Chapter V

‘Amar Desh’: Home, Homeland and ‘Homely’ Books for Children

A Sense of Kinship: Children of a Motherland

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s *Thakurmar Jhuli* was conceived as the first book in the series *Matrigranthabali*. The idea of assimilating the folk and the land in the metaphor of the child and the mother becomes explicit in the distinctive titles chosen for the *Matrigranthabali* books. The sense of this familial kinship is further worked out and strengthened through the comprehensive introductions that are appended to each of the volumes. In his introduction to *Bangopanyash Thakurdadar Jhuli* [Grandpa’s Sack: The Song Narratives of Bengal, 1908] Dakshinaranjan contests the notion that Bengali vernacular literature has been fashioned out of Western literary influences. Like the fairy-tales in the earlier book, he upholds the ancient *kathas* [narratives/stories] as a genre native to Bengal: “the *kathas* were

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* The term might be translated as ‘books dedicated to the Mother’
* This was later advertised as the fourth book of the *Matrigranthabali* series, the first was *Thakurmar Jhuli*. 
Bengal’s own, their distinctive ditties were strung intimately with the lives of its people”. These oral tales, he goes on to argue, have successfully carried out a responsibility that was far greater and more extensive than the printed, literary novels ostensibly borrowed from the West. He remarks that,

[T]ransmitted from one generation to the other, these kathas have not only fired the innate imagination of our children, provided pleasant entertainment for the women engaged in daily household chores and enlivened the conversations of the village elders in their evening gatherings; but further, they have been educating the masses in the highest ideals of knowledge and beauty through the diverting medium of stories told in an easy and amusing style.

The book, being a gleaning of these indigenous geetkathas or song-narratives that had been inherent in Bengali tradition, is therefore fittingly dedicated to the motherland, to ‘Mother Bengal’:

Dhuli kuriye pelam banshi  
[In the dust of Mother-Bengal’s mead]

Bangla mayer math-e  
[I found this pipe to play]

Chhera kanthar jhuli dhore ene dilam hate  
[My rustic sack of homespun cloth in her hands I lay]

(Thakurdadar Jhuli, n.pag.)
The significance of the image of the nation as a mother goddess emerging in a nationalist context in late nineteenth century Bengal has been studied by critics like Tanika Sarkar, Sumanta Banerjee and Sumathi Ramaswamy. Locating the exact historical time when the two discrete concepts of the nation and the mother goddess were merged into a single entity in popular imagination, Banerjee observes,

While the image of the mother had always been closely associated with that of the motherland in Hindu thought and culture (eg. janani janmabhoomishcha swargadopi gariyashi - the mother and motherland are greater than even heaven), the two images came to be identified with each other much later . . . . It evolved in the context of political relationship between the rulers and the ruled during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Similarly, in the larger context of the patriotic discourse “that came to constitute a significant domain in Bengali literature”, Tanika Sarkar notes the rise of the “concept of the Motherland – Deshmata” as a strategic “principle and cultural artifact” (Sarkar, 2011). Tracing the metaphor of the loving child and the worshipped mother back to devotional songs of mother deities, she says, “For Bengalis, accustomed to the worship of a variety of female cults, emotional resonances connected with an enslaved mother figure tended to be particularly powerful” (2011). Also, in sharp contrast to the very masculine public
school image of the dominant British power - by whom the Bengalis were often mocked as a weak and effeminate race - Bengali nationalism chose to erect a mother-figure, bringing into play the diametrically opposite ideologies of natural kinship, femininity and love. The second issue of Balak published the nationalist song “Vande Mataram” [I bow to thee, Motherland] – a hymn popularised by Bankimchandra’s proto-nationalist novel Anandamath. The accompanying lithographic print by Harishchandra Haldar depicted a slender young female figure with children playing around her in an arcadia rich with fruits, vines and flowers [figure 5.1]. In the picture, she personifies the opulent motherland; her fertility is symbolised by the young sons and daughters surrounding her as also by the abundance of fruits and leafy trellises in the background. She is the image of that blessed land “nourished by the goodness of waters, heaped with sweet fruits, cooled by zephyrs and lush with crops” (Balak, May-June 1885, 95).

She is not only the deshmata or the motherland, she is often embodied as the grihalakshmi or the archetypal housewife who is traditionally identified with the goddess of kindness and bounty. An article in a later issue of the journal describing poush-parban - the Bengali festival celebrating a full harvest- is replete with the resonances of a fertile femininity that is synonymous with harmony, homely warmth and grace.
Figure 5.1 Harish Chandra Haldar, illustration for “Bande Ma Taram”, *Balak*, April-May 1885.
[Her] fields are storehouses of a perpetual wealth, the sugarcane and date trees shower you with sweetness, with the beauty of her blue sky, of green meadows, and the creepers ever-laden with fruits and flowers Mother-Bengal is always embracing you….Poush-parbans reveal that the women in our households are truly the daughters of Lakshmi.\(^5\)

It is this image of the ‘annapurna’\(^8\), the omnipotent giver, ever rich, ever blessing, who often resurfaces as a metaphor for the fertile motherland in children’s literature. For instance, in Chhabi o Kabita [Pictures and Poems, 1914] – a children’s book by Yogindranath Basu, an illustration with the caption “Janani Bharatbhumī” [Motherland India] portrays the nation-goddess carrying sheaves of “hunger-satiating rice grains in her right hand” in her right hand and bearing a pitcher full of “thirst-quenching water in her left” [figure 5. 2].\(^6\)

The motherland is strategically identified with rural imageries, and is profoundly symbolic not only in its fertile and nourishing qualities, but also in its conventionalism and indigenousness. The countryside, in itself a vast space in the map of India, was relatively unsullied in comparison to the bustling, smoke-belching cities and towns – the very visible metaphors of a gigantic colonial power. Interestingly the ‘literary map’ of

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\(^1\) Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity.

\(^4\) Goddess symbolising plenitude, literally meaning one ‘laden with rice’.
Figure 5.2 “Janani Bharatbhumi”, illustration for the poem “Bharatmata”, Yogindranath Sarkar, Chhabi o Kabita, Part I, 1914.
India that became common around this time in patriotic songs and poems, used the country’s natural boundaries as political demarcations. In his well-known autobiography Nirad C. Chaudhuri recollects how he, aged twelve, was swept by the emotional fervour of the nationalist movement around 1908. The cherished dream for him and his brothers was that their nation, now subjugated and impoverished, had been great in the past and would rise to be greater still in the future. “The faith was fixed in our mind by a large number of patriotic songs whose single theme was that our country would be great again”, he says (247). He particularly remembers his heightened emotional responses to a “patriotic lyricism” whose poignancy lay in the continuous evocation of the beauties of nature, in “the waters, the green grass, and the golden cornfields of Bengal, the fragrance of mango blossom in the spring; while on a grander level we had the snows of the Himalayas and the waves of the Indian Ocean” (248). In this context, where love for the country was being extended to a love for its topographical and geographical features, it is worth quoting part of an article “Amader Desher Katha” [About our Country], that appeared in the children’s periodical Prakriti [Nature] in 1907:

Though we constantly reiterate the phrase ‘our country’ do we have any exact idea of the actual constituents of that territory? . . . What are the boundaries of our land? . . . Steering clear of political debates, let us see what Mother Nature has to say in this
regard . . . her fingers point to a huge expanse - far greater than Bengal - as our nation. Following her directions we recognize the glorious Bharatbarsha as our majestic land. With walls of the highest mountains and the deepest caverns of the seas, Nature has carved out the contours of Bharat and made it distinct from the rest of the world . . . this great expanse called Bharatbarsha is our nation.  

