Conclusion

Homely Books and the Politics of Leisure

“The nation comes from the nursery”, wrote Samuel Smiles in *Self-Help* (1859). A Scottish author and reformer, Smiles forcefully advocated the doctrines of Utilitarian philosophers and preached their ‘gospel of work’. Smiles’ *Self-Help* and *Character* had gained ideological popularity in late nineteenth century Bengal and were self-consciously borrowed in vernacular pedagogical treatises and books on character development. In the introduction to a recent anthology of critical essays on children’s literature, Nilanjana Gupta and Rimi B Chatterjee remark that in the tumultuous times of “radical thinking and fierce argument over the creation of an appropriate ‘Indianness’” for nineteenth century Indians, and for Bengalis in particular, the most suitable place to start “was with the hearts and minds of [their] children”. For precisely this purpose, in order to access the “hearts and minds” of their wards, they needed to find an area of print and a method of pedagogy that was not already overtaken by foreign thought. They had to manoeuvre a cultural space that was free of colonial control. For this, they needed to look outside and think beyond the peripheries of formal institutions and the
educational print literature associated with them. These were direct manifestations of a colonial usurpation and had become entrenched in the socio-political system as active agents of imperial power and control through the nineteenth century. The Bengali intellectuals therefore turned to a private place – secluded from the hands and eyes of the ‘outsider’. Within that space, they recreated an indigenous juvenile culture that was fast perishing in the face of a massive colonial influence and the on-going social reformations. Taking the ‘colonial tool’ of print outside the public spheres of education, the intelligentsia of Bengal relocated it within the private space of the home and created a separate culture of homely books for their children. In an act of appropriation and subversion, they used the medium of printed children’s books – that had so long remained yoked to the practical needs of education, sustenance and livelihood, and initiated a new culture of ‘storybooks’ or ‘galper boi’ for young readers. These captured in print the diverse indigenous traditions of the past and integrated them with the ideas of a modern nation. They stressed on a practice of leisurely reading and encouraged children to read for pleasure. Through such volumes, juvenile reading began to extend beyond practical necessities and dreaded compulsions and developed as a form of leisure, to be undertaken by voluntary choice. With a new literary market and a thriving book trade emerging out of such volumes in the last decade of the nineteenth century, for the urban and suburban middle-class and upper-middle class Bengali child,
reading became a constructive pastime, a form of healthy entertainment and a source of pleasure.

In 1859, in the preface to what he claimed to be first original Bengali story written for children, Harinath Majumdar had observed that the monotony of studying text books often compelled literate adolescents to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of immoral and bawdy romances. Bijay Basanta, a fairy-tale-like story, was intended as a juvenile book that would provide both moral education and wholesome entertainment for children. Harinath Majumdar’s concerns, as expressed around the mid-nineteenth century, point towards a complete lack of suitable leisure-reading matter for literate children and adolescents. This emphasis on the necessity of an ‘entertaining’ literature for young people was reiterated through Jyotiringan, Sakha, Sathi, Mukul and other such juvenile periodicals that cropped up in between 1860 and 1900. The same issue was articulated yet another time in 1891, in the introduction to Hasi o Khela [Laughter and Games] by Yogindranath Sarkar. A prolific writer of children’s stories and verses, in this introduction he voices a desire distinctly different from his predecessors: “Though our boys and girls have sufficient school readers, primers and other books of knowledge, there is not a single illustrated volume suited for pleasurable reading at home” (Hasi o Khela, Author’s Preface, viii)[italics inserted].
Writing a review of the book in Sadhana – a contemporary literary periodical, Tagore too notes the utter lack of emotion and beauty in the dry educational literature available for Bengali children. He stresses the importance of a genre of children’s books that would stimulate the imagination of the young readers and induce a habit of voluntary reading in them:

This book [Hasi o Khela] is for little children. There had been a serious dearth of such books in Bengali language. Whatever publications exist for children are text books meant to be read at school; not a trace of affection or beauty can be found in them; they end up plaguing children rather than helping them . . .

