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Adaptations are More than a Derivative Form: A Reading of Selected Adaptations in the Bengali Children's Periodical – *Sandesh*

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Abstract:

*This paper contends that early Bengali children's literature drew from English literary conventions while carving a distinct identity. It proposes that Bengali juvenile literature was distancing itself from its colonial origins and was shedding the 'civilising' intentions of the past. To substantiate the argument, the paper looks at a few adaptations published in one of the early Bengali children's periodicals, **Sandesh**.*

Keywords: adaptations, Bengali children's literature, derivative, periphery, readership

Introduction:

Early Bengali children's literature endeavoured to resonate with young readers by blending various features of English literature with indigenous cultural themes and storytelling traditions. It offered a diverse range of stories, characters, and settings that reflected the rich cultural heritage of India. Moreover, such writings played a crucial role in instilling a sense of identity and belonging among the native children. It empowered them to embrace their heritage and culture, besides fostering a love for reading and learning. The interplay between English literature and Indian culture resulted in the production of localised adaptations, radical appropriations, and subtle subversions of British genres. One of the primary reasons for this was the changing perceptions of Indian childhood. English literature, a key aspect of British education in India, was adapted into Bengali children's writing, shaping discussions on the upbringing and growth of native children. The prevailing notion of Bengali childhood among the Bengali intellectuals and their writings for children reflected the thoughts dominant among contemporary European thinkers/adults (Kumar, 1991). The influence of Romantic and Western liberal ideas was noticeable in their works and writings. While expressing their disappointment and concern regarding the absence of writings and periodicals for children in

Bengali, editors like Pramodacharan Sen of *Sakha* and Bhubanmohan Ray of *Saathi* were comparing the situation with the one existing in England, where a large number of periodicals for children were being regularly published. In fact, both *Balakbandhu*, edited by Keshabchandra Sen, and *Sandesh*, edited by the Ray family, are often thought to be modelled on the *Boys Own Paper*, the popular English periodical published in England. However, these adults/writers keen on publishing for children were not completely moulded by whatever was Western. They endeavoured to accept and promote those thoughts that could be easily accommodated within the existing native framework and reject all that was superfluous. They were against any uncritical imitation of Western ideas, and their disgust with such blind replication of Western manners was reflected in their farces and amusing tales (Raychaudhuri, 1999).

Upendrakishore Ray's *Tuntunir Boi*, *Khukumonir Chara* by Jogindranath Sarkar, and *ThakumarJhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar are examples of early Bengali children's works that might be classified as totally indigenous. Initially, however, the writers frequently borrowed from the West; possibly this was because there were few native texts intended solely for juvenile audiences. They infused these stories with local colour to make them appropriate for native young readers. In their hands stories like Cinderella became 'Panshurani Ila' and Rumpelstiltskin became 'Ramkhel Telok Singh'.

However, in the writings for children, the adults of the time did not expect or wish to encourage the juvenile readers to participate directly in the ongoing anti-British movement. The primary objective of these adults/writers was to make the young readers conscious of the idea of a 'nation in the making' so that they learned to love and respect their fellow countrymen. They wished to cultivate the values of patriotism and love for one's countrymen. Thus, although the genesis of Bengali children's literature and the notion of childhood were influenced by colonialism, it purposefully transcended the constraints of being a derivative form.

Analysis:

This paper contends that early Bengali children's literature drew from English literary conventions while carving a distinct identity. It proposes that Bengali juvenile literature was distancing itself from its colonial origins and was shedding the 'civilising' intentions of the past. To substantiate the argument, the paper looks at a few adaptations published in one of the early Bengali children's periodicals, *Sandesh*.

