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Tagore's *Lokashahitya*: The Oral Tradition in Bengali Children's Rhymes

Abstract

This article presents a translation of "Chhelebhulano Chharha," a well-known essay on Bengali children's rhymes by Rabindranath Tagore, and a discussion of the key ideas on oral composition discussed therein. Also presented is one of the earliest collections of Bengali children's rhymes. Among the important points raised by this essay is the notion that children's rhymes are products of the mental state that also gives rise to dreams. Tagore claims that the composition process of these rhymes is intimately connected with word association and with the innate language rhythms of Bengali.

Key words: folklore — children's rhymes — Bengali — oral composition — dream analysis

THIS article presents a translation and critical discussion of "Chhelebhulano Chharha," the first in a collection of essays on Bengali folklore entitled *Lokashahitya* [Folklore], published in 1907 by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).[1] Tagore's views on folklore composition as expressed in "Chhelebhulano Chharha" are significant from the perspective of contemporary folklore scholarship. There currently exists no other complete English translation.[2] The essay is followed by a small collection of *chharha*s (rhymes) compiled by Tagore.

The poems that Tagore refers to as *chhelebhulano chharha* can be heard throughout Bengal, and are familiar to most Bengali children. Mothers, grandmothers, and nursemaids frequently recite them to soothe crying children, to distract them into eating, to lull them asleep, and to coax and console them in myriad other ways. Recitation occasions vary from peaceful afternoons and evenings when the mother is alone with her child to stressful mornings when she is trying to calm a screaming toddler as she prepares the afternoon meal. The poems thus express a variety of emotions, ranging from happy musings on the child to the general melancholy and sadness that Bengali women often associate with their own social condition. These poems thus furnish a convenient window to the inner thoughts of their composers, and also alert us to the type of cultural influences that Bengali children are exposed to as they grow up.

Tagore's empathy with romantic nationalism in his adolescence prompted him to collect folklore as early as 1883 (MUKHOPADHYAY 1975, 40). With the founding of the Bangiya Shahitya Parishat (The Bengali Literary Academy) in 1894 Tagore found an official platform from which to urge other scholars to collect these "relics of national treasure" (MUKHOPADHYAY 1975, 66). And there was indeed a spurt of activity in the editing and publishing of folk songs, folktales, and nursery rhymes during this period.[3]

Lokashahitya was a pioneering effort in the context of the Bengali

literary scene, because at that time very few intellectuals were interested in examining the Bengali folk tradition. Most educated Bengalis were products of the age of the so-called Bengali renaissance. Although it is not clear when the term *renaissance* was used in the context of nineteenth-century Calcutta, many contemporary Bengali intellectuals, including the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) and the nationalist leader Bepin Chandra Pal (1858–1932), regarded the nineteenth century as a glorious period of rebirth when Bengali society revitalized itself as it came into contact with the West.

The period witnessed a two-sided process of acculturation, with representatives of Indian culture and European culture expanding and enriching their knowledge of each other (KOPF 1969, 5). British civil servants like Warren Hastings, William Jones, and others who served in India during the first part of the nineteenth century contributed significantly to the acculturation process. Unlike their successors, who did not mix with the Indians, these people learned Indian languages, studied classical traditions, and acted as interpreters of Indian civilization to the outside world. The Bengali intelligentsia, for their part, were exposed to the ideals of the European Enlightenment, acquiring through this a more secular perspective and a desire to raise the level of social consciousness. At the same time they were invigorated by their own newly rediscovered heritage. In this environment things like folklore and folk beliefs were viewed as superstitions, as faulty ideas that society needed to discard. Since, moreover, the Bengali renaissance was primarily an intellectual movement centered in and around Calcutta (a city founded by Western traders and later the seat of the British Raj), there was little involvement by the so-called "folk." With the rise of nationalism, however, attitudes started to change. In the field of Bengali literature, Tagore was instrumental in channeling much of the nationalistic fervor of his countrymen into appreciation for the older folk and epic traditions, including the medieval *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics and the *Baul* songs. Not only did Tagore appreciate the vital role of folklore in sustaining Bengali literature, he was also able to arouse the interest of other intellectuals like Dinesh Chandra Sen and Jogindranath Sarkar in collection and analysis.

