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Voices Re/Dis-Membered: Reading through the Editorial Politics of the Fairytale Collections of Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on the large-scale project of 'collecting', 'editing' and publishing the rustic tales more popularly known as the fairytales that characterize the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Bengal. While we must acknowledge that the fairytale emerged as a distinct genre as opposed to the folktale during this particular period of Indian literary history how far it was a product of the cultural negotiation with the English is a question pursued in the paper but ultimately left to much ambiguities and future possibilities. In the process of dealing with these collections we have encountered the problems associated with the idea of orality. In an age of rising print capitalism traditional modes of preserving and carrying forward a cultural memory undergoes multiple challenges the most difficult of which is to perhaps negotiate the validity of the very idea of orality itself. The attempt at going back to any pure, pristine Voice and transcribing it faithfully in a new and modern technologized form is perhaps similar to the search for history in a medieval gothic castle where history is itself the ghost of the house.

Keywords: *fairytales, orality, literacy, printing, colonial Bengal.*

> We no longer believe as Gundtvig (or Mitchelet did), that, behind the doors of our cities, in the nearby distance of the countryside, there are vast poetic and "pagan" pastures where one can still hear songs, myths, and the spreading murmur of the "folkelighed" (a Danish word that cannot be translated; it means "what belongs to the people").
> - de Certeau (131.)

To open the paper with a suggestion for the impossibility of the illusion of a meaningful communication is a masochistic endeavor in itself. Not only the sets of binaries suggested in the lines as that of between

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the country and the city, the rhythmic/poetic and the prosaic, the elitist and the populist, the creative and the bookish speaks of a fundamental breach in the discourse of modernity but the very limitations of translation signal the failure of any attempt to re-produce any "original" voice lost to the age of modern technology. The act of translation is essentially a political act which demands the erasure of the voice of the subject. It is a temporal act of representing the absent or the non-present. The limits of representation are also the limits of communication and therefore the limits of faith. The fact that in the opening quotation de Certeau laments not the loss of the voice or the connection with the voice but rather the loss of the *belief* in the existence of such an originary voice, which provides the most critical point of departure for my paper.

Tejaswini Niranjana's critical insight would lead us to the context of this paper elaborating its relation with the issue of translation; she has explicated how in colonial modernity the colonized subject lives always already in a state of translation (6). For a society in transition from one value system to another it becomes inevitable to fictionalize both its past and its present. Where identity itself emerges from a temporal dislocation as in the case of a colonial society the point is less to stabilize the self than to identify and typify the other(s). The colonial experience was a clash of two different temporalities. It was only after the colonial encounter that India came to realize that their sense of time was not rooted in history and how historical time was to be distinguished from the unhistorical time. Colonialism triggered a temporal displacement in the colonized for the experience of being colonized is the experience of lagging behind time and modernity constitutes that promise which eludes one with hopes of similarity and simultaneity of historical progress. The ideas of linearity and sequentiality were important markers of the colonial time frame. Central to the creation of a historical narrative is the question of progress from an oral, illiterate culture to a literate and written one. "Progress is scriptural in type…The "oral" is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the "scriptural" is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition" (de Certeau 134). And the two are supposed to be mutually exclusive categories related in a temporally sequential relationship where one naturally follows the other. But while talking about the collections of nineteenth century Bengali fairytales we are faced with a lot of challenges that defy any clear categorization between the oral and

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the scriptural or the written. The entire politics behind the collection, edition and mediation of stories gathered from the supposedly rural population of the villages of Eastern Bengal by the urban middle-class educated Bengali intellectual community finds its landmark moment in the famous tryst between Rabindranath Tagore and Dakshinaranjan MitraMajumdar. We are not to forget that it is on the insistence of Tagore that MitraMajumdar travelled to the distant parts of Eastern Bengal to collect the "stories" of Bengal in and around 1906. The travel resulted in the publication of the legendary *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907. Dakshinaranjan, in travelling from Maymansingha to Calcutta, was not only covering a geographical distance but was actually taking a deliberate leap from the narrator to the writer, from the listener to the reader, from one cultural milieu to another (Bandopadhyay 66).

The folklore research project that started from the second half of the nineteenth century and continued till the middle half of the twentieth century in Bengal or more precisely in Calcutta was actually a search for the fiction that would enable a collection of "sounds under the sign of the Voice, - of a Culture of its own or of its great Other's" (ibid 132). When writers, authors, editors and academicians of colonial Bengal indulged in the process of unearthing and collecting the fairytales of indigenous production they were subscribing to the popular view, again a western import that fairytales and orality are intimately connected and the oral is always the pure, the natural and the original. As an extension to this the written tale was seen as simply transcribing the stories orally generated and handed down for hundreds of years and as simply putting into print the traces of that long-standing tradition (Harries 100). This is not to deny that many of the fairytales of the collections have been part of an ongoing oral popular culture, but the point is, any sense of accessing that culture through reading fairytales is an illusion-an illusion carefully and deliberately created to address very specific political purposes.