I do not hope to transform insipid school education into something exciting . . . Entrusting the task of assigning textbooks in the hands of cruel-hearted authorities, now it is a matter of great urgency for us to write books that will be desirable to our children, books they will enjoy reading at home. Without this, there is no other way for nurturing the intellect of Bengali children and of ensuring their mental health and happiness. (289) [italics inserted]

The passage clearly illustrates the opposing binaries that were contesting against each other in the arena of contemporary children’s books. They were: “school” versus “home”, “insipid” versus “desirable” and “cruel-hearted-authorities” (colonial power) versus “us” (indigenous people). In
this cultural battle over the mind and intellect of “Bengali children”,
Tagore’s own strategy is also articulated in clear, unambiguous terms –
“it is a matter of great urgency for us to write books that will be desirable
to our children, books they will enjoy reading at home”. Tagore himself
had initiated a similar endeavour around 1895 through his plan of
publishing a series of juvenile books or Balyagranthabali. Unlike the dull
and anaemic school textbooks, the books in this series were written to
constitute an imaginative literature for children and to provide them with
an enjoyable alternative. In his introduction to Gnanadanandini Devi’s
Sat Bhai Champa, Abanindranath Tagore mentions Kshirer Putul,
Shakuntala, Sat Bhai Champa, Nadi and Rajkahini as some books that
had been written for the series.7

In the introduction to Yogindranath Sarkar’s Chhara o Galpa
[Rhymes and Stories,1910], another entertaining volume for children,
Ramendrasundar Tribedi comments on a perceptible shift - a certain
change of attitude in Bengali juvenile publications.8 He remarks:

Since the last few years there has been an earnest
enthusiasm for making Bengali children’s literature befitting for
children*. . . nursery rhymes, tales and songs are being collected
and published in a number of children’s books. Ramayan,
Mahabharat and other mythological narratives like Markandeya

* He uses the word ‘shishujyogya’.
Chandi and so forth are now being rewritten for amusing children. It is indeed surprising that such efforts had not been taken earlier.

In the ancient times, the stories of Panchatantra and Hitopodesh had been composed for children . . . All this while, these tales have been lying so near at hand; and yet why have they not been employed for entertaining Bengali children? (429)†

Yogindranath Sarkar was perhaps the first of the many publishers of Bengali children’s books to make a name for writing, compiling and publishing ‘happy’ volumes for young readers. His books – generously dotted with pictures, unlike the meagerly illustrated juvenile publications of the contemporary period – spoke of a childhood full of innocence, mirth and laughter. These pretty books were clearly objects of recreation and leisure, being more in the line of attractive toys than the printed texts associated with mandatory, uninteresting lessons and fearful punishments.9 In the early decades of the twentieth century, this budding sector of the book industry was further developed and enriched by an array of colourful and entertaining children’s books on varied subjects from publishing agencies like ‘U. Ray & Sons’ and ‘Sisir Publishing House’. Like Yogindranath Sarkar’s ‘City Book Society’, they specifically addressed the segment of juvenile literature in book

† Immediately after this, Tribedi goes on to criticise Vidyasagar - whom he calls the father of modern Bengali children’s literature - for including only foreign stories in Kathamala. He questions, “Why did he remain blind to these truly indigenous [khanti swadeshi] tales?”
publishing and produced alluring and amusing books for children’s leisure-time reading. In 1920 Sisir Publishing House (which also published the periodical *Amar Desh*), announced their ‘*Shishutosh*’ series consisting of publications expressly designed for children’s pleasurable reading outside school. Advertising a long list of “attractively illustrated” titles that would be available in the series, the commercial stated:

> Today, across the country there are signs of a new life. Our attention has been drawn towards those duties without which one cannot hope to build the foundations of a national consciousness.

> It is universally agreed that there is a great scarcity of literature suitable for Bengali children. This deficiency cannot be compensated by school texts. The books that we have published as part of our “Shishutosh Series” will not only enrich the storehouse of our children’s literature, they will also help to stimulate the mental faculties of our children.

> Our children are the future of our nation and this is an effort towards their education – we hope to have the full co-operation of guardians and teachers in our mission. (n.pag.)

> It is this hitherto unexplored space, the space of voluntary, private and pleasurable reading that the authors and publishers attempted to demarcate as an independent niche within the already defined

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1 The word ‘*Shishutosh*’ literally means that which is pleasing to children.
boundaries of the juvenile genre. It is where the child would seek the ancient magic of stories and discover the pleasure of reading and be drawn to books. It is a ‘home’ or a ‘leisure’ reading space as opposed to the formal ‘school’ reading consisting of books of advice and information. According to Partha Chatterjee,

the nationalist cultural project of producing disciplined citizens for the new nation took root in the inner spaces of the community . . . [and] not in the public institutions of civil society. Seeking zealously to protect that inner space from colonial incursion, the nationalist tended to see the school as a source of alien cultural influence and moral corruption.\(^1\)

At a time when a foreign authority had become institutionalised in all aspects of public life and was invariably affecting the personal sphere, the nationalists wanted to emphasise the privacy and the sovereignty of the home. It is in this private space - which naturally has the sanctity of belonging to the self, that the writers of children’s tales situated their literature. Their project of reclaiming children’s lore springs from the nostalgic realm of the home - from the warmth and familiarity of the kindred circle, of the grandmothers’ undying affections and their unchanging traditions of home-made pickles from the days of yore.