Tagore was aware of the multiform quality of folklore and recognized it as the verbal creation of the community. This being the quality that sets folklore apart from written literature, Tagore emphasized the importance of preserving variants. This awareness is noteworthy for two reasons. First, viewed from the perspective of the popularity of the "urform" concept among the romantic folklorists of his day, Tagore's position is distinctively modern. In fact, the recognition that the shape

and nature of variants of a text depend on the context of the performance has revolutionized contemporary folklore scholarship (see VON SYDOW 1977, BOGATYREV and JACOBSEN 1929, and LORD 1960). Tagore says:

> The characteristic primitive and natural *rasa* [essence] associated with children's rhymes attracted me to their preservation. This sense of primitiveness may not be appealing to everyone, but certainly no one can doubt that it is our duty to collect these rhymes for posterity. They are our national treasures. These rhymes, long stored in our society's collective memory, echo the loving voices of our mothers and grandmothers and reflect the rhythms of our ancestors' childhood play. Because of the rapid changes in our social structures, however, many things both big and small are being lost. The time has therefore come for us to collect and preserve these timeless treasures of our national past.
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> These rhymes have been collected from different parts of the country. As a result, one will notice variations in the dialect in which the rhymes are recorded. One will also find more than one form of the same poem, none of which are to be discarded. The reason for this is that there exists no such thing as a correct or authentic version among the variants. The rhymes have changed form so much as they traveled through time and from mouth to mouth that it would be totally inappropriate to select one particular version as representative. The variations are part of their essence. This quality of constant change is natural to them. They are not dead, unchanging relics from the past, they are alive and are capable of movement. They can make themselves suit the needs of the place and the time. In order to show this state of constant flux, it is essential to preserve the different forms. (TAGORE 1989, 169)

Tagore's appreciation of the above-mentioned ideal of *rasa* forms the second noteworthy aspect of his regard for the multiform in folklore. This concept, which forms the basis of the literary theories of classical Sanskrit, assesses the value of literature, both written and oral, on the basis of its communicative powers. These, in turn, depend on the arousal of sympathetic emotions in the reader or audience. Thus the context or locus of a composition and its attendant connotations play a significant role in its success. One notices a similar stress on context and associative meaning in the works of contemporary scholars on oral tradition and performance. FOLEY, for example, writes:

> In the case of traditional oral narrative, the various words or units of utterance that constitute the idiom no longer defer simply to the meanings of the everyday language extrinsic to performance, but rather are charged with associative values particular to the event taking place. (1992, 283)

Although *Lokashahitya* is well known in Bengal, its ideas have not enjoyed the attention they deserve from folklorists. One possible reason for this is the excessively ornate quality of the prose. The overly figurative nature of Tagore's writing often gets in the way of clarity, and poses severe problems for translators. The problem is further heightened by the fact that Tagore approached the subject not as a scholar but as a typically romantic poet extolling the virtues of these simple, homely, oral compositions. Nevertheless, the ideas that are articulated in this essay need a fresh review because of their relevance to current scholarship on oral poetry.

LOKASHAHITYA

Nursery Rhymes

For some time now I have been busy collecting the rhymes that women in Bengal use to amuse children. These rhymes have a special significance for the study of our language and social history, but it is their natural, spontaneous poetic quality that has been of even greater value to me.

I am weary of introducing essays with discussions of what I like or dislike, because such comments are perceived as vain by expert critics. I would modestly suggest to such pundits, however, that if they carefully review the matter they will see that such comments are not exercises in vanity but rather just the opposite. Learned critics possess a balance beam: they judge all literature according to a fixed standard and canon that they have decided upon. This allows them to readily evaluate and put a stamp on any piece of writing that comes in front of them.

