogly named
Durlabh Goswami. “Dhruva and Prahalada, Sudama and Krishna, Radhika and Gopis, Harish Chandra and Saivya became all shining images before me and the world of reality fused with the world of phantasy”, he reminisces (46). Mukhopadhyay reflects that though, as children or adolescents, they did not always fully understand the tales, legends and songs, the haunting poignancy of the sentiments remained etched in their young minds along with the snatches of songs and couplets that were remembered even later in life. Thus Children too, as part of the communities, drew both entertainment and education from such lively sessions and captivating performances. Apu’s childhood in the remote little backward village of Nishchindipur - as narrated by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay in his classic work, presents an apt literary example. The boy hero’s childhood is steeped in the ambient folk culture consisting of popular entertainments like household rhymes, *kathakata* sessions and *jatras*. Apu endlessly imbibes the epics and mythologies, not only from his readings of *panchalis* and *Purans* but more so from a practicing mass culture replete with rituals and festivals. Hence, it was not surprising that at a time of writing an indigenous history, these traditional narratives that reflected common beliefs and ritual practices, began to be drawn out and distilled into printed versions for children. Starting from the last decade of the nineteenth century, this rich repertoire of epics, legends and mythologies began to be retold for children in easy, abridged forms, both in prose and in verse.
When *Shishuranjan Ramayan* [Entertaining Ramayan for Children] by Nabakrishna Bhattacharya was published in 1891, Bankimchandra Chatterjee warmly encouraged and appreciated the enterprise of reproducing the indigenous epic for children. Complimenting the author, he wrote, “Nowadays our children know about Peter of Russia and are closely acquainted with the history of Philip II of Spain but names like Dasharath or Janak are quite foreign to them.” Calling attention to the edifying and illuminating aspects of the great epic, he stated that it was indeed lamentable that the textbooks approved in the current system of education completely disregarded these works and deprived children of the lofty philosophies and social ethics embedded in ancient texts like the *Ramayan. Arjyapath* [Aryan Narratives, 1888] by Bireshwar Pare, written with an intention of providing children with moral education through historical tales, also drew upon indigenous mythologies. In order to illustrate distinctive virtues like obedience, duty, mercy, gratefulness or magnanimity the book related exemplary stories of numerous Puranic characters like Ram, Bhisma, Arjun, Kunti, Karna, Judhishthir and Dronacharjya.

A new way of retelling the Puranic tales in print for the purpose of entertaining children was marked by the appearance of Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri’s *Chheleder Ramayan*. The first of his many books for

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Character in *Ramayan*
children, it had initially been published around 1896-97. It was planned as an illustrated volume and had been supplemented with excellent illustrations by the author. However, when the book came out of press, the illustrations were found to be badly distorted due to the poor quality reproductions of the wood-block printing technique. A second edition of the book, published in 1907, was an enlarged and enhanced version of the earlier edition, and according to the author, was in effect “a new book.”

Upendrakishore used a simple yet powerfully evocative language to capture the grand drama and the heroic action of the great epic. The narrative technique was radically different from the formal intonations of earlier epic narrations. Telling the story in the first person to his young readers, the author used conversational inflections to generate feelings of awe, wonder, delight or to induce a sense of breathtaking suspense. This he probably drew from practicing oral traditions, from the powerful elocutions of jatras and from the dialogic nature characteristic of the kathakata sessions which involved the participation of the narrator and the listeners alike. The various feats of Ram, the epic hero, especially his slaying of devilish and oppressive monsters are described in great detail. One such amusing instance is provided by Ram’s encounter with Viradh, the ogre:

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88 Probably no copy of this edition is now extant, but in the preface to the second edition published in 1907, the author mentioned having written a Chheleder Ramayan earlier.