In the same year the following song was published in another children’s journal Mukul:

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\begin{align*}
Aji & \quad \text{tomare janani chinechhi} \\
\text{[Today]} & \quad \text{I have found you Mother} \\
Hridoye mama nibhrita nilaye & \quad \text{[In the solitary sanctum of my heart]} \\
Tomare dekhite peyechhi & \quad \text{[Have I seen you]} \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
Tai & \quad \text{atodine mor moro ghumghor} \\
\text{[So]} & \quad \text{the intoxicated drowsiness of my past days} \\
Giyachhe go aji tutiya & \quad \text{[Have been banished]} \\
Tai & \quad \text{hridoy majhare murati tomar} \\
\text{[So]} & \quad \text{in my mind your image} \\
Uthiyachhe aji phutiya & \quad \text{[Has blossomed today.]}
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{Khoka-khukur Khela} [The Little Boy’s and the Little Girl’s Games, 1909], an entertaining ‘play-time’ book for children written by Dakshinaranjan
Mitra Majumdar, had a map of India titled “Amader Desh” [Our Nation] at the beginning [figure 5.3]. It also ended with a song celebrating the ‘golden’ land:

\[
\begin{align*}
Desh & \quad desh & bhai & \quad amader & \quad desh \\
[My \ country \ my \ country \ my \ country & \quad brother, \ this \ is \ our \ land] \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
Uttarete & \quad Himalay, & dakshine & \quad sagar, \\
[In \ the \ north \ the \ Himalayas \ & \quad to \ the \ south \ the \ seas] \\
Pube & \quad pashchime, \ bhai, \ pahar & \quad manohar, \\
[East \ and \ West, \ brother, \ are \ girdled \ by \ beautiful \ hills] \\
Bhai, & \quad pahar & \quad manohar; \\
[Brother, \ by \ beautiful \ hills;] \\
Tar & \quad modhye \ mayer & \quad anchal & \quad sona-dhala & \quad besh, \\
[In \ between \ the \ mother’s \ mantle & \quad overspread \ with \ gold] \\
Gachh-gachhalli & \quad kshirer & \quad nadi & \quad sona dhanel & \quad kshet; \\
[Woody \ glades \ creamy \ rivers & \quad fields \ of \ golden \ grains] \\
Bhai, & \quad amader & \quad desh \\
[Brother, \ this \ land \ is \ our \ nation.]^{11}
\end{align*}
\]

Songs penned by Dwijendralal Ray like “Amar Desh” [My Country] and “Amar Janmabhumi” [My Native-land] were published frequently in periodicals like Mukul and Sandesh.\textsuperscript{12} Ray’s verses articulated a deep sense of patriotism through lyrical evocations of landscapes (of the motherland) that were seen to be entwined with the very rhythms of the people’s lives.
Figure 5.3 “Amader Desh”, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Khoka-khukur Khela*, 1909.
In such poems and songs and in the numerous iconographic images that became hugely popular as prints, ‘Bharat Mata’ or Mother India is repeatedly embodied as a mother figure with snow-capped mountains of the north crowning her head and the seas to the south girdling her feet. To visually merge the mother goddess with the territorial land, typically, the image of the goddess was morphed onto the map of the country. The periodical *Amar Desh* (1920) – a magazine with a perceptible nationalist thrust - featured such an image superimposing the mother figure and the map as its cover illustration [figure 5.4]. The journal also regularly printed a contour map of the country as a set headpiece. A full-page advertisement of Sisir Publishing House – owned by Sisirkumar Mitra, the publisher and co-editor of *Amar Desh* - displayed the words “*Desh matake puja koro*”[Worship your Motherland] in large decorative letters, urging the young readers to devote themselves to the cause of the nation. Such exhortations, embodying the nation in the concrete form of the mother, created for the children, the living entity of a ‘Motherland’. Ramaswamy points out that such images potentially changed “the nation’s territory from a geographical space into an intensely human space”. She convincingly argues that the embodiment of the nation as ‘Bharat Mata’ gives the territory a substantial form, one which recalls and draws upon the emotional affects of a readily-identifiable and an intimately-related figure – that combines the entities of the mother and the goddess. This mother goddess “transforms the geo-
Figure 5.4 Cover illustration, *Amar Desh*, April-May 1921.
body into a homeland or a motherland to live and die for” and as the Bharat Mata is an “inviolable essence”, a living symbol of hope and liberation, so the nation becomes a sacred body, inseparably connected with its people through natal bonds, through the fundamental ties of kinship.14

In the prime seat of the vast Indian empire, in a renaissance imbibed through an imperial culture and in a genre rooted in colonial technologies and foreign pedagogies, such repeated emphasis on ‘our nation’/ ‘our land’/‘our country’ signal not only a developing idea of a nation in the making but also a persistent effort to instill this idea of nationhood in the minds of the young readers. Though at an early stage, the actual socio-cultural identities of this land often remain loose and overlapping** (unlike its geographical boundaries, which being pre-determined are definitive), the significance lies in its defining a brotherhood through the use of the plural possessive ‘our’. It is an example of what Benedict Anderson terms as the “horizontal comradeship” underlying the ‘imagined’ community of a nation.15 Anderson’s concept is especially pertinent to this study since it links modern nationalism to the multiple effects of ‘print capitalism’. Assessing the advent and popularity of a print-culture in the third chapter,

** Socio-culturally, it varies from a regional (related to Bengal), racial (related with Bengalis) and communal (conceived as a Hindu nation) to a larger, multi-cultural identity. Further these identities are not discrete but constantly overlap with each other.
Anderson argues, “...[the] fellow-readers, to whom they [readers] connected through print, formed in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of a nationally imagined community” (47). In this context, the use of such plural possessive like ‘our’ implicitly made every individual child-reader a part of the larger family of the nation’s children, constituting of all the sons and the daughters of the motherland. It is in their new roles, as the sons and daughters of the nation (a kinship embedded in and springing from the metaphor of the motherland) that the young readers are now seen. Thus in Bengal, entertaining literature for children constituted one of the very first literary and cultural genres to confer the status of future citizens to their readers and to make them conscious of their natural kinship with an extended (though imagined) ‘national’ family. In addressing them seriously and in motivating them to take up the cause of their motherland, these children’s publications, especially the juvenile periodicals played an important role in the history of a nation in making.

When in the usual discourse of nationalism “the country is not a piece of land with actual people living on it”, instead it becomes a ‘Mother Goddess’, the people then are her devoted sons (Sarkar 2011). It is through this extended metaphor of a natural kin that the discourse seeks not only to strengthen the figure of the matriarch as the commanding chief of a large warrior force whom she nourishes and inspires, but also
reflexively to underline the masculine strength that supports and protects her sacred image. Interestingly and perhaps not unsurprisingly the motherland is largely imagined as the mother of sons and not daughters. The daughters, where they are mentioned are conceived as future mothers themselves and are cast in the role of the nurturer, in the image of the resilient and charitable bangalakshmi. Embedded in the heart of the ‘mother-child’ metaphor was an unspoken call to action. Through the varied lyrical invocations of the motherland – who, shorn of her past glory is now trapped in a state of bereavement - the boys and girls are made aware of their individual and collective responsibilities and are called upon to take action. It is a duty necessitated through the ties of kinship, it is the moral responsibility of freeing their mother[land] from the shackles of oppression and to restore to the nation her former glory. Thus, in being seen as a part of a larger family, as the ‘children of a motherland’, the young readers of the varied entertaining periodicals and story books in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal were drawn into the ambit of the nationalist agenda.