Being appointed the governor-general of Bengal in 1772 Warren Hastings recommended that the British colonial administration should seek to rule the territories under its control not according to the British law but according to the laws of the native regions. And for that purpose the colonial officials must know where to find the laws and also how to read them. His proposal led to the birth of the western discipline of Indology encouraging the British government officials to learn Sanskrit. This is the

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juncture that also engineered the birth of a new cultural consciousness. But it came with its own set of problems. The first problem lies with the identification of Sanskrit as *the* Indian language and also the medium to know India and traditions. It is also to be noted that it was not an oral culture that the English had ascribed to India, rather they ventured to know India through its written texts. The second is perhaps the mode of operation itself: learning the Indian languages and translating the Indian texts into the language of the colonizer; in other words translating the texts into the language of power. And translation finds its 'natural' ally cum the most common mode of operation in comparison. We shall see how comparison betrays the whole project. First translated into English by Charles Wilkins the *Bhgavad Gita* was repeatedly proclaimed to be the foremost work of the Hindu philosophy and subsequently gained the title of the "Hindu Bible". Comparison with the Bible sets the tune of the time. For Lalbehari Dey this was the point of departure; though he turned the attention from the written to the oral but comparison nonetheless remained unavoidable. He talked about a "comparative mythology" to compare between the oralities of the East and the West (5). Interesting is his use of the term mythology which for him denoted a non-literate or primarily oral world. He proposed his collection *The Folktales of Bengal* as a contribution to the "daily increasing literature of folklore and comparative mythology" (ibid). But Dakshinaranjan MitraMajumdar countered the point where he rejected any notion of comparison with the coionlonizer's texts and asked for an autonomous paradigm to discuss both written and oral texts of the East. However rejection of something is also to be conscious of its presence all the time. Both of these men, turned to the folk to settle down questions of cultural affinities and differences.

The aim of my paper would be to trace two distinct trends of folklore research in nineteenth century colonial Bengal and also their possible overlapping. If the one was implicated in the colonial discourse of anthropological collection of cultural knowledge and production of useful tools of colonial administration, the other was evidently functioning within a strong nationalist paradigm of thought. While Lalbehari Dey's *Folktales of Bengal* falls under the first category having its affinities with the projects initiated by the Asiatic society, Dakshinaranjan Mitramajumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* would be an example of the latter project as an extension of the agenda of the Bengali Sahitya Parishad. The first

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point that signals the fuzzy boundaries between the two is that both the endeavors were furthered by Indians. Both exoticized and the "other"ized the folk and the oral and the rural/rustic but appropriated them to suit very different purposes. In any case the nineteen century Bengal was marked by a sudden urgency to put, preserve and display its traditional tales in official academic containers. And preservation to this age necessarily meant the use of the written mode. The immediate influence behind Dey's book was Sir Richard Temple and his son Captain R.C Temple and its stated aim was to build a bridge to cover the distance between the Thames and the Ganges and it also claimed to prove that "the swarthy and half-naked peasant on the banks of the Ganges is a cousin to the fair-skinned and well-dressed Englishman on the banks of the Thames" (Dey 5). The very fact that the book was written in English made it less accessible to Indian children, women and common folk and more to the Sahibs and the Indian elites. It was not only upholding a culture of literacy but also defining that culture in terms of English education. Also, the very choice of the vernacular language in writing *Thakurmar Jhuli* signaled a different agenda. It called for a resistance to the aggression of the English fairytales which were becoming more and more popular in the middle-class households of nineteenth century Bengal. And none other than Tagore was writing the Preface. For him the English fairytales were pushing the Bengali children into a bookish world where experiences of listening were being replaced by the experience of reading. He was calling for a return to the lost world of orality. However, the idea of orality, in nineteenth century Bengal was itself marked by impurities and contradictions. Tagore insisted that any direct access to our oral tales was no longer possible. "The origin is no longer what is narrated but the multiform and murmuring activity that produces a text and a society as a text" (de Certeau 134). Therefore, he advocated a very different kind of orality drawing its sources from written documents. Perhaps Tagore was anticipating something that was later to be termed as 'Secondary Orality' by Walter J. Ong. Ong defines "This new orality has striking resemblance to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment and, even in its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, *based permanently on the use of writing and print* [my emphasis] which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well" (133). While Dey's book ushered in a moment of