89 The volume becomes historically significant in that it is said to have motivated Upendrakishore to perfect the process of half-tone printing – a research in which he had been dabbling for the preceding six or seven years. See, H. Adhya, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri.
Till now, in their days of exile in the forests, Ram, Lakshman and Sita had not met an ogre. This time they came upon quite a fiendish one. He stood like a towering hill in the middle of the forest. . . Mr. Monster was then having his breakfast - a modest feast of three lions, four tigers, a couple of rhinoceroses, ten deer and the whole of an elephant’s head. (34)

Exaggeration, one of the most derided aspects of traditional Hindu historiography, often becomes Upandrakishore’s chief narrative device in retelling the epic for children. Ashis Nandy, discussing divergent attitudes towards history in a different context defends the tendency of reciting absurd figures and fantastic events in traditional Indian historiography:

A king is mentioned as having sixty thousand children and the heavens are mentioned as being inhabited by three hundred and thirty million gods, not only to make the point that the king is potent and the gods are many, but also to wipe out what many would consider the real data, and obviate any possibility of verification or empirical treatment . . . In fact you are not expected to take these figures seriously.63

He remarks that this in this type of traditional historiography, “data are important only so far as they relate to the overall logic and the cultural symbol that must be communicated” (Nandy, 6).
Though retelling old histories and capturing oral manners in the printed word, these new, amusing books for children did mark a departure from the earlier traditional cultures. In the preface to Chheleder Ramayan, Upendrakishore gratefully acknowledged his indebtedness to Rabindranath Tagore who had reviewed, corrected and suggested judicious changes in the manuscript of his book. Interestingly, both of Upendrakishore’s Ramayans for children, namely, Chheleder Ramayan and Chhotto Ramayan [Little Ramayan, 1919] drop the Uttarkanda or the ‘aftermath episode’ of the original epic and present a truncated version of the tale.††† In the preface to his Chheleder Mahabharat [Mahabharat for Children] too, Upendrakishore states having omitted certain episodes in order to make it appropriate for children. Such deliberate textual erasures – a new element in Bengali children’s books - were probably the effects of a studied censorship that the modern intellectuals like Upendrakishore and Rabindranath brought to the areas of Bengali children’s literature in particular and Bengali childhood in general. Along with a simplification of language and a relaxation of formal style, these books also heralded the beginning of a modern attitude towards childhood which became evident in their conscious pruning of traditional literary materials. Thus, while old stories were being retold and an oral culture was being replicated in print

††† The Uttarkanda or the aftermath in Ramayan brings in fresh complications in the plot of the narrative and disturbs the short period of stability and happiness following Ram’s crowning ceremony at the end of Lankakanda.
for children, they were also being ‘re-fashioned’ with a new and ‘re-formed’ vision of childhood.

