Preface and Acknowledgements

This is a study of ‘leisure-time’ books for Bengali children that were generated as a ‘new’ kind of juvenile literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period in colonial Bengal. This is also a study about juvenile leisure – about reading as a form of entertainment and a recreation for Bengali children. Through the long nineteenth century, juvenile reading had developed from being a means towards a formal education (and a prospective livelihood in a colonial age), to a potentially dangerous habit contaminated by ‘trash’ tales and erotic literature (in a time flooded by print) to a ‘healthy’ pastime for Bengali children (in an era of growing nationalism). Thus, in the course of its engagement with an entertaining print literature for children in colonial Bengal, the thesis also journeys into the spheres of colonial and national history, the space of the school and that of the home and the new cult of Bengali childhood that was hewn out of the contemporary socio-political debates.

The seed of this work had been sown a couple of years before I actually commenced my PhD research. It was during my M.Phil course, when I had chosen the genre of Nonsense literature as the topic of my dissertation, that I had been introduced to the immense academic possibilities of children’s books. However, moving into the corresponding ‘indigenous’ and ‘vernacular’ domain, as a student of English literature, has been a gradual process, made possible through a series of interim papers and conference presentations. Again, the idea of moving beyond the peripheries of juvenile texts into a broader ambit of childhood studies, had been triggered by various intriguing suggestions, received as part of peer-reviews and through interactive exchanges. Thus, through the long course of time during which “Reading Leisure: A Print Culture
for Children in Colonial Bengal” had been conceived, shaped and written, I have gathered many debts of gratitude. It would indeed have been difficult to complete this dissertation without the moral, intellectual and financial support of many individuals and institutions.

First, I would like to thank Prof. Nilanjana Gupta, my mentor and dissertation supervisor for her astute guidance and intellectual support through the extended tenure of this research. Her knowledge and expertise in the area of cultural studies as well as her patience and understanding had helped me tide over difficult blocks and particularly rough periods of thesis writing. My thesis has also tremendously benefitted from the knowledge and counsel that several teachers, scholars and researchers had provided over its formative years. I acknowledge my heart-felt gratitude to Prof. Gautam Bhadra for allowing me access to his vast wealth of knowledge of nineteenth century Bengali history and culture. Through the conversations that I was fortunate to have with him, he had drawn my attention to important sources and overlooked texts. It was he, in particular, who had emphatically underlined the importance of Ramayan and Mahabharat in the history of Bengali children’s literature and had urged me to look at the colonial genre of printed children’s books form a different angle - exploiting the indigenous histories of non-print traditions and native cultures. I am grateful to Prof. Swapan Chakravorty, a recognized expert in the areas of print and book history, for helping me with important factual data and valuable suggestions. His stimulating queries regarding the emergence of an ‘entertaining’ factor in the history of Bengali children’s books had ignited my interest and led to my investigation of the subject and has ultimately, framed the final approach of my thesis. Professor Abhijit Gupta (Jadavpur University) and Abhijit Bhattacharya (Center for Studies in Social Sciences), both of whom have an enormous amount of first-hand experience of working with archival Bengali texts, had given
me valuable leads to locate possible sources for rare, nineteenth century publications. I am also deeply indebted to Prof. Moinak Biswas, whose intellectual advice and moral support I had continually sought and who was always unfailingly helpful.

As a member of the International Research Society for Children’s Literature – a scholarly association in the area of juvenile literature and childhood studies, I had been introduced to the world of exciting and vigorous scholarship that these fields have generated globally. In the process of my activities as a member of the society, I had been fortunate enough to interact with Prof. Maria Nikolajeva, Prof. Kimberley Reynolds, Prof. Hans-Heino Ewers and with many other young scholars and researchers in the area. These discussions had often pointed out new directions in my research and sharpened and matured my own analysis. Through the length of this PhD, parts of my research have been presented at conferences and published as papers. At the biennial conference of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, through my associations with the forum’s scholar-members, I acquired an understanding of the methodologies for critically approaching texts of popular periodicals and for assessing their impact on readers. Rimi B Chatterjee’s corrections and suggestions in “Moral Versus Magic: The Great Debate in Children’s Literature” and Bjorn Sundmark’s meticulous editing of “Our Motherland: Mapping an Identity in Bengali Children’s Literature” have helped to hone my arguments and polish my writing skills.