Past glory is incessantly recapitulated in a number of juvenile publications for inspiring the young sons of the nation, for it is they who can uplift the Motherland from her present state of decline. Gnanadanandini Devi, the editor of Balak, had appealed to her young readers, “You are our only hope. Pursue foreign knowledge, but digest it
to the benefit of the flesh and blood of our native land and gathering the fruits of diverse cultures, enrich the storehouse of your impoverished motherland”.

Often recounted by the authors of juvenile literature was a *Puranic* story that essentially embodied a myth of nationhood. The mythology relates to the princely child Bharat, under whose able reign Bharatbarsha evolved as a great kingdom. *Khoka-khukur Khela* narrates the legendary story of Shakuntala and Bharat in the poem ‘Sarbbadaman’, literally meaning ‘he who defeats all’:

*Shakuntala ranir chhele bone holo boro*
[Queen Shakuntala’s son was growing up in the forest]

*Tar bhoye boner pashu bhoye joroshoro*
[All the wild beasts held him in awe]

*Atotuku ektu chhele, - rakhte nare may, -*
[Just a little child – but too strong for his mother]

*Chhele bagh shinher chhana kere khelte niye jay*
[Seizing the cubs of tigers and lions he played with them]

*Ei chhele amon tej amon bikrom*
[Such was the boldness and prowess of the boy]

*Dekhe shobai naam dilo sarbbadaman*
[That people named him ‘Sarbbadaman’]

*Bharat name shei chhele raja holo shesh*
[This boy, named Bharat later became king]

*Tari name Bharatbarsha amader desh*
[Our country Bharatbarsha was named after him] (11)
The illustration accompanying the poem shows the child holding back a lion cub from its mother while the lioness visibly cowers before the spirited boy and surrenders to his will [figure 5.5]. Telling the same tale of the fearless child who used to romp with cubs of ferocious beasts, “Bharater Chhele” [India’s Boys] a piece in a children’s annual, tacitly traces the genealogy of the readers to the great Aryan King:

No ordinary child can engage in such a daunting sport – he has to be a son of the noble Suryavanshis ....The boy [in the fore-told story] is Bharat, and after him this country was named Bharatbarsha....This is the true mettle of any son of our nation, such are his lofty ideals. Just as the extraordinary nature of his childish play speaks of his noble lineage so are the sons of Bharatbarsha known by their courage and their honesty, their education and commitment; they [can] cavort fearlessly with lions and are fiercely dutiful as sons.18

A glorious history is of utmost importance in defining a nation and many of the authors started to frame the yet unsung history of India in their writings for children. They recounted the tales of heroes – from epics, myths and legends and from ancient and recent past. Rajanikanta Gupta, writing of the dauntless Rani Lakshmibai in his Aryakirti [The Deeds of the Aryans, 1883] intended to arouse a noble aryabhav in the minds of his readers.19 Instances of unflinching courage and the extraordinary martial valour of the Rajputs and the Marathas in the face
of Muslim invasion were often extolled by the Bengali writers as examples of national resistance and patriotism. Abanindranath’s *Rajkahini* [Royal Tales, 1909] presented a fascinating history of Mewar, relating the stories of its brave-heart queens and indomitable kings.\(^{20}\) *Chitor-gourab* [The Pride of Chitor, 1921] a play based on the fight between Mewar and Delhi is imbued with high nationalist fervour.\(^{21}\) The stage is set for the action to unfold as the ‘sons’ pledge their hearts to the enthroned *Bharatmata* [Mother India]. *Biratwe Bangali* [Heroism in Bengalis, 1929], asserts in its preface, “What Bengal needs is history, otherwise Bengalis will never rise. When a man feels his race has a wretched past he can never be of any worth....Therefore come let us search for our past”.\(^{22}\) The book begins with Satyendranath Dutta’s famous invocation of Bengali heroes “*Abar tora manush ha*” [Rise and be a man again]. Praising ancient Bengal’s naval glory, singing of its gallant kings like Dhammapal, Ballalsen and Pratapaditya and recounting the martial feats of its invincible *lathiyals*, the book calls for a renascence of Bengal’s heroism and physical prowess [figure 5. 6].

In a true *swadeshi* spirit, the children were also made aware of the nation’s more recent and contemporary achievements. Biographies of celebrated Indians not only appeared regularly in many children’s periodicals like *Sakha* [The Friend], *Mukul* [The Bud], *Mouchak* [The Beehive] or *Amar Desh* [My Country] but also became popular as
Figure 5.5 “Sarbbadaman”, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Khoka-khukur Khela*, 1909.
Figure 5.6 “Maharaj Pratapaditya”, Anilchandra Ghosh, *Biratwe Bangali*, 1929.
individual books or as part of a series for the juvenile readers. The ‘Bharat-gourab Granthabali’ published lives of illustrious men like Ram Gopal Ghosh and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. *Charitmala* (1894?) or ‘A Garland of Lives’, written by Shambhuchandra, younger brother of Vidyasagar, consisted of short biographies of inspiring Indian personae like Vidyasagar, Gadadhar Bhattacharya, Pyari Charan Sarkar, Ram Shastri and Harish Chandra Mukherjee. The volumes presented a stark contrast to similar compendiums for children published years earlier by Vidyasagar. Where Vidyasagar’s *Jiban Charit* (1841) and *Charitabali* (1856) had been respectively translated from and inspired by Chambers’ *Biographies* and narrated exemplary lives of men like Newton, Duval, Roscoe, Gifford and so on, *Charitmala* sought to provide the same lessons for young readers by examples from their own society.

In this project of defining a new nation, the roles of the daughters, though vastly different, were no less important than those of their brothers. The girls were to be future wives and mothers who would rear brave sons. In *The Nation and its Fragments* – a brilliant study of nationalist imagination and cultural sovereignty within colonial Bengali society, Partha Chatterjee reflects on the ideologies which framed ‘new’ social roles in the “cultural politics of nationalism”. The position of women in the new modern nation called for a balance at home against

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†† Literally meaning ‘series on Bharat’s Pride’, the books published biographies of eminent Indians.
the external adjustments that men would have to make in the public sphere:

The crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality . . . they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not in other words, become essentially Westernized. (Chatterjee, 126)

Thus, working on a principle of selection rather than a total rejection of Western culture, Chatterjee astutely argues, these re-framings attempted to integrate modernity within the indigenous identity. The indigenous qualifiers to colonial reformations vis-à-vis the women’s question have also been studied by scholars like Jasodhara Bagchi and Tanika Sarkar. Bagchi comments that “Bengali mothers proverbially stood for unstinting affection, manifested in an undying spirit of self-sacrifice for the family” and notes that motherhood continued to be viewed in a “positive light” during the social reform era that engendered protests and instituted changes in many oppressive customs for women.25

For little girls, who were expected to grow up into adults anywhere between the age of nine and fourteen and assume full responsibilities of womanhood, models of conduct were set to teach them to be good wives
and good mothers. The entire cultural education was geared to habituate them in physical hardships and mental endurance – tutored through observations of rites and rituals like fasting and worship that drew on traditional religious practices. Such societal trainings and cultural practices – now reinforced through the ‘new’ print literature - taught them the principles of feminine virtues, most of all those of marital fidelity, piety and selflessness. This new literature for girls drew on mythologies related to a set of female characters who collectively represented a cult of indigenous femininity and were traditionally idolised in *Puranic* histories. These indigenous moralities recounted the mythological histories of pious women like Sita, Sati and Behula who were legendary examples of feminine chastity and who had shown great resilience and tragic dignity in the face of insurmountable odds. The introduction to *Sita* written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar superbly illustrates the role-model as well as the ideology implicit in such texts.