Following the second edition of *Chheleder Ramayan* in 1907, there was a profusion of books that reframed and represented the great Indian epics for children: *Chheleder Mahabharat* [Mahabharat for Children, 1908] by Upendrakishore, *Ramayaner Chhabi o Katha* [Ramayan in Words and Pictures, 1909] by Yogindranath Basu and Yogindranath Sarkar’s *Lanka-kanda* [The episode at Lanka, 1909] and *Kurukshetra* (1909). These again were followed by *Tuktuke Ramayan* [The Pretty Ramayan, 1910] by Nabakrishna Bhattacharya, *Sita* (1913) by Baradakanta Majumdar and *Chhotto Ramayan* (1919) by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri. Besides these more well-known books that survived through successive editions, there were also a number of ephemeral ones. At least two more titles are mentioned in the ‘advertisement’ prefixed to *Ramayaner Chhabi o Katha*. In it, the author Yogindranath Basu laments that the two ‘mahagrantha’ or grand texts of the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* - that had once shaped the nature of a people and set the norms of a civilization - could now only rarely be seen in the hands of boys and girls. In the context, he mentions having compiled simplified versions of *Krittibas Ramayan* and *Kashiramdas Mahabharat* as *Saral Krittibas* and *Saral Kashiramdas* for children. These two books are also mentioned as sources in the prefaces to
Yogindranath Sarkar’s *Lanka-kanda* and *Kurukshetra*. Both of Sarkar’s books focus on the highly dramatic turning points in the two epics with the earlier and the later events outlined in brief. As his source-texts, Sarkar mentions the Bengali originals in both cases – the *Krittibas Ramayan* and the *Kashiramdas Mahabharat*, but also acknowledged his debt to *Saral Krittibas, Saral Kashiramdas, Chheleder Ramayan* and *Chheleder Mahabharat*. Also mentioned was the name of Nabakrishna Bhattacharya, the author of *Shishuranjan Ramayan*. Bhattacharya’s *Tuktuke Ramayan*, published in 1910, professed to be an “entertaining little volume” for children in contrast to the earlier *Shishuranjan Ramayan* which had been conceived as a school book. These ‘modern’ re-tellings and re-writings of the epics for children can be seen implicitly in contrast to the much earlier text-book versions of epic narrations (like *Shishubodhak*), in that these later books primarily aimed to amuse and to please rather than to teach. The later volumes were also distinctive in their use of colloquial language and their preference for a conversational style instead of the much more formal, stylised narrations in rigid and sanskritised Bengali. Thus, in between 1907 and 1919, there were a series of children’s books on the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* – the two grand narratives underlying the life and culture of the Bengali people down the ages. These books also aimed to connect their reading audiences much in the same way as the prevalent traditions of *kathakata, panchali* and *jatra*. These practices not only brought alive the
epics for the enraptured audience but also cemented the community through an “extraordinary celebration of shared emotions and listening experiences” (Ghosh, 34). The prefatory verse in *Ramayaner Chhabi o Katha*, draws on the traditional culture of a shared, communal reading and addresses its audience in the plural, thereby underlining a shared past and a racial identity of its imagined readers:

_Bangalir chhele meye je achho jethay_  
[All ye sons and daughters of Bengalis, wherever you might be]  
_Diner abase kimba rajar sabhay_  
[In poor huts or in princely courts]  
_Enechhi sobar tore dakho upahar_  
[For every one of you I bring a gift]  
_Law-o asi hok shrom sarthak amar_  
[Come and take it – that will be my reward] (n.pag.)

In a similar way, Yogindranath Sarkar’s *Lanka-kanda* concluded with a verse that drew upon a community, a brotherhood and a nation:

_Ram sama satyapriya nayban nare_  
[With a truth-loving and an honourable man like Ram]  
_Lakshman Bharat sama anuj nijhare_  
[With brothers like Lakshman and Bharat]  
_Sita sama satitwe hoiya sugathito_  
[Strengthened with a chaste wife like Sita]  
_Bharater prati griha hauk shobhito_  
[May each Indian household be adorned]^{65}
Most of these retellings were again connected to each other, with the predecessors being cited and followed as supplementary sources for the latter texts, thus forming a coherent tradition of epic narratives in the children’s domain. Tagore’s defense of the ‘Epic’ as an ideal education suited to the special needs of the child, over and above the empirical history of mere “facts and dates” was also voiced around this time in a lecture on his ashram school of Shantiniketan. Strongly condemning the prevailing (English) system of education as “a bagful of information” where teachers and students become “living gramophones” crammed with figures and data, Tagore wrote, “we rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates.”