Marking a departure from the pedagogical and didactic literature that represented colonised spaces and imprisoned childhoods, these
books, though in print, were transformed by the magic touch of ‘voices’ of affectionate mother and loving grandparents, of homely comfort and associations of kinship and tenderness, of happy childhoods and of indestructible traditions. The prioritisation of natural ties over artificial ones, of the familiar oral voice over the alien printed word, of the indigenous over the foreign, is seldom more compellingly expressed than in the discourse of Thakurmar Jhuli: “Keboli boier katha? Snehamoyeeder mukher katha kothay galo! Deshlakhshmir buker katha kothay?” [Only the printed words of books! Where are the oral tales of loving women! Where is the voice that comes from the bosom of the Nation-goddess?].

These were not books for classrooms, schools or examinations, they were to be pursued for pure pleasure. It was books such as these that came to define ‘galper boi’ in Bengali culture. The term, though literally meaning ‘story books’, has since been conventionally used to broadly signify all sorts of leisure-reading books for children. These books collectively outlined the contours of a new vernacular print genre for children, namely, ‘shishu-sahitya’ or children’s literature – and made it distinct from the primers, readers, moralities and other kinds of educational books. The term, as noted previously in Chapter IV, was coined by Ramendrasundar Tribedi in his introduction to Yogindranath Sarkar’s Khukumanir Chhara (1899). Thus, though there had been a century-long precedence of children’s books or ‘shishu-pathya pustak’ in Bengal (starting with Shishuganer Pustak in 1801), it was about a century later
that the phrase *shishu-sahitya* or ‘children’s literature’ came into circulation in Bengali language and culture. This literature thus implicitly becomes dissociated from the earlier ‘non-literary’ juvenile books. The term ‘*shishu-sahitya*’ aligns itself with the ‘new’ genre of children’s books, with pleasing and homely volumes like *Hasi o Khela* or *Tuntunir Boi*. It identifies with their indigenous repertoire of tales, songs and rhymes and is infused with the native ‘*chhelebhulano*’ traditions.

Beyond the sphere of rhymes, verses, legends and stories, in a tradition continued from periodicals like *Sakha*, *Mukul* and *Sandesh*, books like *Jibjantu* (1901), *Sekaler Katha* (1903), *Chiriakhana* (1911), *Pashu-pakshi* (1911) and *Keet-patanga* (1925) brought the ‘stories’ of science and those of the numerous inhabitants of the natural world to the sphere of ‘homely’ juvenile literature. *Sekaler Katha*, a book on natural history by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, was described by the author as an “illustrated children’s book containing tales about various prehistoric beasts”.\(^{13}\) In the preface the author clearly articulates his intentions in writing a children’s book on a branch of science. The contents as well as the illustrations of the book, he stresses, though drawn from science, have largely been designed to please children and not to burden them with facts. It is a volume that children will read in their “leisure hours”. It is, accordingly, authored with the aim of “telling

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\(^{8}\) That which enchants, amuses or diverts children.
children stories of ancient times – it does not intend to teach scientific facts” (Author’s preface, n.pag.).

Not only did such books provide entertaining reading for children during their leisure hours, that is, when they were not ‘at work’ studying for schools and examinations, but more importantly, these books were strategically placed in a private haven of leisure – in the child’s home. The books were intimately connected to and ensconced within the comforting associations of home. Opening up worlds of exhilarating romances and haunting fairylands revisited in soporific afternoons and dreamy bedtimes, they were inundated with feelings of maternal tenderness and kindred bonding and carried the sense of warm security inherent in familiar storytelling voices. This literature therefore becomes desirable in its very freedom from the fearful associations of schools, classrooms and examinations, from the strictures of rules, disciplines and punishments of formal institutions, from all the hardships and compulsions of the public sphere. Instead, it is an unalloyed entertainment to be enjoyed in the intimate comfort of a private space. These were books to be read at leisure and enjoyed as leisure at home.