This dissertation owes a lot to the generous support I had from various institutions at different periods. At a very early stage of my research, I was favoured with the great advantage of being able to revel in the world of children’s books at a special library that is unique in the planet. The sheer pleasure of studying at the Internationale
Jugendbibliothek – a library dedicated to archiving children’s books and a resource centre for critical works in the area, cannot be summed up in words. A generous grant from the IJB had allowed me to work for a period of two months at this fairy-tale library housed in a castle in Munich. It was here that I had an opportunity to survey the length and breadth of a 400 year-old genre and amass abundant references. I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Barbara Scharioth, the Director of the Library and my colleagues at the IJB – Petra Worsching, Claudia Soffner, my fellow research-visitor Sigute Chlebinskaite and my host, Ursula Heulbig, for making those days some of the best loved ones of my life. I sincerely thank the Charles Wallace India Trust, which had partially supported and enabled my research visit to the British Library, London. I remain indebted to a teachers’ fellowship granted me by the UGC and by Rama Krishna Sarada Mission Vivekananda Vidyabhavan - the institution where I teach, for allowing me leave for the research and writing of this dissertation. These various institutional supports had helped me to pursue my research and to dig out rare books from various libraries in India, Bangladesh, England and Germany.

In the long and tedious process of uncovering a history without the support of any well-defined bibliographies in the core area of Bengali children’s publications, the assistance and cooperation of the staff at the various well-known and lesser known libraries that I have used, had been invaluable. I am thankful to the National Library, Sahitya Parishat Granthagar, Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public Library, Bengali Periodicals & Newspapers Archive at the Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Chaitanya Library, the Boys’ Own Library, Bangiya Jatiya Shiksha Parishad (National Council of Education, Bengal) and Bidhanchandra Granthagar in Calcutta; the Dhaka University Library, the Bangla Academy and the National Archives of Bangladesh in Dhaka and the Oriental and India Office Collections, the British Library in London for
supplying me with primary texts: books and periodicals for children in nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Of these, the National Library, a dearly loved space since my undergraduate days, had been the major site and source of my research. I am thankful to the staff of the Reading Room and Rare Book divisions and to Sayed Abuzar, Swati Bose and Ashim Mukhopadhyay in particular - their promptness and their knowledge about the immense holdings of the library had been very helpful in tracking books for this study. An on-going documentation and research project for compiling a public-domain catalogue of nineteenth century Bengali children’s books, funded by India Foundation for the Arts, at which I have been working - though not directly related to the thesis - have energised my hunt for and deepened my scrutiny of old and rare books.

Resources apart, this work owes a lot to the cheerful assistance and significant contributions of friends, colleagues and family members. I cannot think of a life without Sanmita – my childhood friend since school through university and currently a colleague in the same discipline, and Chaiti – also a friend, mentor and colleague. Close confidantes during troublesome times, both have enriched this research with constructive criticisms and by challenging me with alternative views. For these and for their unflagging friendship, I am for ever thankful. My many discussions with Chitrira, Manas, Sarbani, Farhan, Anindya and Reema have been academically and emotionally rewarding. In London, Paramita and Amit had given me the care and warmth of their home and hearts. Their unstinting hospitality and support had made my research trip to London a comfortable recess instead of a plain and rigorous work assignment. I am also indebted to Anirban Gupta for helping with the technicalities of formatting work.
The writing of my thesis would have been much more stressful without the unconditional love of my family – they have, in more ways than I can enumerate, borne the brunt of my troubled times, and it is largely due their unfaltering support that this work could be completed. Sanjukta Sengupta, The eldest in the family, taught me the archaic Bengali numerals for reading the prices of nineteenth century books, while the younger Senguptas had run a hundred errands for me. Upal has been generous with his time and has painstakingly edited the images used in this dissertation, making the raw files reproducible as supporting material in the thesis. Much as I value his efforts for easing my work, a far more rewarding aspect of sharing a life with him is the joy and laughter he brings into it. Finally, as I finish this thesis, I am reminded of my grandfather, the late Harendralal Ganguli, who had given me the first lessons in English. This study is also a tribute to my mother – from whom I had heard the first rhymes and stories, and to my father – who had, in spite of his many occupations and demanding schedule – found time and interest to read drafts of this dissertation. To both of them I owe my precious childhood, and it is to them I dedicate this work on children’s stories and children’s leisure.