Apart from the epics, a fair number of children’s books were also written on the varied religious narratives and genealogies derived from the wealth of mythological tales in the numerous Purans and Upapurans. Pouranik Kahini, an anthology of some of the mythological tales written by Labanyaprabha Basu for the periodical Mukul, was published in 1902. Arjyanari (Part I, 1908), a volume jointly authored by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Kaliprasanna Das Gupta, brought together the tales of twenty-three remarkable women from the Puranic histories that included the stories of Sati, Sita, Sabitri, Kunti, Gandhari,
Draupadi, Damayanti, Shakuntala, Gargi and Maitrayee. *Sita* by Baradakanta Majumdar, extolled the purity and chastity of the central female character of the *Ramayan*. The foreword, written by Dakshinaranjan, praised the author’s chosen mode of narration which “closely followed that of the *katha* or the oral-tale . . . [and which] will help to inscribe a living image of Sita in the minds of little girls”.68 As ardent a mythologist as a folklorist, Dakshinaranjan’s own *Khoka-khukur Khela* (1909), though a lighthearted miscellany, incorporated the stories of Bharat, Kalketu and Behula through rhymed poems and attractive illustrations. A series of mythological stories by Kuladaranjan Ray, that had appeared earlier in *Sandesh*, were also collected and published as a children’s anthology titled *Puraner Galpa* [Mythological Tales, 1919]. Through these narratives that were selected variously from the *Brahmapuran*, the *Vishnupuran*, the *Shivpuran* and the *Markandyapuran*, the author, “endeavoured to instruct and amuse his child audience” in equal measure.69 Thus during this period, there clearly was a “strong emphasis on ‘Indianness’” in the Bengali children’s books, which became manifest “in a revivalist tendency to retell classics, legends and tales of heroism, often from history”.70

*Chheleder Chandi* [The Tale of Chandi for Children] by Atulchandra Mukhopadhyay, published in 1910, abridged and retold the legend of the Goddess Chandi for children. The foreword, which outlined the historical
time of the original text, was written by none other than Dineshchandra Sen. The remote mythological history is connected with everyday reality at the very outset as the author begins the story of Chandi with a reference to the village *chandimandap*—a playing area familiar to children in every Bengali hamlet. Myth and tradition thus become, for the child-readers, inextricable and indispensable parts of a living culture, a social and communal reality carried on through generations and not something that is merely fabulous and archaic. In the same fold were books like *Sonar Chand* [The Golden Boy, 1913]—a collection of tales of ‘golden heroes’ like Dhana, Drhuba, Srimanta, Jatil and Brishaketu, and *Bhaktir Dor* [The Garland of Faith, 1918]—a children’s play based on the legends of Dhana and Krishna. There occurred, during the same period, an outburst in publishing ritualistic songs and rhymes that were commonly a part of popular religious and semi-religious practices mainly associated with girls and young women. Dakhsinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s *Thandidir Thale* [Grandmother’s Pouch, 1909], *Meyeder Bratakatha* [Rites and Vows for Girls, 1925] by Basantakumari Dasi and *Chhotto Meyeli Brater Chhara* [Little Book of Rhymes and Rituals, 1925] by Charubala Devi are examples of some *bratakatha*-collections for girls that appeared in the early twentieth century.

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*Chandimandap* literally means a shrine for the Goddess Chandi but more generally it connotes a place for communal gathering, usually an elevated platform shaded by a thatch in a central location within the village.
The protracted urge, in the face of an estrangement with one's roots, was a profound search for the recovery of the 'self', of defining a national identity by tapping the indigenous springs of culture. The oral lore – the songs and stories born of the earth – that had so long remained absent from the 'official' and 'respectable' books for children and from which the children had been wrongfully alienated in a colonial culture, were zealously reclaimed and faithfully restored to their domain. In this way, the 'popular' that had for the past few decades been labeled as all that was backward and vulgar, came to be seen as ingredients that were truly indigenous, authentic and uncontaminated – heritages which needed to be recovered and preserved for charting an independent cultural identity as well as for forging a nationalist discourse. Rejecting the form, content and language of the 'Western vernacular' juvenile literature, the elites and intelligentsia of contemporary Bengal sought to give the native children a literature of their own.