*Hasi o Khela* [Laughter and Games, 1891], *Chhabi o Galpa* [Pictures and Stories, 1897], *Chhele o Chhabi* [Children and Pictures, 1898], *Khukumanir Chhara* [Rhymes for the Little Girl, 1899], *Tuktuke Boi* [The Pretty Book, 1900], *Hasimukh* [The Happy Face, 1900], *Gunjan* [Sweet
Hummings, 1905), *Khoka-khukur Khela* [Little Boys’ and Girls’ Games, 1909], *Chhelekhela* [Childish Games, 1907], *Jhikmike Boi* [The Glittering Book, 1908], *Chhutir Para* [Holiday Readings, 1909], *Rangachhabi* [Rosy Pictures, 1910], *Jhumjhumi* [The Rattle, 1910], *Khokar Gan* [The Little Boys’ Songs, 1913] were a few among such books that were published and sold in volumes around the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century period. The very appearances of these pretty volumes as well as their titles indicate an area of happy leisure, of carefree fun and pleasing games. These elements starkly contrasted with the solemn associations of classrooms and lessons that were called up by the formidable sounding *Jnananjan, Bodhoday* or *Riju-path*, texts that had constituted Bengali children’s books in the earlier period.

While this journey from morality to levity, from instruction to pleasure, is true of most histories of children’s literature (including that of England), in a colonial context, the emergence of the leisure factor in Bengali children’s books was nuanced with the stirrings of a rising nationalist consciousness. This area of leisure literature or ‘*galper boi*’ for children was reclaimed out of and fenced off from the already colonised areas of childhood – from the pedagogies, educational policies, public institutions and the British-formulated textbook literatures. It was fashioned into an indigenous literary genre, defined as a private realm and marked as a sovereign space. The children, as the rising generations,
were the future citizens of the nation and the authors sought to indoctrinate them in ideologies of nationhood in the private space of the home.

Printed books for children had come into existence in Bengal as part of the British colonial influence towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. The genre, not unsurprisingly, was hitched to the colonial machineries of administration, education and reformation from a very early stage. By initiating new thoughts, new knowledge and new disciplines and employing a new technology, it became a cog in the wheel of imperial power. Surveying the changing tendencies manifested in Bengali children’s books during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century period and reviewing the shifts in context of a wider socio-political environment, this thesis has argued that through books of leisure, in the private space of the home, Bengali juvenile literature sought to create a national consciousness. Moving away from school texts and borrowed books, the endeavour at the turn of the century was to harness the ‘non-school’ or the ‘non-print’ culture existing in the margins and to reinstate these traditions in the modern world of print. Blocking out a fresh territory from within the already defined generic space, the new printed books recovered Bengali juvenile literature from its colonial weaning and gave it an indigenous identity. Engaging with traditional cultures and incorporating literary distinctions and
characteristic idioms of a living, spoken language, this new children’s literature set out to adumbrate a national culture for the boys and girls of an emerging nation.

This is not to suggest that the other forms of writings like text books, moralities, books of conduct and adaptations and translations from Western originals did not continue to be written and published in the new century. But with the rapid influx of the new homely books - the books of folk and fairy tales, of mythologies and biographies of a pronounced indigenous bent, clearly the spirit and the nature of Bengali children’s literature had changed. The thesis has traced the consolidation of nationalist consciousness in an emerging form of literature for children in Bengal through the 1880s to the 1920s. It does not claim that this new literature for children was always used to radical ends. That was not the case. With a proliferating market, the genre of children’s books quickly established itself as an area of brisk book trade and many categories of entertaining juvenile publications – like school stories, detective fiction, adventure stories, horror tales, science fiction nonsense rhymes and works of fantasy came up in the following decades.¹⁵
Inextricably related to any juvenile culture is the idea of childhood as a social concept. The leisure-reading books for children and the niche book market that emerged in the area of juvenile print culture towards the end of the nineteenth century were engendered in a changing attitude towards the child and an altered view of childhood. For the newly formed urban middle class, children increasingly became a subject of special concern and childhood an area of growing importance. Manuals for parental guidance advocating hygienic practices and a rationalist discipline for child-rearing began to be published**. The puritan and reformative elements of Brahmoism did much to usher in the concept of a modern childhood in the Bengali society. By the turn of the century, a flood of children’s books from a group of Brahmo households and a coterie of Brahmo authors like Pramadacharan Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Gnanadanandini Devi, Shibnath Shastri, Yogindranath Sarkar and Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri enlivened the juvenile reading sphere with entertaining, lighthearted writings and attractive pictures. They brought to the children’s domain a playful spirit and endowed it with much of the innocence and happiness that became intricately associated with the cult of the modern child.