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complete disjunction between the child and the mother or grandmother because of its use of a foreign tongue, MitraMajumdar's book attempted to restore at least a secondary connection where the modern mothers and grandmothers could compensate for their cultural oblivion by reading aloud a book like *Thakurmar Jhuli* to her grandchildren. Even if the woman, in the nineteenth century, had acquired literacy and was educated in the vernacular, English was still inaccessible to her. Secondary orality though dependent upon printed pages tries to recreate the aura of spoken words and face-to-face encounter. The division of labour that Tagore decided reconciled the contradictory demands of orality and literacy where mothers would 'read' the fairytales but children would 'listen' to them.

The folklorists of colonial India did not comprise a homogeneous group. There were British collectors and their native followers. Those who systematically set about collecting folklore were a varied crew: the administrators, their wives and daughters and the missionaries. Mary Frere's *Old Deccan Days or Hindu Fairy Legends Current in South India* was the first among a host of folklore collections by English men and women including Crookes's *North Indian Notes and Queries* and Richard Temple's *Legends of Punjab.* Lalbehari Dey's collection appeared within the same tradition. They were clearly writing with a preexisting notion of who these folks were. They were neither the Sanskrit pundits whom the Orientalists were consulting nor were they English educated Indians who were helping them run the colony; but they were the Indian lower classes steeped in tradition. With the foundation of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1893, the emphasis shifted to the potential of folklore in reclaiming an un-westernized authentic Indian identity. People like Dineshchandra Sen, Dakshinaranjan Mitramajumdar and Ashutosh Mukherjee carried its agenda along with Rabindranath Tagore who was its founder. The very urge that marked the nineteenth century Bengali academia to "collect" and "edit" the "folktales" of Bengal tried to conceal its own points of uneasiness where it refused to look at its classical past and searched for a folk past. I have tried to understand this in two ways; first, retrieving the classical Hindu literature was already a project 'stolen' by western Orientalist researchers like William Jones and Charles Wilkins, a point already made in connection to Warren Hastings and his administrative policy. It left the indigenous researchers struggling to cope with an "anxiety of influence". Secondly, while the classical tradition, the tradition 'invented' by the Orientalist researchers like Jones and Wilson

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identified India uncritically as a Hindu nation, the folk was a site where at least the presence of other religions in India could be acknowledged and finally co-opted and resolved in convenient ways. The very fact that they had to come in close physical contact with the lower-class Indians as part of their administrative job made them perceive the essential difference in their vocation from that of the Orientalists and Indologists. While people like Max Müller could study Indian language and literature in the University of their Home Countries, people like Temple and Crooke could not afford such an academic life and had to be in contact with the narrators - a murky ill-defined swarm of balladists and rural bards from whom they "extracted" their stories. The appropriation of the classical Indian literature by the western scholars was part of the colonial project of designing a "new" historiography for India- one that demonstrated a linear historical progression from a golden Hindu past, through a dark, barbaric medieval Muslim era to the enlightened British future. There are two points I would like to highlight here: (a) along with the classical literatures of India, folk was also a domain which became a point of inquiry for the colonial masters but perhaps with the exception that it was now the "lay-man" English colonial official rather than the academic Indologist/Orientalist scholars who were doing the job. (b) Nineteenth century Bengal saw an appropriation of the folk into the Bengali canon and the literary academia which soon became a specialized branch of study. Dineshchandra Sen's in the Foreword to his *Folk Literature of Bengal* asserts that, "An active research is going on in the field of old Bengali literature and new materials are being made available to us every year (xiv)." Sen explains that in the light of these discoveries he had to revise and rewrite his lectures delivered in1917, lectures that were published in the form of the book (xv). Therefore, it marked a clear break from the "casual" mode of collecting the folk and aspired to become that one domain in which the 'native intellectuals' could take a sort of an upper hand. The shift of emphasis is clear in Tagore's *Lokasahitya.* In its opening essay "Chhelebhulano Chhora" he recalls a time when he had compared the Bengali folk rhyme "Bristi pade tapur tupur" with Kalidas's *Meghduta* and evaluates the act as being amateur and attributes it to his lack of experience in art and nature. As a young lad, Tagore confesses, he was more preoccupied with the formal ornamentation of poetry and it was only with age and experience that he learnt to appreciate the wisdom of the common folk imbedded in our folk rhymes. It was a conscious political claim on his

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part where the indigenous modes of knowledge production and expression were reinforced by Tagore with new vigour.