Unfortunately, we who do not have such a balance beam because of our lack of ability and experience must depend, when appraising literature, upon our own preferences. It would thus be sheer arrogance on our part to pass judgment on literature. Instead of judging what is good and what bad, people like us should satisfy ourselves with declaring what we like and dislike.

Now if someone were to ask me who is interested in such opinions, I would answer that people have always listened to views like this. Liter-

ary criticism is regarded as the criticism of written works, but in most cases it is literature that critiques life and human nature. No one blames a poet when he expresses the pleasure, pain, or wonder he feels toward nature, humanity, or events, and no one censures him when he attempts to arouse similar feelings in the minds of his readers utilizing his own sensitivity and literary acumen. The reader is then free to judge whether or not he agrees with the poet. Thus a critic who sets aside the techniques of critical assessment and presents the reader with his feelings on a piece of writing should not be taken to task.

This is especially true with these children's rhymes, which are intricately connected with my own life and emotion. It is impossible for me to separate the pleasures of my childhood memories from the enjoyment I derive from these rhymes. It is best to admit at the very beginning that my powers of discrimination do not suffice to let me say how much of this pleasure is rooted in my reminiscences and how much in eternal literary ideals.

The line, "The rain falls tip tap, the river gets flooded" (*bṛṣṭi paḍe ṭāpur ṭupur, nadi elo bān*), was like a magic chant for me, and the feelings aroused by this rhyme remain as intense as ever. Recalling these feelings, I can appreciate the appeal and charm of such rhymes in general, and I understand why these meaningless, spontaneous rhythms flow eternally through human memory, while so many epics, romances, essays, sermons, and other products of meticulous human effort are lost every day. 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 even 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. Eternal and unchanging, the child is born every day among us in human form, yet he remains just as fresh, sweet, and innocent as on the first day. The reason that children remain so universally pure and clean is that they are Nature's creations; adults, in contrast, are to a great extent the product of their own doings. Rhymes, like children, are born naturally of the human mind.

This claim is a significant one. Disconnected reflections on the outside world drift regularly across our minds without any conscious effort. They take on different shapes and forms, effortlessly jumping from one subject to another. Just as dust, pollen, smells, noises, leaves, and drops of moisture float aimlessly in the world around us, colors, smells, sounds,

fantasies, scattered thoughts, snatches of conversation, and discarded fragments of experience wander randomly through our minds.

When we concentrate our thoughts on a particular topic, however, these excess murmurs cease, these thoughts fly away, these fantasies shatter, and our mind and imagination start flowing in a single stream. That which we call the mind is so powerful that when it starts to work our inner and outer worlds come largely under its influence, so that our entire existence follows its directives. Just consider how little we perceive of the singing of the birds, the murmuring of the leaves, the rushing of the water, the bustling of human activity, and the sounds of all the other comings and goings, hustlings and stirrings, that constantly revolve around us. The main reason for this is that the human mind, like a master fisherman, captures what it can in its nets and leaves the rest alone. When the mind concentrates on looking, it does not listen; when it focuses on listening, it does not look; and when it thinks, it neither listens nor looks carefully. The mind is capable of easily clearing away most of the things it does not find useful. Aided by this power, the human mind has been able to hold its own within the diversity of the universe. The *Purānas*[4] tell us that certain great men of the past attained the power to die at will; similarly, the human mind is capable of making itself "blind" or "deaf" at will; indeed, it needs this power at every moment of its existence. But as a result the world often passes us by, leaving little impression on our consciousness. The mind accepts what is cognized and molds it according to its nature and needs, but pays little attention to the rest of the world, or even to the stirrings within itself.

The thoughts, sounds, and images that cross our minds when we are in a state of repose continuously change their shape and configuration, like clouds floating in the sky. If these aimless reflections could somehow be recorded on pieces of canvas, we would find some similarity between these pictures and our rhymes. These rhymes are simply reflections of our ever-changing inner mind; they are like the fluid shadows of clouds on the clear waters of a lake. This is why I say that rhymes are born spontaneously.