Written by Baradakanta Majumdar and published in 1910, *Sita* was the first title of the series ‘*Sati-katha Granthabali*’\(^\text{26}\). Drawing attention to Sita’s character as a model of integrity and piety, the author particularly stressed on the moral education that the story would impart to its girl readers:

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\(^{26}\) ‘Books telling the tales of chaste women’. 
My dear friend Barodakanta has retold the [Sita’s] tale, sweetened with tender teardrops, for our country’s little girls and brides - who are the living images of the Goddess Lakshmi. The sweetness of childhood as expressed in Sita’s character, the brightness of her youthful days, her polite and reverential nature as a bride as well as her competence in carrying out household chores, her kindness, sacrifice and patience, the unwavering love for her husband, her firm stoicism in grief, her pride in her husband, her generosity towards one and all, her staunch and unbending spirit during her imprisonment, her astonishing restraint, her pride and her faith – in short, the multitude of virtues reflected in Sita’s versatile character have been well represented in Baradakanta’s little volume.

. . . . [The story] will have a great bearing on the reader’s character development and education. Especially so for the impressionable children, the impact on their minds is far-reaching. Bradakanta’s art of narration is such that little girls will want to follow Sita’s actions. The story will etch a living image of Sita in their thoughts for all times to come. To succeed in this enormous task through the diversion of storytelling is a great achievement. (Introduction, Sita, n.pag.)

Such role-models from ancient history were abundantly found in books like Pouranik Kahini and Aryanari that retold the accounts of Sati, Sabitri, Damayanti, Shakuntala, Kunti, Gandhari and a plethora of other women glorified in the Purans.
Khoka-khukur Khela draws upon the entertainment of role-playing, a favourite activity among children who are fond of recreating and imitating the adult world as part of their make-belief play. The book illustrates how the ‘new’ roles (that hark back to the ancient and glorious past) are firmly divided by gender. While the legends of Kalketu and Bharat - the two stories with boy-heroes - call into play a typically masculine discourse of undaunted courage and physical prowess, the ideological model for girls is provided by the histories of Behula and Annapurna (Kunti) – both of which underline the feminine ethics of selfless sacrifice and nurture. The story of Behula is narrated in verse in the poem “Behula Sati” [The Chaste Behula]. It celebrates the legendary courage and faith of Behula who, as a newly wed bride, had brought her husband back from dead:

\[ \text{Joto desher lok bole - dhanya meye!} \]
\[ \text{[All over the world people are full of praises for Behula]} \]
\[ \text{Bashar ghore mora pati - jiyie enechhe} \]
\[ \text{[She has brought back to life the husband - who died in the nuptial chamber]} \] (32)

“Bhai-bon” [Brother and Sister] - a poem in the same book presents a brother and a sister in conversation. Though light-hearted in spirit, it neatly segregates the future aspirations of the boy and the girl, and defines their ‘ideal’ social roles:
Bhai [Brother]–

.................

Amra pori ‘First Book’.
[We study the ‘First Book’]

Chhobi thake lal tuktuk!
[It has pretty pictures in red]

Amra jokhon boro hobo? –
[What shall we be when we grow up?]

Hobo magistor!
[A magistrate!]

Bon [Sister] –

Amra akhon kheli jamon
[Like the games we play now]

Boro holeo thik tamon
[So when we grow up]

Chhelepile kole niye
[With sons and daughters of our own]

Korbo konna-ghor
[We will do our household duties.]

The theme is reiterated in yet another poem “Ke-Ki-Hobo Khela” [Playing at What-shall-we-be] where the boys speak of being merchants, shopkeepers, factory-owners and farmers in future while the girl, who speaks at the end replies:

Kar chokhe jol esechhe
[The ones who have tears in their eyes]

Pran diye ta nebo bete
Another genre that was restored in print during this time, specifically for young girl readers, were the \textit{bratakathas}. These consisted of a set of feminine rituals and religious observances among which some were traditionally carried out by unmarried young girls and were considered an essential part of their domestic education. Through a practice of these rites and observances, these \textit{bratakhas} provided the girls with a practical training in the norms and procedures of the worships that took place round the year. Through these practicing rituals the girls were taught the art of \textit{alpana} and the rhymes and songs that were customarily chanted as part of the worship. Through the tales or the \textit{kathas} they learnt the histories associated with the rituals.\footnote{These are the symbolic designs and intricate patterns that are traditionally drawn by women in Bengali households.}

Books like \textit{Thandidir Thale} [Grandmother’s Pouch, 1909], \textit{Meyeder}

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\footnote{“Lokkhiti” is a commonly used term of endearment. Derived from the word ‘Lakshmi’, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, it bears the connotations of a golden girl.}
March 1, Rites and Vows for Girls, 1925, and Chhara, Little Book of Rhymes and Rituals, 1925, that collected and printed these bratakathas aimed to revive these traditional cultures, particularly among the girls of urban and liberal families and used the print medium to preserve and propagate the traditional ideologies of an ‘ideal’ Indian girlhood.

Thandidir Thale (Part I, ‘Kumari brata’) an anthology of bratakathas for unmarried girls was published in 1909 as part of Dakshinaranjan’s Matrigranthabali series. Around the time of its publication the book was advertised as a “sandal-scented flower basket”, as “a sacred blessing” for “the little girls of the country”, and was therefore “an ideal award book for all girls’ schools” [figure 5.7]. Since the title as well as the rites and rituals contained in the book related to ‘unmarried’ girls, it would be not be out of context to take note of the expected age group of kumari [unmarried] girls in the contemporary society. Meredith Borthwick testifies that the marriageable age for daughters in middle to late nineteenth century Bengali society had been “anywhere between the ages of ten and twelve” when they left their natal home to join their husbands’ families. In a much more recent article on the complex changes affected by colonialism on areas like love, sex and romance Tapan Raychaudhuri notes that the “miseries of the child bride are a recurrent theme in Bengali folklore”. Whereas popular nursery rhymes would often explore
the sorrows of the girl-child in the hostile environment of her in-laws’ home, following some of the early memoirs written by Bengali women like Rassundari, Haimavati and Prasannamayee, Raychaudhuri points out the practice of pre-puberty marriage “at the age of nine or earlier” was largely common in the contemporary society (355-56). This is also visually borne out by the photographic illustrations of kumaris observing the appointed rites in Thandidir Thale. Indeed the girls photographed for the illustrations seem to be in the age group of five to twelve [figure 5.8]. Like the earlier titles Thakurmar Jhuli and Thakurdadar Jhuli, Thandidir Thale was also introduced with an elaborate preface by the compiler. Once again upholding the bratakathas as one of the purest of indigenous literary treasures to be carried over from antiquity, he states that in these rites and rhymes are to be found the truest and the most intimate history of the Bengali antahpur. Stressing the significance of these traditional rituals for young girls he writes:

For our little girls, these bratakathas combine rituals with the pleasures of childish games. Where else can one come across such profound diversions? . . . It is while playing that our sweet and innocent girls get lessons in religion, fine arts and beauty. It is through these [bratas] that their inherent qualities of cordiality, wifeliness, motherhood, grace, kindness, love, sacrifice and resilience get roused by a magic wand and flower into future images of womanliness and godliness. . . .