Indigenous Designs and Book Illustrations

With the generation of a *swadeshi* brand of children’s literature in Bengal, the art of book illustration – an especially important aspect of children’s books - too acquired an indigenous texture in the domain of juvenile publishing. The illustrations increasingly asserted a separation
from colonial models through what can be seen as distinctive non-
Western forms and native styles. The art and technology of book
illustration was another facet of the new print culture initiated under the
British influence. In the early period, for reasons of economy and
because of a lack of local expertise, the missionaries had used old and
rejected wood blocks acquired cheaply from London to embellish their
books for Bengali children. Using borrowed blocks, the early
illustrations, juxtaposed with adapted subjects in indigenous settings,
were visibly foreign. In time, there developed a skilled band of native
block makers and engravers in and around Calcutta, “the future Wests &
Lawrences & Wilkies of India”, many of whom mastered the art and went
on to become fine artisans.71 Along with this development, there came
into business several indigenous art studios excelling in photo engraving,
half tone and lithographic printing, like U. Ray & Sons, K.V. Syene &
Brothers and A.B.Doss Ivy Press. Till the late nineteenth century, or, to
be specific, till the reclamation of the indigenous histories in print, the
art of children’s book illustration largely remained bound to foreign-made
blocks and plates. Even when the blocks were manufactured locally, the
artisans and engravers followed Western models and styles. For example,
both Sakha and Mukul – periodicals which were profusely illustrated with
woodcuts - continued to use imported and imitated blocks till the early
twentieth century. Such pictures often jarred, especially when used for
illustrating Bengali subjects [figures 4.4, 4.5].
Figure 4.4. Woodcut illustration, *Sakha*, February 1883.

Figure 4.5. Woodcut illustration, *Mukul*, May-June, 1902.
Apart from the technology of printing images, which like other aspects of the print culture, was initiated and influenced by the British, Indian art too had undergone momentous transformations under colonial impact. The ‘scientific’ European art had, from a very early stage, derided Indian art as a monstrous deformity. It had set new ‘norms’ for Indian artists to follow and had instituted the various colonial art colleges and schools which had become, by the twentieth century, the ‘official’ centres of art in the country. Like most cultural areas, by the end of the nineteenth century, the contemporary movements in the sphere of fine arts, both within Bengal and outside it, had begun to reflect and embody the rising nationalist agenda. Opposing the Western norms of scientific realism and classical purity, the artists questioned the validity of photographic imitation as art and set out to establish an ideology of a swadeshi art. As a field related to fine arts and sharing many of its exponents like Abanindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri and Nandalal Bose, the illustrations that enlivened the ‘indigenous’ children’s books, too displayed the contemporary “tension between an academic naturalism, colonial legacy and a search for an alternative canon” (Mitter, 230).

The ‘swadeshiness’ of Thakurmar Jhuli, besides being inherent in its native fairy tales, was heightened and reinforced by the stunning illustrations of the book. Done by Dakshinaranjan himself, the drawings
were transferred to wood blocks by skilled engravers like Priyogopal Das, Aurobinda Das, Kunjabehari Pal and Hemchandra Bandyapadhyay. These illustrations stand as historic examples where all notions of classical purity are rejected to flaunt an inimitable, swadeshi Bengaliness [figures 4.6, 4.7]. The accompanying visuals to “Neelkamal ar Lalkamal” [Neelkamal and Lalkamal], “Sonar Kati Rupar Kati” [The Gold and the Silver Sticks] or “Chyang Byang” have become, like the tales, part of an immortal heritage. The entire volume was elaborately decked with a profusion of indigenous motifs like lotus petals or conch shells and used intricate lunettes depicting the mayurpankhi [the peacock-headed boat] or elephants as headpieces. These were drawn from and were strongly reminiscent of traditional alpana patterns: a folk art form profoundly and fundamentally Bengali [figures 4.8, 4.9]. At a time when book illustration and design was a predominantly west-influenced domain, Thakurmar Jhuli was swadesh-ism incarnate. Bound in a purely indigenous attire and telling native tales in their rustic dialects and oral styles, the book captured the essence of Bengali femininity in its diction as well as in its design.