Before examining some of these rhymes for illustration, I have several apologies to make to my readers. First, how am I, an aged, somber, and status-conscious man, to capture the soft, loving, and simple voices that are eternally associated with the telling of these rhymes? I fear that readers will have to contribute that tender essence from their own childhood memories. With what magic can I bring back the love, the tunes, the memories of softly lit evenings with which these rhymes are forever linked? I can only hope that at least some of that charm has been cap-

tured in the following lines. Second, it may impinge on these homely, simple, and unadorned womanly rhymes to place them in the company of tight, rigorous, and sophisticated essays, somewhat like presenting a simple, naive housewife as a witness in a court of law. But there is no other choice; courts must run according to their rules, and essays must be written according to theirs. The associated pain is unavoidable.

Jamunābatī saraswatī kāl jamunār biye
Jamunā jāben çuaçurbādi kājitalā diye.
kājiphul kuḍote peye gelum mālā
hāt-jhumjhum pā-jhumjhum sitārāmer khelā
nāchoto sitārām kāṅkal beṅkiye
ālochal debo ṭapāl bhoriye.
ālochal khete khete galā holo kāṭh
hethāy to jal nei, tripurnir ghāt
tripurnir ghāṭe duṭo māch bheseche
ekṭi nilen guruṭhakur, ekṭi nilen ke?
tār bonke biye kori oḍphul de.
oḍphul kuḍote hoye gelo belā
tār bonke biye kori ṭhik dukṣur bela.

Jamunabati Saraswati, tomorrow is her wedding,
Jamuna will travel to her groom's through Kajitala.[5]
While picking *kaji* flowers, I found a garland,
Tinkling bells on hands and feet, it's Sitaram's game.
Dance dear Sitaram, bend your hips,
I'll feed you a *tapal*[6] full of rice.
The throat got parched while eating the rice,
There's no water here, go to Tripurni's ghat.
Two fish swim near the banks of Tripurni,
Guruthakur[7] took one of them, someone else took the other,
I marry his sister with oarflowers.
The day wore on while we picked oarflowers,
I marry his sister at high noon.

Even the most sympathetic critic will have to admit that there is absolutely no relationship between the respective thoughts in this rhyme. A series of pictures floats by, one after another. One thing is clear, though — there is no sense of discrimination. It is as if the guard at the gate of high poesy is enjoying a siesta in the sweet warmth of a fall afternoon, and truant thoughts, taking full advantage of the situation, are

freely coming and going without so much as a word of introduction or excuse. Sometimes they even skip over the poor guard's outstretched legs or gently nudge his ears as they gambol carefree inside the magnificent edifice of the human imagination. If the guard suddenly wakes up, though, these thoughts will not know where to run.

Whoever Jamunabati Saraswati is, it is clear that tomorrow is the big day of her wedding. It may not have been necessary at this point to mention the route she has to take through Kajitala on the way to her groom's house, but then, it is not entirely irrelevant either. However, there is absolutely no indication of any preparation for the occasion, and no one seems the least interested in it. The land of rhyme is such a place. There things happen, or do not happen, with such ease that no one ever worries. Thus, although Miss Jamunabati is to be married the next day, no one pays much attention; indeed, no one even asks why the subject came up. As a city dweller I am not familiar with *kaji* flowers, but I am certain that the upcoming wedding has no relation to the picking of such flowers. Furthermore, I am at a total loss to explain why suddenly, in the midst of all this confusion, Sitaram starts dancing with tinkling bells on his hands and feet. The lure of rice may have done the trick, but again, the same rice distracts us from Sitaram's performance and takes us to the banks of the Tripurni. Although it is not surprising to find two fish swimming near the banks of this river, it *is* surprising that our determined composer intends to marry the sister of the completely unknown man who claims the second fish for himself. Moreover, he ignores all civilized norms for a proper wedding by deciding to conclude the auspicious ceremony with oarflowers, and I am certain that the time of the event was not chosen on the basis of any calendar, old or new.