††† The inner recesses of the traditional Bengali house reserved for women.
Even in the state of childish effervescence these rites train girls to be uncomplaining in abstinence, to undertake hardship, to be ready to serve and to forgive, they inculcate perseverance, joy, piety, chastity and generosity in their young minds. – And all through the means of pleasurable games! . . . .

. . . And on this [the proper education of girls] is founded the character of the nation. It paves the way for a nation which will be rich in wealth and culture and strong in every aspect. (Introduction, viii)

Thus the lessons for the girl child - the virtues, the practices and the ideologies that will mould her into the deal woman of the future, are defined unambiguously. The role that she is cast in is not only related to the nation’s glorious historic past but also as a necessity for the future prosperity of the nation. As mentioned, apart from line drawings illustrating the traditional alpana patterns Thandidir Thale was adorned with photographic illustrations showing kumari girls engaged in performing seasonal rituals. The author’s use of photographic visuals (an uncommon choice for Dakshinaranjan with his penchant for ‘indigenous’ book designs) was perhaps aimed at reinforcing a ‘real picture’ of the cultural practices.

In 1921 the periodical Amar Desh also published a series of such rituals, evidently for the use of its girl-readers. Indicative of the same ‘indigenous’ ideology of girlhood, the series encouraged a practice of
feminine rites like “Harir Charan Brata”, “Shib Thakurer Brata”, “Punyipukur Brata” and “Dash Putuler Brata” among little girls. A diligent practice of these, the author promised, would bring rewards and blessings in the form of good husbands and healthy sons and a life without the fear of widowhood. The rhymes that were to be chanted by the girls as part of the rituals are often suggestive of similar desires. For instance in the following verse that was to be recited for the Punyi-pukur brata:

\[\text{Punyi pukur pushpamala ke puje re bhorer bela} \]
[By the sacred pond with flower-garlands who worships at the hour of dawn]

\[\text{Ami sati punyabati bhaier bon putrabati} \]
[I, who is chaste and pure, the sister of brothers and the mother of sons]

\[\text{Hobe putra morbbe na prithibite dhorbbe na} \]
[My sons will not die and will be many in number]

\[\text{Shoamir kole putra dole moron hoy jano ganga jale} \]
[My sons in the lap of my husband may my death be granted in the holy water of Ganga] (220)

All the desired rewards are clearly set around the male members of the home and the family that the girl belongs to at present and is going to have in the near future.
Even folk narratives and reworked fairy tales like *Malanchamala* and *Kankabati* – to take two examples of tales with female characters in the lead, endorsed a brand of womanhood that is defined and glorified by the quintessential qualities of selflessness, sacrifice, chastity and an unquestioning love for one’s husband. Dinesh Sen, who like Dakshinaranjan, was an active propagator of the indigenous cult, passionately elucidated the uniqueness of *Malanchamala* – a story which revolves around the sacrifice and renunciation of the central female figure married to a child husband. “[I]t presents the old ideal of womanhood in the most striking manner”, he wrote, “and is typical of the great virtues of the fair sex as conceived by the Hindu nation”. Identifying a “politics of chastity’ in such an ideological propaganda, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay notes in a different context the “peculiar twist in colonial history brought about by the re-emergence of the Prachina” or the cult of the old-world woman. He observes,

The Orientalist-nationalist ‘re-interpretation’ of history posited her [the old-school woman] as being emblematic of all that has remained unsullied by external touch, by the colonial encounter. The ‘Prachina’ was like the one solid rock, unmoving and unmovable, in a world otherwise continually shifting – it was only she who could provide the safe anchorage to the nation caught up in the cross-currents of conflicting claims and meanings.
In another essay on *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Bandyopadhyay critiques the social responsibilities of girls and boys as preached by the fairy tales. Citing textual evidences he draws attention to a ‘golden combination’ that according to his argument, had worked in favour of the book’s reception among the contemporary audience. This fusion of the masculine and feminine social ideologies, worked out through fairy tales, blended the “romantic thrill of the youth’s crusade with the pristine chastity of the traditional woman”.

*Kishoree* [Young Women, 1919], a novella ‘for young girls’ written by Bijayratna Majumdar related the story of four ‘modern’ young girls from their schooldays till the time of their initiation to adulthood. The novel concludes with the girls discussing their future course when on completion of their school education they fondly bid farewell to each other to follow their individual destinies. Menoka, a central character in the story, speaks zealously of her future dream:

I want to be a mother. The mother of a son . . . A son who will be forthright, bold and determined. A son like Gora, who will cry passionately “Bharatbarsha! My Bharatbarsha . . . Anandamayee had not given birth to Gora but she took immense pride in her son. I would also want a son like that. A son who will bow to this country of mine and say ‘Mother Bharatbarsha’! (123)

††† In the preface the book was advertised as an ideal volume for girls as it “had hardly any male characters”.

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The full-blown rhetoric of her speech ties the mother, the son and the motherland in a bond of inseparable kinship: it is to the motherland that mother pledges her life and those of her sons. In an advertisement of ‘Bharat-chitra Granthabali’ the publishers Bhattacharya and Sons, announced forthcoming titles like Aryanari, Purankatha, Aryabir, Aryab balak and Bharatbarsha. The discourse of the advertisement seamlessly combines indigenous models of femininity and manliness from ancient history with the cultural identity of a modern nation [figure 5.9]. The commercial fittingly illustrates, in the context of this historical and cultural analysis, the politics of recasting girls and boys in gender-specific roles in the new culture of nationalism.

Home: A Kindred Space

Defining nation as an ‘imagined political community’ Benedict Anderson differentiates two kinds of vocabularies – that of kinship and home – in the formation of its political discourse (130-131). He proposes that nations are conceived in languages and not in blood. Quoting a

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§§§ Book series on ‘Portraits of Bharat’
Figure 5.7 Advertisement for Thandidir Thale in Dakshinanjan Mitra Majumdar, Khoka-khukur Khela, 1909.

Figure 5.8 Photographic illustration, “Harir Charan Brata”, Dakshinanjan Mitra Majumdar, Thandidir Thale, 1909.
Figure 5.9 Advertisement of “Bharat-chitra Granthabali” in Kaliprasanna Das and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Arya-Nari*, 1908.
particularly moving patriotic verse, Anderson argues, “something of the nature of this political love can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *Vaterland, patria*) or that of home . . . Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied” (131). The *deshbodh* manifested in the multifarious genres of Bengali children’s literature at the turn of the century appropriates both. As discussed in the earlier section, a particular kinship was suggested through symbolic iconographies and metaphors in a new print literature for children. The innate bond was that of the matriarch with her children, which brought together the people of the nation as brothers and sisters on a familial horizontal plane, sharing a common destiny and thus creating an integrity required of a nation.