Many reputed artists and skilled engravers of the day had important contributions as illustrators in creating the innovative and stimulating visual texts in children’s books. They translated the
Figure 4.6. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, “Chyang Byang”, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, 1907 (reproduced from Golden Jubilee edition, 1957).

Figure 4.7. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, an illustration in “Sonar Kati Rupar Kati”, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, 1907 (reproduced from Golden Jubilee edition, 1957).

Figure 4.8. Title page, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, 1907 (reproduced from Golden Jubilee edition, 1957).

imaginary landscapes and fantastic characters of the folktales and mythologies into printed pictures for the young readers. The fantastically unorthodox representations of “Akanore” and “Husur Musur” in Khukumanir Chhara embodied the outlandish and unreal creatures from the phantom world of Bengali nursery rhymes [figures 4.10, 4.11]. Soon, with the original contributions of pioneering artists like Abanindranath Tagore, the illustrations in Bengali children’s books achieved not only a quality of excellence but also a definite indigenous edge. Abanindranath, one of the ideologues of swadeshi art, had added his own illustrations to Shakuntala, Kshirer Putul, and Bhut-patrir Desh [The Realm of Trolls, 1915] [figures 4.12, 4.13, 4.14]. Though varying from the sublime and the ethereal to the quixotic and the nonsensical his illustrations speak of an original and consciously indigenous imagination at work.

Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri’s illustrations for Chheleder Ramayan were printed using the half-tone process, a technique that was perfected by the illustrator himself. Further, his visual representations of the epic characters – especially the fantastic ones, were executed with an imaginative flourish that was unbridled and free of the strictures of Western classicism [figures 4.15, 4.16]. In fact, illustrations of Chheleder

Figure 4.13. Abanindranath Tagore, Illustration, *Shakuntala*, 1915.

Figure 4.15. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, Illustration, *Chheleder Ramayan*, 1907.

Figure 4.16. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, Illustration, *Chheleder Mahabharat*, 1908.
Ramayan, Chheleder Mahabharat, Ramayaner Chhabi o Katha, Lanka-kanda, Kurukshetra, Tuktuke Ramayan, Sita and Chhotto Ramayan, can be seen not only as being radically different from the naturalistic techniques of Western paintings but also as a coherent manifestation of defining a new style in the world of the printed image in children’s books. In their depiction of the ‘marvellous reality’ of the ancient narratives filled with half-humans, gods and demons, such illustrations as “Kabandha”, “Viradh” and “Ranakshetre Chamunda” can be seen to be exuding an indigenous brand of magic-realism [figures 4.17, 4.18, 4.19]. In style and in execution, these illustrations approximate what Christopher Pinney terms as the “xeno-real”. Pinney aligns this term with an art form popularised by the innumerable oleographs and chromolithographs of Hindu “Mytho-pictures” in nineteenth century India. In their styles as in their subjects, he substantiates, these images marked a strategic departure from colonial realism. Tuktuke Ramayan used, among other awe-inspiring illustrations of monsters and ogres, the famous “Jatayu-Vadha” painting by Ravi Varma, an early stalwart of Indian art [figure 4.20]. The illustrations in Chheleder Chandi, drawn by the famous artist Sitalchandra Bandyopadhyay, portrayed the grand fury of the ten-armed divinity [figures 4.21, 4.22]. The indigenisation of these illustrations is apparent in their distinctive exuberance of colours, in sensory excesses and in the background mythoscapes that either ignore or are shorn of realistic bindings.
Figure 4.17. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, “Kabandha”, *Chhotto Ramayan*, 1919.
Figure 4.18. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, “Viradh”, Chhotto Ramayan, 1919.
Figure 4.19. “Ranakshetre Chamunda”, Yogindranath Sarkar, Kurkshetra, 1909.
Figure 4.21. Sitalchandra Bandyopadhyay, “Mahishasur Badh”, Atulchandra Bandyopadhyay, *Chheleder Chandi*, 1910.