So much for poetic content. If the plot had been ours to develop, we would most certainly have made Jamunabati the sister of the unknown man at the end of the story, and would have concluded the high-noon ceremony between her and our composer with the help of the oarflowers. Such a turn of events would surely have brought greater aesthetic pleasure to the reader.

The mind of the child, however, is for the most part free of such conscious rigor. The child is affected independently by his own imagination and by the outside world; one arrives after the other. The fetters of the conscious mind are distressing for children; they find it difficult to pursue anything along a well-defined path of cause and effect. Children build castles in their minds just as they build sand castles by the shore. Sand lacks the ability to stick together, so the castles are not solid. But it is precisely this quality that makes sand suitable for the creations of

children. One can build a grand structure in minutes with fistfuls of sand, and if the architecture turns out not to be to one's liking one can easily correct the mistakes. The playful creator, when exhausted, can instantly level the structure with a kick and happily return home. When one builds by design, however, one is forced to follow the rules of building. Children are incapable of adhering to such rules — they have only recently arrived from the carefree, cheerful, and impulsive land of the gods. Unlike us, they are not yet used to long periods of servility. The child, building castles in the sand and forming rhyming images in his mind, imitates in this mortal world the actions of our Creator. That is why our scriptures often equate the actions of the Creator with the play of a child — both are products of carefree and joyous fancy.

The rhyme quoted above has no coherence, yet it does present images. The events at Kajitala, at Oarforest, and on the banks of Tripurni are as strange as those in a dream, but are just as real.

I ask the reader to bear with me when I claim that dreams are real. Many eminent philosophers have questioned the reality of the present world, but the same skeptics have been unable to doubt the reality of dreams. "There is no such thing as reality," they have said. So what is there? The answer is dreams. Thus you can see that though the actuality of this world can be denied with the help of sophisticated arguments, it is not so easy to deny the reality of dreams. Here I refer not only to daydreams or conscious flights of imagination; my point is equally valid for unconscious dreams during sleep. It is absolutely impossible for even the most committed skeptic to doubt his own dreams while he is dreaming them himself. People who continually doubt even the simplest of truths while awake willingly accept the reality of dreams while asleep. Thus a prime quality associated with truth — believability — is present to an unequaled extent in dreams.

The reader will realize from the above that the world of dreams is far more real to a fanciful and imaginative child than the real world is to an adult. That is why, while we adults sometimes reject truths as improbable, children easily accept the impossible as true.

bṛṣṭi paḍe ṭāpur ṭupur, nadi elo bān
çibuṭhakurer biye holo, tin kanye dān
ek kanye rṅādhen bāḍen, ek kanye khān
ek kanye nā kheye bāper bāḍi jān.

The rain falls tip tap, the river gets flooded.
Shivuthakur weds on such a day,

Three maidens are given away.
The first maiden cooks and cleans,
The second one just feeds,
The third one returns to her parents without eating anything.

When I hear this rhyme now I cannot but admire the wisdom of the second of Shivuthakur's three brides. But there was a time when I did not possess such shrewd powers of character analysis. These few lines were like the classic epic *Meghadūta*[8] to me at that time. I could vividly see a majestic, heaving river rushing downstream on a dark and stormy day. I could also see a few small boats moored by the bank and the three new brides of our Shivuthakur busy preparing the evening meal. To tell you the truth, I was quite moved by the charming life of this man. Even my concerns for the temperamental third maiden and her brisk retreat to her parents' home could not mar the beauty of this image. An inexperienced young lad, I could not comprehend that in these lines the disastrous, heartrending end of Shivuthakur's married life was being portrayed. But, as I have already said, at that age I was busier fashioning images than analyzing human nature. Only now do I realize that the unfortunate Shivuthakur did not take his third bride's desertion in the same blissful spirit that I did.