Closely linked with this notion of a family is the space of one’s home. In the Bengali context, especially for the Bengali child, often the home would not only signify a physical and material space that one lived in but also the centre of one’s large collective familial and inherited identity (especially in the case of a ‘*dasher bari*’ or a natal home). It was a space filled with closely-knit kindred members coming from multiple branches of a large family tree and was pervaded by feelings of love and tenderness. A particularly eloquent description of this comfortable, intimate and lively sphere as viewed through a child’s eyes is given by
Professor Radhakamal Mukherjee in his autobiography *India: The Dawn of a New Era*. Narrating his childhood thoughts and experiences in great detail he writes of a complete “starvation of creative and imaginative life” in schools where “listlessness and apathy replaced joy and curiosity’ of the child (39-40). On the other hand, the home with its periodical celebrations of fasts and feasts, rituals and sacraments, its story-telling from the epics and the Puranas, and its regular visits of strangers and relations, ascetics and saints, was always full of excitement and wonder. On some days the priests used to recite with great gusto the myths and legends of the ancient past, full of glory and splendour. Guests and relations told stories and anecdotes from far and near . . . The home, in spite of a certain monotony in the routine of life, was never lacking in interest and marvel. Above all, it spilled loves and affections on all sides. It stimulated the budding, inchoate but strong desires and aspirations for gentleness, goodness and peace. (40)

In his preface to the celebrated anthology of nursery rhymes *Khukumanir Chhara* [Rhymes for the Little Girl, 1899], Ramendrasundar Tribedi locates the Bengali child’s ‘home’ firstly in its large kinship, the traditional extended Bengali family, in which one grows up with siblings and cousins, in the company of caring aunts and loving grandparents, and secondly in the nursery ditties and folklore that imbue these ties of kinship with an abundance of overflowing affection. Situating the
bustling, Bengali home as an extreme opposite of the English ‘Home’ where the aged live unitary lonely lives, he distinguishes the former as a space permeated by the rasas [spirits] of gentlest kindness and abundant love.**** In an expansive statement Tribedi underlines the all-embracing warmth and the emotional strength of the Bengali home. It includes, he states, not only the varied members of the large family, but also the occasional guest who is always welcome, the pet cat, the household cow and even the legendary snake that sleeps for years in some abandoned corner of the house. For the child, who is raised in such a home, its warmth is inseparably associated with the rhymes, songs and the nursery ditties that are crooned by loving grandparents or aunts and the bed-time stories told by familiar story-tellers. Thus through the metaphor of the traditional ‘Bengali home’ Tribedi not only creates a private sphere full of warmth and care to which the child naturally belongs and which is the child’s very own, but more significantly he connects the sense of a home, the feeling of homeliness with the oral lores of childhood that are saturated with intimate memories and emotional ties. Continuing the differentiation of the indigenous and the foreign, he describes such literature as the “natural” and “ancient” literature of Bengal in contrast

**** Tribedi makes this elaborate distinction between the idea of home in Bengali culture and the English ‘Home’ in context of a comment made by Sir Monier Williams. Williams had lamented that the Hindus had no ‘Home’.
to the modern, “artificial” literature produced by the influence of an “artificial education” (427).

Thus a sense of homeliness with its associations of a familial care, comfort, security and belonging is attributed to the traditional oral literature that is ‘natural’ to Bengal – a literature that is Bengal’s as well as the Bengali child’s own. For any Bengali child, story-telling was a homely leisure. Following this, an ambience of familiarity, comfort and kinship uniquely associated with one’s home, was recreated in the very titles of the ‘new’ books that began to be written for Bengali children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period. The names like *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1908), *Rangadidir Rupkatha* (1909), *Pishimar Galpa, Didimar Galpa* (1913), *Thakurmar Jhola* (1918), *Thakurdadar Rupkatha* (1922) not only captured in print the traditional stories but recreated the comforting experiences of listening to the wonderful tales told by grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts or sisters on sleepy afternoons or pleasant evenings. Through the tellers of the tales, these books tacitly drew on the tellers’ intimate and familial connection with the children and situated their ‘oral’ tales in the familiar and personal space of the home. Where the story-teller is not a blood-relation, for instance, the cook or the maid in *Bamundidir Rupkatha* (1926) or *Paruldidir Galpa* (nd), they are the counterparts of Shambhu’s

†††† The words used by Tribedi are “kritrim sahitya” and “akritrim prachin nijeswa sahitya”.

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mother, Tinkari Dashi or Padma Dashi. These rustic figures were an important and essential part of the usually large and busy Bengali households, especially of the andarmahal or the inner apartments - within the precincts of which the larger part of Bengali boyhood and girlhood was spent. Indeed the practice of ‘servocracy’ that both Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore refer to in their reminiscences meant that upper middle class children had to spend a substantial part of their growing-up years under the care and supervision of their servants. Thus not only were they familiar figures to the children (for whom their parents remained inaccessible for the most part of the day) but also persons with whom they felt most closely connected.40

Towards the turn of the century the authors of Bengali children’s stories are deeply anxious about ‘capturing’ these oral, household tales in print. Furthermore, they are careful to keep intact that intimate colloquy of the personal ‘voice’ in them. For this the authors resorted to their own households and past childhoods, to the remnants of folk culture percolated to them through the ‘uncontaminated’ sectors of the colonised society, to the rustic tales told at bedtimes or at leisure by grandmothers, aunts or nurses. Rejecting the ‘Englishman’s Bengali’ which was unnatural, unidiomatic and necessarily foreign, the new writings for children in contrast, radically broke from the formal rigidities of sadhu bhasha or ‘written Bengali’. Consciously trying to replicate the
oral speech patterns, these children’s stories played up the conversational elements through profuse use of rhythmic speech, rustic idioms and rhymed intonations.

Rev. Lal Behari Day mentions a ‘Shambhu’s mother’ in his preface to Folk Tales of Bengal (1883), from whom, as a little boy, he had heard countless fairy tales. A more detailed account of her evening story-tellings is recorded in Day’s Govinda Samanta, or The History of a Bengal Raiyat (1874). Though a novel, it recounts the familial and social life of rural Bengalis in the nineteenth century not only through the history of a contract-farmer – as the subtitle indicates, but also through a number of digressive chapters on communal and cultural practices of the village folk. In the village of Kanchanpur lived a woman who was a widow of fifty years of age and who supported herself by spinning thread. Day writes:

Shambhu’s mother was acknowledged to be the best story-teller in her part of the village, and was therefore looked upon with admiring awe by all the children. As soon as the lamps were lit, children dropped in into her hut, sometimes singly, sometimes in groups of two or three, to listen to the marvelous upakathas [stories]. . . . The old woman sat in her hut before a dim lamp . . . [and] incessantly turned the charka which went ghnan ghnan ghnan. (‘Evenings at Home’, Govinda Samanta, 126).
In his memoirs Rabindranath Tagore frequently turns to the nostalgic and treasured world of his childhood fairytales. Surfacing repeatedly in his recollections, these tales, the poet remembers, brought a respite from the thick, black intimidating volumes filled with difficult English words that stood like ‘sentinels’ on guard. In a world filled with a dull routine and traumatised with dreaded lessons, these stories of wonder provided him with a time of his own:

The black-covered reader is lying in wait for me on the table. The cover is loose; the pages are stained and a little torn; I have tried my hand at writing my name in English in it, in the wrong places, and all in capital letters. As I read I nod, then jerk myself awake with a start, but miss far more than I read. When finally I tumble into bed I have at last a little time to call my own. And there I listen to endless stories of King’s son traveling over an endless, trackless plain. (Boyhood Days, 42-43)

Elsewhere he writes about the absurd yarns told to him by Abdul the boatman and fondly recaptures some of the magic of bed-time fairy tales crooned by the maids Tinkari, Piyari or Shankari.