A close reading of some of the translations or adaptations would reveal that attempts were made to make young readers aware of the existence of myths and legends from across the world about the creation of the universe, destruction, and genealogies of heroes, kings, and sages. For instance, '*Norway Desher Puran*' begins with the lines, "Just as there are tales of gods and demons in our country, there are similar stories of such gods and demons in the religious texts of ancient

Norway and Sweden.” (1913). It narrates the story of creation and destruction in the Norwegian myths and tells the readers how Odin, or Woden, the king of heaven, had two sons, Tiu and Thor, and that Wednesday, Tuesday, and Thursday have been derived from the names of Woden and his two sons. Similarly, in ‘*Golposholpo*’, the narrator draws a parallel between Putana’s death when she tried to kill infant Krishna and the Greek myth of Juno’s failed attempt to kill her stepson Hercules. Such tales in *Sandesh* hint at how stories may have travelled from one culture to another and subsequently adapted to fit into the mould of the existing literary traditions of the recipient culture.

Some tales reveal the inhumanity of punishment or exile in various countries. One such tale is about Praskovia, whose father, Captain Luploff, was exiled to Siberia. At the outset, the narrator reminds the readers that,

“...just as prisoners are deported to the Andaman Islands, in Russia, prisoners are sent to Siberia. Usually, a prisoner is kept in chains and made to work in the mines. At times, the king exiles those who may not have committed any grave crimes but have, for some reason, enraged the king. However, such prisoners do not have to work like the others and are allowed to go into exile with their families, and the government bears some of their expenses. They may work on the farms or hunt to earn some extra money, but they are never allowed to leave the country and are always under police surveillance.” (1914)

In the story, Praskovia travels to St. Petersburg to meet and appeal to the Emperor to release her father, who had committed no crime. Besides informing the young readers about how Russian Emperors punished their subjects and exiled them, it also highlights the exemplary courage of the young girl Praskovia, who felt it was her duty to free her parents from bondage and exile. Since the writers aimed to inspire young readers to challenge what is wrong, oppressive, and unethical, Praskovia would have been an appropriate model for young readers.

A version of the Norwegian folklore ‘Why the Sea is Salty’ appeared as ‘*Sagar Keno Lona*’ (1913), which narrates the tale of King Frodi’s Mill-Grotti, which could grind whatever the one who turned it wished for. Frodi bought two maidservants, Fenja and Menja, daughters of a demon, and they were strong enough to turn the mill. Frodi asked them to grind gold and silver, and they did, and then he would not allow them to rest at all. To punish Frodi for his greed, the sisters sang the Lay of Grotti and wished for an attack by robbers while turning the Grotti. That night, robbers looted and plundered Frodi’s kingdom, killed him, and, while leaving, carried the Grotti on their ship. That night, the leader told the sisters to grind salt from the Grotti. Eventually, the overloaded ship sank, creating a terrible maelstrom in the sea, which according to the narrator, continues to blow even today. That day, the sea turned salty as the salt from the ship fell into the sea. The tale not only introduces the young readers to a legend of another country but is also didactic in

its intent, as greed is responsible for the deaths of Frodi and the robbers. Through the narrative, the writer informs the readers about a natural phenomenon, Maelstrom, thereby blending fiction with fact.

'Juju' (1915) is another story about African belief in a spirit called Juju. Beginning the piece with the existence of a similar concept of 'juju' (implying something frightening) in the native culture, the writer humorously clarifies that no one is sure of 'juju's' identity and no one has seen it either, but it exists in the imagination of the people. Then he goes on to narrate the origin of the African 'Juju' which means different kinds of magic (could be a talisman) to either ward off evil or instill fear in people. There is a specific mention of a Juju in a cave in the Takkum region of Africa. It was made by the mighty king of Takkum, who went inside the cave with all his kinsmen and subjects except those who were warriors of the kingdom. The mighty king of Takkum took a bold step to secure the future of his kingdom by delving deep into a cave with all his kinsmen and subjects, excluding the warriors. Concerned that his people had grown complacent due to a long spell of peace and prosperity, he sought to ensure the kingdom's protection in his absence. After years of digging the cave, the king entered the cave with his followers, leaving the soldiers with a crucial task. The soldiers were instructed to marry women from warrior clans and raise their children as warriors so that they could safeguard the kingdom of Takkum. He ordered them to shut the entry to the cave with boulders and not carry any food. It is believed that the spirits of those dead people still protect Takkum, and every night they light a fire, which is why enemies are frightened to cross those roads. The significance of this Juju, believed to be the spiritual protector of Takkum, is evident in the reverence and fear it commands. The nightly lighting of a fire by the spirits of the deceased individuals inside the cave is a powerful symbol of protection, deterring enemies from crossing the roads leading to Takkum. Even during the tumultuous times of the First World War, the Germans could not compel their African soldiers to traverse these sacred grounds, highlighting the deep-rooted respect and awe surrounding the King of Takkum's Juju. The story of the King of Takkum's Juju offers a captivating insight into the intersection of history, tradition, and modernity. It served as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting young readers to a distant geographical space (Africa) and the timeless struggle for protection and preservation.