Tagore in his Preface to *Thakumar Jhulhi* has talked about the need to "teach" modern mothers and grandmothers the indigenous tradition of storytelling so that they can make their children familiar with the stories of their own culture. And for a proper selection of stories they must turn to Dakshinaranjan's collection (xiii). Dakshinaranjan in writing the book was miming the voice of the rural storyteller walking the lines in between the practices of writing and the supposed oral transmission within a culturally more aristocratic mode of reading. While Dakshinaranjan was translating the voices of the rural female folk, Tagore urged the women of Bengal to translate the voice of Dakshinaranjan in re-producing the tales. In both cases, 'telling' is a female act while 'writing' is a male act. The experience of being colonized was inevitable for men who had to accept the superiority of the western power in the material organization of life. But women in the relative safety of home could still afford to stick to their cultural ethos. As an extension of this, women were thought to be the custodians of the storehouse of the stories which they would pass onto their children and grandchildren. Storytelling was a motherly function tied to the body of the woman where stories were believed to be as natural as milk and blood. Dakshinaranjan in *Thakurdadar Jhuli* has actually identified the female labour room or *antur ghor* of the rural Bengal as the birthplace of most fairytales. And if women were imagined as the tellers of the tales it follows they were not the collectors of them. Lal Behari begins his Preface by referring to a woman called Sambhu's mother who happened to be the best story-teller in his village. She was also a personal acquaintance of Dey. But he laments that "she had gone long, long ago, to that bourne from which no traveller returns, and her son Sambhu, too, had followed her thither (5)." The loss of the female voice is also the loss of an originary (or should we say primary) orality. What is left is tragically derivative and secondary as Sambhu, her son is dead too. The collector-ethnoghrapher is no close relative to the original narrators and this distancing is urgently required to make the oral world seem both lost and dead. Writing about a quarter of a century after Lal Behari, Dakshinaranjan shares much of the nostalgia in Thakumar Jhuli's 'Granthakarer Nibedon' (Author's Preface). He would effuse:

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> Maa used to tell us innumerable fairy-tales. - To claim that she knew those stories would be a mistake, fairy-tales were inseparably connected to her daily household chores; there wasn't a housewife who didn't know the fairy-tales, - not to know them was something to be ashamed of (Qtd. in Rangit Sengupta 12).

Women did never have a claim to knowledge which is objective and universal. All they could claim was a personal memory. What women produced can be listened to but was not serious enough to be read. The world of the fairytales was female, cyclical, lost to the present and therefore stood outside history. It is interesting to note that Lal Behari could ultimately find a narrator in a converted Christian woman. Whether conversion to the colonizer's religion provided her with a subject-position to speak is a question open to debate but the fact that at least Dey identifies her in person with a specific name tells of a different editorial position than that of the authorial claim attributed to Dakshinaranjan's narrators who were the "old women from the village" (*polli-gramer briddha*), an anonymous collective entity. While anonymity of the author is the traditional marker of "stories" orally transmitted, the erasure is also symptomatic of a strong sense of dissatisfaction on the author's part that the stories they offered were found to be grossly unfinished and invited editorial interventions. Romila Thapar speaking in the context of ancient India has remarked that as long as the culture was oral it would require professionally skilled memorizers; as soon as it was written down, the traditional bards would become less valuable and those with formal education would tend to take over the records (241). We are led to assume that something similar happened in nineteenth century Bengal as well, though perhaps with the important exception that women were never professional when it came to stories, neither in ancient nor in modern India.

To trace the complex interaction between the folk and the feminine authorial position we must again return to Tagore and his "Chhelebhulano Chhora". Here he discusses rhymes which are mostly associated with childish lullabies. Tagore identifies the "chelebhulono chhoras",' to be "meyeli chhoras" or feminine rhymes. It actually stereo-typifies the folk as feminine and naturally connects masculinity with the "serious" or "high" literature. He says:

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> There is a certain permanency in these rhymes. No accounts of their composers exist, and no one asks the date on which they were written. Because of this spontaneous universality they are age-old as if composed today, and remain fresh even if a thousand years old. If one thinks about it, one realizes that there is nothing as old as a child. Adults have been deeply influenced by time, place, and culture, but the child has remained the same for the last hundred thousand years… Rhymes, like children, are born naturally of the human mind (Qtd. in Suchismita Sen 6).