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The poet refers to Peary Sarkar’s first and second English Readers and McCulloch’s Course of Reading.

Tagore’s’ recollections in the two memoirs are not always uniform. In Chhelebela translated as My Boyhood he writes of Piyari and Shankari while in Jibansmriti or My Reminisences the same story is allotted to Tinkari and Shankari.
But we children were in bed by this time, and lay listening as our maid-servants Piyari or Shankari told us stories – “In the moonlight, expanding like an opening flower . . .”

(My Boyhood, 23)

Also enthralling to the boy Tagore were the hair-raising tales recounting the adventures of brave bandits and gangs of robbers. These were transmitted by a young servant from Jessore (29). Recalling these childhood pleasures later in life, the poet laments that “these days, little boys no longer hear fairy tales from the womenfolk, they read them on their own in printed books. Pickles and chutneys – bottled in jars and sealed with lac - now have to be bought from the New Market” (48). A pioneer folklorist, Tagore himself never loses the magic of his childhood tales and continually incorporates them in the varied genres of his writings for children as well as for adults.43

The remembrances of Tagore’s nephew Abanindranath, the pioneering ‘Indian-style’ painter and an eminent writer and illustrator of children’s books, are also replete with references to the childhood memories of nursery stories and folk rhymes.44 Being a solitary child, he often wandered by himself through the third-storey apartments of the sprawling Jorasanko residence. The stories that he heard, like the pictures that enraptured him, fired his innate imagination and kept him company in his afternoon solitude:
Manjari would be muttering drowsily, ‘Once there was a tuntuni, who didn’t want to make a nest on the neem tree but had to fly straight up to the ledges of the palace roof, and steal cotton out of the Prince’s quilt for her tiny little nest.’

In those days I knew of no such thing as a stairway up to the roof, but nevertheless, I had no trouble in reaching the little bird’s nest – right there in the bosom of the wide blue sky . . . . In this manner, during the day, the stairway of story let me spend time with the birds on top of the roof. (Apan Katha: My Story, 45)

Further on he explains,

Thus in those days I saw many things through the eyes of story. . . They would bring the roof close to me, and bring to me the parrots of Kamalaphuli, let me ride on the horse in the ‘agdum bagdum’ nursery rhyme, or in the governor’s palanquin; they would take me to the little hut of the Mashis and Pishis who lived on the edge of the forest, or straight to the door of Mama’s house. (46)

These were the very memories that he relived and the tales and rhymes that he drew on when, as an adult, he wrote his wonderful books for children.

Besides folk tales and fairy stories heard from nurses, maids or grandparents, another oral tradition is repeatedly evoked in the recollections of late nineteenth century childhoods. All important memoirs, biographies and reminiscences charting personal experiences
of growing up—either in the cultural ferment of modern urban societies or in the quiet recesses of rural Bengal bear references to reading sessions or paths, recounting pious tales from the Puranic histories and from the sacred texts of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. While Shibnath Shastri remembers his mother reading Ramayan in the afternoons, Tagore tells us of reading “a dog-eared Ramayana with a marbled paper cover belonging to an old aunt” and recapitulates how he was moved to tears over a sorrowful episode in the book. For days on, in the evenings he had also listened to Brajeswar reading aloud the seven cantos of Krittibas’ Ramayan which would be punctuated by the folksy panchali recitals from Kishori Chatterjee (My Boyhood, 18).

Abanindranath recalls the kathakatas in the third-storey terrace-room of his favourite paternal aunt. The children of the house also attended when their father read out from Kaliprasanna Singha’s Mahabharat at four in the morning, sitting in the clock-room above the stairs. “At that time, we started our education with these stories,” writes Abanindranath. It is these childhood memories of indigenous literary forms and oral rhythms that writers like Shibnath Shastri, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath or Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri later evoke and draw on in their own writings for children. In the preface to Tuktuke Ramayan, author Nabakrishna Bhattacharya recalls how as a child, he used be captivated by the ritual Ramayan-path of his mother and sisters. Their rhythmic oral chants left him spell-bound:
In a time long ago, when I was a child, I heard my late mother and my cousins recite after their evening meditations:

*Sindhu hoilo bondhon Ramchandra hoilen par*
[The sea was bridged Ramchandra crossed over]

*Banore berilo ashi Lankar duar*
[The monkeys surrounded Lanka’s entrance]

The verses exercised such a charm on me that I used to abandon all my activities and sat listening to them enraptured. (Author’s Preface, n.pag.)

The author adds that when recasting the epic as an entertaining volume for children, he had thought it fit to follow the hypnotic rhythms of those oral models that had enchanted him as a child. In this way, *Tuktuke Ramayan*, like many of its contemporary epic retellings for children, drew on the oral intonations of traditional literature and transferred them to printed books. Being *new* in format, these children’s books were also essentially *old*, carrying ancient, indigenous (pre-colonial) traditions into a new modernity. It would not be a digression to take note of Dhan Gopal Mukherji’s memoir in the context. Though Mukherji had written all his children’s books for an audience of American children, he drew heavily from Indian legends and epics for books like *Rama, the Hero of India* and *Master Monkey*. Once again, the author, who spent his adult life abroad, would resort to the memories of these epics from his own childhood:
in the afternoon she [my mother] would recite to us parts of the epics, the old religious tales of India. She had been taught by her mother, and her mother by her mother, and so on back for generations. . . .

I am afraid I was more intent upon the brilliant pictures evoked by stories of gods and goddesses and heroes, than by the deep religious significance of these legends. As I was obliged to commit them all to memory, however, I gradually absorbed their inner meaning. (Caste and Outcast, 49)

_Didimar Galpa_ (1913), _Sanjher Katha_ (1919), _Thakurmar Jhola_ (1921), _Thakurdadar Rupkatha_ (1922), _Chhoto Chhoto Galpa_ [Little Tales, 1923] are lovingly nostalgic about the fading traditions of oral story-telling that children used to enjoy in every household. Asitkumar Halder’s two anthologies of folk tales for children _Hoder Galpa_ [Stories of the Ho Tribe, 1921] and _Buno Gappo_ [Wild Yarns, 1922] were sourced from the stories collected by his father in person from the people of the Ho tribe. Nagendranath Gangopadhyay’s _Udal-buror Saotali Galpa_ [Santhali Stories by Udal-buro, 1921] had a section on the story-teller. In tune with the book’s cover illustration showing an old man perched on his haunches (a way of sitting that is visibly distinct from the West-influenced, urban elitist culture) animatedly telling tales to eager children around him, the preface firmly establishes ‘Udal-buro’, and not the author, as the narrator: “My part is only limited to putting these tales in script; Udal, an
The old Santhal is the story-teller here. His oral style suits the tales much more than any written word can.” (Introduction, n.pag.) [figure 5.10]. The emphasis here – as also in the numerous anthologies which drew their names from their household tellers like Rangadidi, Bamundidi, Parulldidi, the familiar grandfather or the loving aunt - is on the innate art of story-telling that belongs to the ‘Udal’s, the grannies, the aunts and the nurses over the years. It is instinctive and natural, steeped in an ancient tradition, suffusing the people’s cultural memory. It is therefore implicitly in opposition to and undeniably valued as dearer than anything acquired or cultivated – the qualities usually associated with the pedagogies of empiricist knowledge. The binary is between the ‘artificial’ and an ostensibly ‘foreign’ text-book knowledge acquired with perseverance and effort and the ‘intrinsic’ traditions that are inherited by birth. They nourish the child like the mother’s milk and are imbibed in the very rhythms of its breath and speech. Thus the homely tales, these ancient and innate traditions of childhood, offer a rare and inviolate space – that which cannot be seized by any foreign power and is genuinely one’s own.