Sometimes I wonder about this Shivuthakur. Perhaps someone of that name really existed. It is possible that a fragment of some forgotten history survives in these lines. Other rhymes may contain other fragments of the same man's life story.

e pār gangā, o pār gangā
madhyakhāne car
tāri madhye bose āche çiv sadāgar
çiv gelo çuaçurbāḍi, boste dilo pṅiḍe,
jalpān korte dilo çālidhāner cṅiḍe,
çālidhāner cṅiḍe noy re
binnidhāner khoi
moṭā moṭā sabri kalā, kāgmāri doi.

Ganga on this side, Ganga on the other,
A piece of land lies in between,
Shiv Sadagar remains seated in the middle.
He went to his in-laws' house,
They gave him a seat to sit,
Offered him a snack of *shalirice chira* [rice flakes].

It was not *shalirice chira* silly,
It was only *binnirice khoi* [puffed rice],
Along with some big delicious bananas
and curd from Kagmari.

From the description I suspect that Shivuthakur and Shiv Sadagar are the same person. Both are quite conscientious in their marital duties and perhaps rather mindful of their eating habits. One also has to admire Shiv Sadagar's choice of a small island in the middle of the Ganga as the place to spend his newly wedded life.

The careful reader will notice that *shalirice chira* is mistakenly mentioned at first as a snack appropriate for Shiv Sadagar, but that the error is quickly rectified and *binnirice khoi* identified as the snack of choice, as if there can be no excuse for having misrepresented such an important incident. It must be admitted, though, that this substitution does not greatly improve the quality of the food, nor the in-law's reputation for hospitality. Perhaps our composer was more concerned with presenting the truth than with anything else. But that does not appear likely either! Could this be like a dream, with the *shalirice chira* having somehow changed itself into *binnirice khoi* between one glance and the next? Who can say that Shivuthakur did not similarly transform himself into Shiv Sadagar?

We are told that there are fragments of rock between Mars and Jupiter; some maintain that these are the broken bits of an entire planet. To me these children's rhymes are like similar fragments of some erstwhile existence. Many broken bits of ancient lives and memories are scattered amongst them, and no archeologist can ever put them back together again. Only our imagination can sometimes capture the essence of those distant, lost lives.

A child's mind, however, is not particularly interested in reconstructing such historical entities. The child lives in the present, and that is what is glorious and important to him. All he cares about are concrete pictures; he does not wish to blur them with emotional tears. Notice how a series of images floats across the following passage, like a flock of birds. Each and every picture is impressed upon the child's mind separately, but deeply.

noṭon noṭon pāirāguli jhṅoṭon bṅedheche
baḍo saheber bibiguli nāite eseche
dui pāre dui rui kātlā bhese uṭheche
dādār hāte kalam chilo chṅuḍe mereche

o pāreṭe duṭi meye nāite nebeche
jhunujhunu culguli jhāḍte legeche
ke rekheche, ke rekheche? dādā rekheche[9]
āj dādār ḍhelāphelā, kāl dādār be
dādā jābe konkhān de? bakultalā de
bakulphul kuḍote kuḍote peye gelum mālā
rāmdhanuke bāddi bāje, sitānāther khelā
sitānath bale re bhāi, cālkaḍāi khābo
cālkāḍāi khete khete galā holo kaṭh
hethā hothā jal pābo citpurer māṭh
citpurer māṭheṭe bāli cik cik kare
sonāmukhe rod nege rakta pheṭe paḍe

The white pigeons strut their feathers
While the ladies come to bathe in the river.
Two carps swim near the surface,
Brother had a pen which he threw at them.
Two girls stepped into the water,
Their bangles tinkle in the wind.
Who had kept it? Must be my brother.
Today's brother's bachelor's day,
Tomorrow's his wedding.
What route is he going to take? He'll travel through Bakultala.
I found a garland while picking *bakul* flowers.
Ramdhanuk's drum beats on
As Sitanath continues reveling.
Sitanath says, I want to eat some *chalkarai* [roasted beans] —
Too much of it parched my throat.
Wandered around here and there, came to the Chitpur field.
The sands shimmer in the midday sun,
The pretty face looks bloodshot in the heat.