** For example, *Paribare Shishu Shiksha* [Educating the Child in the Family], 1890, *Santaner Charitra Gathan* [Developing a Moral Character in Children], 1912.
Also apparent in their construction of a separate terrain for children was a studied censorship, especially noted in the will to erase all traces of sexuality from children’s texts. The asexuality of the modern child – unlike the more unguarded childhoods of the earlier ages – was an active imposition of an adult ideology at work, which consciously sought to protect and preserve the naïvete and innocence of children. Indeed, the new recreational literature attempted to define a ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ reading-area for children. It was a permissible and healthy leisure, carefully chosen and sifted by the adults for their wards and was, as such, distinct from idle and dangerous reading habits – habits that had drawn repeated complaints and warnings from the moral guardians of the society. The tendency of wayward school children to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of erotic and sensational literature had often been considered seriously damaging. Therefore though the new writings re-told the old tales, these were almost always refined by modern sensibilities. This was also therefore the beginning of a barricading of children’s reading areas - limiting them to certain legitimate areas of leisure-time reading - a development typical of modern times. However, beyond these moral reformations and ideological reconstructions, childhood remained further divided by the social variables like religion, caste, class and gender. Indeed, both social and literary evidences point to the fact that instead of one homogenous idea of the child or a single precept of childhood, in colonial Bengal, there
existed simultaneously, different versions of childhood. The indigenous and the Western, the traditional and the modern, the ideological and the real constantly conflicted and overlapped with each other to constitute the many fragments of Bengali childhood.

As winds of change blew over Bengal, the societal norms were reviewed and reformed. Along with the shifting dynamics of the institutions of home and family the paradigms of childhood too signaled a change. The rigorous discipline and the severe penalties of *Barnaparichay* (1855) are tempered by a cheerful indulgence in the happy rhymes of *Hasi Khushi* (1897). The children’s periodical *Sakha* (1883) had the Wordsworthian dictum “The Child is father of the Man” as its epigraph while Tagore’s romantic apotheosis of the child found repeated expressions in numerous works, most notably in *Sahaj Path* (1930) – an alphabet book that was unlike any other. Periodicals like *Amar Desh* (1920) hailed their young readers – the boys and girls of Bengal - as the future citizens of a nation. As discussed earlier, several of the influential factors propelling these changes in the ideas of childhood and children’s books bore colonial affinities. These foreign influences paradoxically helped the indigenous traditions to come back through new sensibilities and modern technologies in a reformed culture. Like ‘the intimate enemy’ – they remain as ineradicable elements and potent forces
in the new cultures of childhood that were forged in nineteenth century Bengali.

Thus the thesis does not point towards a definitive outcome – as history itself is not neat and homogenous. What it does state is that though initiated in a British colonial culture and heavily influenced by Western pedagogies, beginning from the 1880s children’s literature in Bengal marked out certain divergent patterns. These were very much rooted in and related to the new ‘re’formed ideologies and liberal humanisms of the Bengal renaissance and reflected the nationalist thoughts that were energising Bengal at that time. For children, who were subjugated to a foreign schooling system and made to read books for a practical purpose, the ideas of nationhood and patriotism were articulated in the private space of ‘homely reading’, through the new literature constructed as a recreational genre. Taken collectively, these ‘leisure-reading’ books can be seen to represent a nationalist project. Surfacing as varied forms of writings on science, sport, travel or folk lore in numerous periodicals and ‘story books’ for children, they expressed the voice of a culture and a race which was becoming aware of its unique past, its independent identity and its potential future greatness. It therefore strove for a status higher than its present servile one and wanted to motivate its children towards that end.
Notes to Conclusion


9. The basis of my earlier comparison between Yogindranath Sarkar of Bengal and John Newbery of London as children’s book publishers becomes evident here. Like Newbery who in mid eighteenth century England showed that books for young people, properly designed and marketed, were an important part of book trade and could be a steady source of profit, Sarkar too had an acumen for identifying the possibilities of an unexplored reader group in late nineteenth century Bengal. Also like Newbery, he had a talent for creating a more child-centered literature and produced beautifully illustrated volumes that were coveted by children.


