Sanjay Sircar, trans., Abanindranath Tagore, and Gaganendranath Tagore, *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore's* **The Make-Believe Prince (Kheerer Putul);** *Gaganendranath Tagore's* **Toddy-Cat the Bold (Bhondaṛ Bahadur)**
New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2018. 372 pages, 10 illustrations. Paperback, ₹995.00. ISBN: 978-0199486755.

This remarkable volume is at once a contribution to colonial historiography and folk-lore studies; a set of richly annotated translations of two nineteenth-century Bengali-language "fantasy fictions"; a versatile meditation on—cum demonstration of—the art of translation; a Hobson-Jobson-style encyclopedia of (mainly Bengali) flora and fauna, culinary arts, and folkways; and a work of historical anthropology. While the language of the two translated tales is at times precious—and thereby faithful to the "Victorian" style of their Bengali authors—that of Sircar himself, in his lengthy intro-ductions and appendices, is extraordinarily rich and beautiful: even the meticulously detailed footnotes are beautifully written. Throughout, there is a lightness of touch that allows the author to playfully yet trenchantly critique ideologues from several intellectual traditions, as for example when he asks the self-referential question "Can the Bengali Christian speak?" (73, note 8).

Scions of the illustrious Tagore family (338), the authors of "The Make-Believe Prince (*Kheerer Putul*)" and "Toddy-Cat the Bold (*Bhondaṛ Bahadur*)" were deeply engaged in the late nineteenth-century sociocultural transformation often referred to as the "Bengal Renaissance." Limited to a small segment of the Bengali population, the *bhadralok* or "gentle folk" of socially privileged Kolkata society, this was an affir-mation of Hindu ideals combined with a growing awareness of a "South Asian Self-hood" (xv). The two "classic works of fantasy fiction in West Bengal" (xxiii) translated and commented upon by Sircar express those ideals and that awareness in very differ-ent ways. While the first is a "playful variation, *Spielform*, of a Bengali woman's ritual tale" (*brata kathā* [xviii]), the second is a Bengali-language "symbolic translation" (233) of Lewis Carroll's very British *Alice in Wonderland*.

As Sircar argues in his "Recasting Folklore" introduction to the first tale, folklore collection by Bengali *bhadralok* was a response to British folklore collection, a "part of a larger imperialist project to know and thus more effectively to control those [Indians] who were less developed and, in effect, primitive, ancient, superstitious, pre-modern people" (7). Yet, at the same time, one may discern parallels in *bhadralok* attitudes toward their sources: "[T]he colonized could have taken colonized methods both to know and to celebrate themselves . . . though then the matter of an urban elite celebrating itself through the culture of a rural non-elite needs to be considered" (12).

As Sircar notes, *Kheerer Putul* would have been viewed by late nineteenth-century folklorists as a Kunstmärchen (*rūp kathā*), a corrupt literary reworking of an "authentic" folktale—in this case, a form of AT tale type 459, "The Make-Believe Son (or Daughter)"—both because it was not a direct transcription of an oral telling and because it was specifically "retold for children" (18). And, in fact, Abanindranath appears to have crafted his story not only from folktales but also from a set of "folk nursery rhymes" (31), which Sircar also reproduces in full (130, 136–39, 143–45). This notwithstanding, Abanindranath's adaptation offers an opening onto Bengali religious lifeworlds of the period, which Sircar describes in some detail (42–49). To begin, much of the story is set at a *ṣaṣṭi talā* (29), the arboreal sanctuary of a childbirth goddess whose iconographic and mythological legacy extends back to the time of the *Mahābhārata*. As Sircar relates, the primary event of the local Bengali women's rites that inform this tale is, precisely, the recitation by a female elder of tales of "Shashti of the Forest" (*āraṇya ṣaṣṭi* [45]). In these rites, sweetmeats—sometimes in the form of the infant child to be nurtured, spared, or returned by her—are the principal offerings, and it is these that inform the Bengali title *Kheerer Putul*, the "fudge-textured doll [made] out of milk solids" (33).