Figure 4.22. Sitalchandra Bandyopadhyay, “Raktabeej Sanghar”, Atulchandra Bandyopadhyay, *Chheleder Chandi*, 1910.
These native lores, with their extraordinary gods, humans and demons drawn in mythic proportions, were represented in these radically indigenous visuals that recreated the very spirit of the tales through magnificent and breathtaking illustrations. Thus the ‘indigenous histories’ for children that grew into a definitive genre by the early twentieth century, were communicated to the young readers not only through the printed word, but also through a range of powerful visual images that sought to redefine the imagination of Bengali children.
Notes to Chapter IV


November-December 1898, 124-26; “Lal Suta ar Nil Suta”, Mukul, March-April 1899, 180-182.


19. In general, chapbooks were inexpensive publications designed for the poorer literate classes. Containing romances, ballads, controversial political or religious comments and all kinds of short texts, they were sold for a few pence by travelling pedlars or
‘chapmen’ (from Anglo-Saxon ceap, meaning barter or business). The chapman’s chief customers were the farming communities, the shepherds, the labourers in remote parts of the country where there were no bookshops. For a delightfully written history of chapbooks in England, see, Sue Dipple, *Chapbooks: How they be Collected by Sondrie Madde Persons, and Something of their Trew Historie* (Hodsdon, Hartfordshire: Pat Garrett, 1996).


Rangeet Sengupta observes that “Both Temple (the administrator-scholar) and Day (the Baptist-evangelist and educationalist) were indulging themselves in digging out
folk narratives from two distant corners of the Empire in India. By doing so, they were participating in a wider colonial endeavour to discover the folk-narratives – an endeavour that had recently gained considerable popularity."

26. Dineshchandra Sen writes, “But the folk-tales of Bengal, told by village women and mostly composed by them, in the quiet environment of shady mango-groves midst which stood their straw-roofed mud huts, - like the coy Malati flower that bloomed in the evening there, - did not venture to peep out and show themselves to strangers.” Dineshchandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920; repr. Kolkata: Aparna Book Industries, 2007), 3.


29. Barun Kumar Chakraborty, Editor’s Note, *Folk Literature of Bengal*, xiii.


31. H. Bose, Publisher’s Preface, 13th *Kuntalin Puraskar* (Kolkata: Delkhosh House, 1910).


34. Khagendranath Mitra notes that Yogindranath’s earlier experience of writing for children in periodicals had later helped him to conceive and publish pleasing and attractive books of rhymes and tales for children. Refer to *Shatabdir Shishu-sahitya* (1958; repr., Kolkata: Pashchim Banga Academy, 1998), 123.


37. The *Swadeshi* movement that generated in India towards the end of the nineteenth century was spearheaded by Bengal. The Boycott resolution was passed on 7th August 1905, in a public meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall; the response in Bengal was overwhelming – “the sale of British cloth in some districts fell to between 6 and 20 per cent of original levels”. For a detailed history refer to Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973).

38. The advertisements appeared in *Prakriti* (1908), *Arya Nari* (1908) and *Amar Desh* (1920) respectively.


Though Khagendranath Mitra is of the opinion that *Kankabati* was not intended as a children’s book, in its 1st edition, the book was introduced by the author as a “*shishu-pathya boi*” [book meant to be read by children]. Tagore’s subsequent review of *Kankabati* in *Sadhana* also establishes the status of the book as a juvenile publication.


41. That the book was, in all probabilities, inspired (at least in part) by Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in the Wonderland*, becomes clear not only in the familiar pattern of the strange adventures and weird creatures that *Kankabati* encounters during her dream journey, but also, very visibly, in the illustrations of the book. Many of
the woodcut illustrations used were close adaptations of Tenniel’s famous *Alice* sketches.