The space of the home, a homely ambience and its familial associations repeatedly surface in the profusion of ‘pleasurable’ books for children that emerge as a new literary trend around the turn of the
Figure 5.10 Cover illustration, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, *Udal-boror Saotali Galpa*, 1921.
century. In his brief preface to *Tuntunir Boi*, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri writes of a story-telling habit prevalent among household women in certain parts of eastern Bengal. The author probably refers to Mymensingh which had been his *desh* or native region and a province particularly rich in folklore. At the end of the day, he says, when little children tend to drop off to sleep before having their suppers, affectionate nurses, mothers, aunts or grandmothers try to keep their sleepy-eyed wards amused with pleasing stories. The enchantment of the tales help keep the children diverted while the women feed them artfully. The tales of the book are drawn from that precious treasury of oral nursery lore, from a tradition steeped in the tenderness of motherly affection. In a strong nostalgic current that underlies the numerous folk and fairy tale publications, ‘home’ becomes a metaphor signifying feelings of comfort and security that envelop a drowsy child as it is fed and lulled to sleep by its mother’s lullaby. The basic elements of comfort and nurture, namely motherly care, kindred affection, wholesome food and restful sleep all add up to create the feelings of homeliness and a sense of belonging. Thus, very much like the comforting space of the ‘home’ that they invoke and exploit, these ‘homely’ books are seen to constitute a private space, a sanctum, that is and will remain forever one’s own. It is a ‘home’ or a *private* and *leisure* reading space that the authors and illustrators of Bengali children’s literature repeatedly evoke. Being the extreme opposite of the *formal*, *dreaded* and *compulsory* ‘school’ readings (consisting of
dry, informative textbooks), it is in this ‘own’ and ‘uncontaminated’ space, that the writers embedded their books for children.

If at one level, the familial and kindred sphere of the child is represented by the space of its home, then, by extending the child’s kinship with the greater, imagined community, at a larger level, its familial sphere (with brothers and sisters born of the same motherland) becomes its home-land or its nation. In Bengali the word ‘desh’, can be used to mean both ‘home/native land’ and ‘country’ or ‘nation’. With these overlapping, double-layered connotations, it becomes a keyword and a leitmotif in the indigenous discourse of the new, entertaining literature for children. This innate and indelible bond shared by the child, his home and his kindred family, his natal land and the people of that land is most poignantly expressed by Rabindranath in his famous introduction to Thakurmar Jhuli. In his simple, lucid and intensely poetic style, he writes, “When the children of Bengal listen to fairy tales . . . the melody of Bengal’s eternal affection flows into their tender souls and suffuses them with the spirit of this land” [italics inserted]. Thus, as the (child’s) mother becomes one with the spirit of the motherland so do his home and family get extended to embrace the land and its people.
Notes to Chapter V


3. “The country was sacralised and feminised. The empire, symbolised by the lion, had often presented itself in strong, male terms . . .Bengali nationalism . . . defiantly worshipped and gloried in the female principle.” See, Sarkar, 2011.

4. Pratibhasundari Devi, “Sangit Shiksha”, *Balak*, May-June, 1885, 95. *Anandamath* was serialised in *Bangadharshan* in 1881-82 and published in book form in 1882; the phrase ‘Vande Mataram’ soon became a fervent patriotic slogan and a little later, in the heydays of anti-colonial uprisings, it was the quintessential battle-cry of militant nationalists.


7. Rabindranath Tagore mentions several songs that were composed for and sung at the annual functions of the Hindu Mela. These songs which presented the nation as a motherland often stressed on the geographical boundaries of the country. See, Rabindranath Tagore, *My Life in My Words* ed. Uma Dasgupta (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006), 4,11.


16. “Shampadaker Nibedan” [Editor’s Note], *Balak*, May-June 1885, 106.

17. Prior to these, in the concluding episode of *Shakuntala* (1896) Abanindranath had painted the same story in his ethereal style and had endowed it with the beauty of a fairy tale. Abanindranath Tagore, *Shakuntala* (Kolkata: Kantik Press, nd).


23. Shambhuchandra Bidyaratna, *Charitmala* (Kolkata; 1894).


27. For a more detailed discussion on the *bratakatha* and the “thoughts and feelings” of the “Hindu girls of old school” expressed through them, refer to Dineshchandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920; repr. Kolkata: Aparna Book Industries, 2007), 147-156.


31. “Brata Katha”, *Amar Desh* (1921), 43, 105, 146, 216, 272, 382, 409, 460, 525. The articles seem to have been authored by Jyotindranath Pal, with the exception of one which was by Bijayratna Majumdar.


33. Dinesh Sen, *Folk Literature of Bengal*, 159.
34. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, “Producing and Re-producing the New Women: A Note on the Prefix ‘re’” Social Scientist Vol 22 No.1/2 (Jan-Feb 1994), 34. The paper provides an incisive commentary on the new woman who emerged out of the literary models like Sushila’s Upakhyan and sociological discourses like Bankimchandra’s Prachina ebong Nabina and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s Samajik Prabandha.

35. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, “Thakurmar Jhuli: Ateet na Bhabishyapuran”, Bangla Sishu Sahityer Choto Meyera (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2007), 11-30. Partha Chatterjee also notes that the reformative zeal and enthusiasm among Bengali intellectuals and elites had to grapple with a substantial dose of apprehension and reservation “as the very institutions of home and family were threatened under the peculiar conditions of colonial rule”. See, Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, ed., Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), 242.


37. Radhakamal Mukherjee, India: The Dawn of a New Era (New Delhi: Radha Publications, 1997). Born in 1889, he was one of the most versatile intellectuals of the twentieth century.


39. The connotations of the words ‘home’ and ‘homely’, in an etymological context, stem from feelings of familiarity or that which one knows and is intimate with. Freud draws on the antonym of this concept of the ‘heimlich’ (meaning homely, native, domestic, local) for interpreting the situations generating the uncanny in his essay on the subject.

dashī, who Abanindranath remembers with such poignancy . . . provided the strong emotional attachment and interaction that the young child needed to learn about people, the world and art” (12-13).


43. While a fairy-tale discourse repeatedly surface in his letters and memoirs, many of his poems and stories in *Sonar Tari, Lipika* and *Galpa-Salpa* and dramatized musicals like *Tasher Desh* draw upon folk-tale motifs and are shot through with the elusive charm of wonder-tales. For a discussion on the use of fairy-tales in Tagore’s writings, see, Manabendra Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindranath: Shishusahitya* (Kolkata: Papyrus, 2000).


47. Dhan Gopal Mukherji, *Cast and Outcast* eds. Gordon H. Chang, Purnima Menkekar and Akhil Gupta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Writing *Cast and Outcast*, especially in the sections dealing with his childhood and youth in Bengal, Dhan Gopal Mukherji (1890-1936) hoped to give his western audience a true picture of Indian life and social customs. Incidentally, he was also the author of *A Son of Mother India Answers*. The book was written as a rejoinder to Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1927) which provided horrific accounts of poverty and barbaric customs in India and presented Indians as a backward race.

49. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, Tuntunir Boi (Kolkata: Sukumar Raychaudhuri, 1910).