As the story's title indicates, its plot revolves around a clever strategy, formulated by an elder "neglected queen" and a resourceful monkey, to persuade the king that that queen has been raising a prince, his son, in exile. Then, in order to produce the "make-believe prince," the monkey tricks Shashti into stealing a child-shaped sweetmeat he has left at her forest shrine, thereby compelling her to reciprocate by providing the queen with a real boy from her "kingdom of children." This she does, and the story ends with the king placing the little prince upon the throne, restoring the "neglected queen" to the palace at the expense of his younger, evil "beloved queen," and making the monkey minister of the kingdom. Sircar parses the relationship—between the "hortatory moral/worship-exhorting" ritual tale and its real-world references versus the "comic, irreverent" fairy tale with its "royal" tropes—with a synoptic table (40), which he follows with an account of the story's transformations: "We wish to regard the materials as a cluster of motifs inverted or arranged in different ways in the two genres: the bratakatha implies the perils of offending against Shashti's power, particularly her power over the lives (and deaths) of children; the rupkatha implies the possibility of turning that power to one's benefit, if one is clever enough to take advantage of the 'human'-like weakness that goes with it" (41).

Sircar supplements his analysis and translation of this tale with a richly detailed annotated bibliography that includes a motif summary of *Kheerer Putul*; Indian versions of AT 459; relevant puranic, *maṅgalkābya*, and *brata kathā* literature on the Bengali Shashti; *brata kathā* forms of AT 459; Iranian and Palestinian versions of AT 459; Bengali editions and dramatizations of *Kheerer Putul*; and translations of *Kheerer Putul* into other Indic languages as well as English, French, Swedish, and Spanish (152–71). Based on his survey of the folk-narrative motifs in Abanindranath's adaptation, Sircar concludes that it belongs to a "basic folktale type" that originated somewhere between the Middle East and North India (51–52).

Identified nearly immediately after its publication as "a book in the manner of Lewis Carroll" (256, note 2), Gaganendranath Tagore's *Bhondaṛ Bahadur* in many ways anticipates the "magical realism" of several contemporary Indian authors writing in the English medium. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* comes to mind, as do Arundhati

Roy's *God of Small Things* and stories by Kiran Desai. So, while it hews closely to Carroll's story line, characters, and literary devices, this is very much a Bengali work, and it is its Bengali specificities that Sircar muses over in his thoughtful and extensive introduction. His treatment of Gaganendranath's recreation of the "social world of the new Bengal dreamland," in which he unpacks the religious and caste relations of the various animal species (190–94), is particularly compelling. As in the case of his treatment of *Kheerer Putul*, Sircar's meticulous attention to detail is both remarkable and entertaining. Just as he did for the nature of the *kṣīr* used to shape the "make-believe prince" of that story (32–37) and for the botanical references in *Bhondaṛ Bahadur* (305–13), his discussion of the animal species of the *bhōdaṛ* of Gaganendranath's tale (235–51), which approaches the matter from multiple perspectives, is a masterful piece of lexicographical sleuthing. Although a subspecies of the "Asian palm civet" may be the most precise translation from a taxonomical viewpoint (313–21), Sircar chooses "toddy cat" in the end, demonstrating that translation is an art as opposed to a science.

This being said, I must take issue with Sircar's interpretations of certain of the religious references embedded in this tale, in which he forces many of the tale's motifs and supernatural figures into a Hindu mold, returning to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Bengali cults of Durga and Kali as primary sources of Gaganendranath's inspiration (207–17). While he correctly entertains the possibility that the figure of *jaṭe buṛi* (whose name he translates as the "Top-Knotted Old Woman") might be understood as a form of the fearsome Mahāyāna Buddhist form of Tara known as *ekajaṭī* ("Having a Single Topknot" [212–13]) in Sanskrit, in the end he likens her to Durga (214). By the same token, he identifies "Blue Mountain," the house of *jaṭe buṛi* situated "straight eastward" (280) with the entrance to Durga's abode in the Himalayas, located well to the northwest of Bengal (211). Located in the eastern state of Assam, Blue Mountain (Sanskrit *nīla parvata*) is the renowned abode of the tantric goddess Kamakhya, whose ancient "seat" (*pīṭh*) was shared by Hindu and Buddhist practitioners in the medieval period. Similarly, the winged horse of the story is, more than a "traditional folk-tale creature" (204), the animal form perennially taken by the Mahāyāna savior deity Avalokiteshvara. It should be recalled here that under Pala patronage, Buddhism remained the official religion of Bengal down into the twelfth century, later than in any other region of India, and that many features of Bengali "folk" traditions bear traces of a 1,500-year Buddhist presence in the northeastern part of the subcontinent. These, together with a number of tantric traditions that Sircar correctly identifies (299–300), were Gaganendranath's more likely sources.

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