47. Recollecting his own childhood readings Coleridge observed, “Should children be permitted to read Romances and Relations of Giants and Magicians and Genii? I know all that has been said against it but I have formed my faith in the affirmative -- I know no other way of giving the mind ‘the Great’ & ‘the Whole’...”, S.T. Coleridge, letter to Thomas Poole, dated October 16th 1797, *Collected Letters of S.T. Coleridge*, Vol I, Ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, (Oxford: Claredendon Press, 1956). Scolfield, one of the Romantic thinkers and thought to be a nom de plume for Willam Godwin, offered the most coherent and radical critique of the existing ‘moral’ literature for children: He pointed out that the old vulgar romances for all their extravagant fantasising, had created credible, authentic and human characters, whereas the didactic realists, trying to represent a real world were unable to fabricate ‘life-like’ characters because of a dearth of imaginative insight. Quoted in Geoffrey Summerfield’s *Fantasy and Reason: Children’s Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen & Co, 1984). Closer to the time of this study, in England, Dickens was emphatically speaking in favour of ‘Fancy’ and advocating the fairy tale as an antidote to the malaise of rampant industrialism. See, Ostry, *Social Dreaming*.

49. Such an intention in the folk literature published for children in early twentieth century Bengal has been hinted at but not fully explored in works like Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Gopal-Rakhal Dwandvasamas: Upanibeshbad o Bangla Shishusahitya* (Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991) and Barnita Bagchi, “Bengali Folklore and Children’s Literature”, *Indian Folklife* No.21 (April 2006).


51. Girindrashekhar Basu authored *Lal-Kalo* [Red Black], an allegorical fantasy concerning a battle between red and black ants and Dinesh Mukhopadhyay wrote *Tepantarer Math* [The Fantastic Moorland] – a *bildungsroman* using a fairy-tale structure.


59. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Endorsement, Shishuranjan Ramayan, quoted in Shatabdir Shishu-Sahitya, 125.

60. Bireshwar Pare, Arjyapath (1888; Kolkata: Hare Press, 10th ed. 1899).


64. Yogindranath Basu, Advertisement, Ramayaner Chhabi o Katha (Kolkata: City Book Society, 1909), ix-x.

65. Yogindranath Sarkar, Lanka-kanda ba Ram-Rabaner Juddha (Kolkata: City Book Society, 1909), 64.


67. These complex tales would often contain, apart from the main narratives, a number of meta-narratives in the form of related legends, stories, parables and hymns. See, Girindrashekhar Basu, Puran Prabesh (Kolkata, 1934).

68. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, introduction to Baradakanta Majumdar, Sita (Kolkata: Bhattacharya and Sons, 3rd edition, 1913), n.pag.


72. Partha Mitter quotes Richard Temple’s “heady mixture” of “morality, progress and evangelism” through the rectifications taught by Western art, Ruskin’s opinion on the Indian artist that “[the Indian] will not draw a form of nature but an amalgamation of monstrous objects” and Sir George Birdwood’s comment that “painting and sculpture as fine arts did not exist in India.” See, Partha Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)


74. This attempt towards defining an independent style, so visible in the books of fairy tales and mythologies for children, however, was not so apparent in other sorts of children’s books. For example, Yogindranath Sarkar’s Chhabir Boi and Rangachhabi used Western illustrations while Ajab Desh (1919)– an adaptation of The Wizard of Oz and the previously mentioned Kankabati largely imitated the famous illustrations in the Western originals with only slight changes in the blocks. Such a trend clearly marks out an ‘indigenous’ area in children’s books – the foreign made or the foreign-inspired illustrations clearly did not suffice for illustrating the native spirit of the folktales and mythologies.


77. Ravi Varma, in collaboration with a group of German print-technicians, had set up the Ravi Varma Press around 1894 and had started issuing his picture-prints for a mass-market. By the early years of the twentieth century, Ravi Varma’s prints were
being widely pirated and replicated all over the country. The pictures were variously used as prints, book illustrations, match-box labels and baby-food commercials. See, Partha Mitter, “Ravi Varma and Popular Prints”, *Art and Nationalism*, 208-18.