Here we get a clue to what might have driven the nineteenth century Bengali intelligentsia to take up the folk and children's literature as a potent site to contest the dominant colonial ideologies of the time within which a continuity of Indian life and experience could be demanded, unchanged by the colonial intervention. Both were feminine categories prophesying qualities like "naturalness", "spontaneity", and "unchangeability". The key idea that defined the folk was simplicity. But this simplicity does not attest a pure transcription, but introduces a carefully constructed version of the actual speech. A kind of naturalness or formlessness is chosen as specific rhetorical stance in the collected narratives. In an attempt to preserve this supposed simplicity and naturalness in the folk rhymes, Tagore distinguished them from both the essay and the epic. And he chose peculiarly gendered metaphors of comparison. While he described the rhymes as womanly he identified the essay or the prose as masculine. The former is like a house wife while the latter like a court of law. The two are also hierarchically arranged where things must go on according to the rules of the court and here, the rules of the essay. We cannot but remember that the rhymes find serious attention only when placed within the essays of Rabindranath Tagore. His distancing himself from the folk-literature was done as soon as his positioning as an old, status-conscious man prevented him from capturing the simplicity of the rhymes in his own writings (Sen 7). The loose ends of Tagore's proposition might lead us to understand why the Bengali *Bhadralok* intellectuals were interested in "collecting" the stories of the folk while resisting any easy identification with "them".

While Lalbehari and Dakshinaranjan's collections were meant to be read, the stories of mothers and grandmothers were meant to be listened to. Yet it was a story of an uneasy transition. We are looking at a clear reversal here, where the story no longer flows from the demands of the listener but from the urgency of the speaker; it also challenges the popular idea of orality preceding and originating the

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written mode of culture. Interestingly, while the stories of *Thakumar Jhulhi* are unequivocally identified as fairytale or roopkotha, Lalbehari Dey's collection continues to be called the *folktales of Bengal.* And Dinenchandra Sen, with all his critical appendages, does not for once account for the different currencies of the two words not even while recognizing the fact that the same story of Manimala' of *Thakumar jhuli* is called 'Fakirchand' in the *Folktales of Bengal*. It was a culture of cross referencing where without getting much troubled by the generic complexities contemporary writers cited each other. The culture thrived on something like a secondary orality - orality drawing sources from printed texts. A scholar like Jack Zipes who has been working for quite some time on the history and development of fairytales in Europe, has argued that both myth and folktales are oral genres, the fairytale however, is a literary genre. The production of a fairy tale, entails the shift from the oral to the written culture, a shift precisely initiated by the rise of literacy and with the invention of the printing press (10). Elizabeth Wanning Harries has also put forward a similar argument. In her much debated book *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy tale* she comments,

> We need begin by acknowledging that all fairy tales have a history, that they are anything but ageless and timeless…Though the early writers of fairy tales in Italy and France in the seventeenth century often claimed that they had been told (by their nurses or grandmothers, from peasant sources), they were usually following written model. The history of fairytales is not primarily a history of oral transmission but rather a history of print (1).

Nineteenth century Bengal was not only the seat of the first established vernacular press and the earliest Indian print and publishing industry but it was also a volatile site where collisions and negotiations on the boundaries between oral and print cultures resulted in ambivalent expressions. This is where Sumanta Banerjee's book *The Parlour and the Streets* has been a very useful source for me which talks about how, "The unconscious and unorganized development of a new folk culture in nineteenth century Calcutta stood in contrast with the elite culture which took shape through a deliberate cultivation of the tastes and manners of two civilizations-the contemporary western and the past Hindu" (10). What is positioning of the fairytales of the period, between these two cultural extremes? Was this genre now the property of the elite collector-ethnographer or of the assumed folk of the villages of East Bengal from whom the former claims to have brought the tales "as it is"? Interestingly the folk arts that indeed

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"came" to the nineteenth century Calcutta with their owners from the countryside of Bengal do not include the *roopkotha*, the Bengali word for fairytale, in Banerjee's catalogue. The *Patua, Panchali, Khemta, Kobiwal*, and the *Sang* - the major folk art forms mentioned in the book are performative in nature. And because of their performative value they were still communal in nature- bringing the communities together. The fairytales being reproduced/printed on pages, however, were meant for private consumption. A reading of the fairytales of colonial Bengal in the present times, compels us to negotiate with primarily two questions- how far the tales were products of the creative imagination of the rural folk and what role did the elite play in compiling them. It was within a new pluralistic cultural history that the folk received its new connotations from a multitude of sources. The oral was no longer the naïve and the primitive but it became a high-cultural event in which storytelling and tale writing went on simultaneously. Once again to borrow words from de Certeau, this was a milieu in which "orality insinuated itself into an endless tapestry of scriptural economy" (132)

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