Even though the adaptations remained close to the sources, the writers often mentioned the departures and similarities wherever possible. In an amusing piece, *'SurjerShaja'* (1914), the narrator expresses the kind of pain that the sun causes with its heat and says that only two people had the courage and power to punish the sun for its pranks! One was Hanuman, and the other was Maoui (a Maori). When Lakshman became a victim of Ravana's wrath, Hanuman began his search for curative herbs to revive Lakshman. During his journey, Hanuman noticed that the Sun was about to rise. He was perturbed as he wanted it to be prolonged. He knew Lakshman would die if he failed to

return with the life-restoring herbs before sunrise. Despite pleading with the Sun not to rise when it was still night, the Sun expressed its inability to comply with Hanuman's plea as it was afraid of Ravana's fury, and that it was Ravana who had commanded him to rise before dawn. Finding it difficult to persuade the Sun, Hanuman caught hold of the Sun and kept it with him till he found the herbs and offered them to Lakshman.

Maoui, on the other hand, was an accomplished magician who wished to control the sun, which was too hot for anyone to work in. So, he and his brothers knitted a thick rope and marched to the horizon to await the arrival of the Sun. They chained and thrashed the Sun as soon as they spotted him, and despite repeated protestations, they refused to free him. The sun is still tied, and the rope can be seen on cloudy days. People believe it is the sun's rays, but Maoui knows the reality. Similarly, the sage Jamadgni was irritated with the Sun for inflicting injury on his wife, who fainted due to the sun's heat. The Sun, gauging the repercussions, promptly provided him with an umbrella and sandals! Because no one had ever seen an umbrella or sandals before, the Sun persuaded the sage that those two items would protect him from the sun, and he succeeded in saving himself from the sage's anger.

By combining tales from the East and the West, the narrator ensured that the young readers appreciated that similar stories exist in different cultures. The piece, which begins with the story of Hanuman carrying the sun and concludes with the sun presenting a pair of sandals and an umbrella to the sage, explicates the fiction behind the sun's omnipotence in such stories. These instances suggest that the origin of the sun's rays defies logic and science (optics) and the fact that man, in reality, can challenge the sun's heat by using objects like umbrellas and sandals. There is a gradual shift in the narrative from irrationality to rationality, which enables the young readers to become pragmatic individuals and not remain entrapped in the supernatural aspects of myths and legends.

Conclusion:

The deliberate exposure of native children to English literature in colonial India may be read as an attempt to keep them on the peripheries of readership, as mere spectators and consumers of narratives in which they had little influence. However, adaptations like the ones above allowed them to break free from this marginalisation. The adaptations then emerged as powerful tools for helping native children navigate the complexities of a global world. By exposing them to diverse cultures and perspectives, these narratives enabled the children to broaden their horizons, free them from parochialism, develop empathy, and see themselves reflected in the stories they read. Thus, by creating a literary space where native children could confidently belong, these writers rescued the children from the margins of readership. Rather than simply aiming to "refine" native children, these adaptations empowered them instead.

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