None of the above pictures captures us for long, nor can we cling to them for long. The quick-flowing images of strutting white pigeons, approaching ladies, fish swimming near the bank, girls bathing on the other side, a brother's impending wedding, Sitanath's frolicking in time to Ramdhanuk's drum, a charming face crimson at midday on a lonely sandy field — all of these pictures have a dream-like quality. The distant imagery of two girls emerging from the water, the faint tinkling of their bangles audible from this shore, are as real as a dream, and like dreams they do not follow any planned design.

The reader must remember at this point that one cannot deliberately create a dream. The rhymes above may have been written effortlessly under the impulse of carefree fancy, but such a sense of the carefree cannot be consciously captured. We have conditioned ourselves to conscious and directed effort, and thus simple and natural things have become terribly difficult. A mood of anxious stress shadows all our efforts even when totally uncalled for. The moment such feelings make their presence felt, all carefree impulses and fancies congeal and lose their freedom to fly. That is why I maintain that those who are able to compose children's rhymes do it naturally, while those who have to make the least bit of effort find the task impossible. The simplest things are actually the hardest to accomplish — that is the prime quality of simplicity.

The reader must have also noticed that our first rhyme has somehow managed to merge itself with this one. Rhymes, like dreams or passing clouds, continuously melt into one another, and no critic blames anyone of plagiarism or distortion of thoughts. These rhymes are like wisps of clouds in the vast expanse of our mind, and there is no way to delineate limits or boundaries between them. Rules or regulations are totally out of place here. Notice the next set of rhymes:

o pāre janti gāchṭi, janti baḍo phale
go jantir māthā kheye prān kemon kare
prān kare hāidhāi, galā holo kāṭh
katakṣhaṇe jābo re bhāi haragaurir māṭh?
haragaurir māṭhe re bhāi pākā pākā pān
pān kinlām, cūn kinlām, nanad bhāje khelām
ekṭi pān hārāle dādāke bole dilām.
dādā, dādā ḍāk chāḍi, dādā nāiko bāḍi,
subal, subal ḍāk chāḍi, subal āche bāḍi.
āj subaler adhibās, kāl subaler biye[10]
subal ke niye jābo dignagar diye.
dignagarer meyeguli nāite boseche
moṭā moṭā culguli go pete boseche
cikan cikan culguli jhāḍte negeche
hāte tāder debçṅākha megh negeche
galāy tāder takti mālā, rakta chuṭeche
paraṇe tār ḍure çāḍi ghure paḍeche
dui dike dui kātlā māch bhese uṭheche
ekṭi nilen guruṭhakur, ekṭi nilen ṭiye
ṭiyer mār biye
nāl gāmchā diye

açvather pātā dhane
gouri beṭi kane
nakā beṭā bar
ḍhyam kuḍ kūḍ bāddi bāje, caḍakdāngāy ghar.

The Janti tree on the other side is full of fruit.
I ate too much fruit, and now I feel ill at ease —
My throat is parched, I am miserable,
When do we go to the field of Haragauri?
Haragauri's field is covered with ripe paddy.
Bought some lime and *pan* [betel leaves], shared it with my sister-in-law,
Reported to my brother when a *pan* got lost.
Called my brother a few times, he was not at home,
Called Subal a few times, Subal was at home.
Today is Subal's bachelor's day, tomorrow is his wedding,
We shall take him through Dignagar.
The girls at Dignagar are busy washing themselves,
Their thick black tresses drape them.
They are busy drying their glistening hair,
Their conch bangles are as white as the clouds.
Their red *takti* [coral] necklaces are blood red,
Striped saris drape their slim figures.
Two big fish swim close to the bank,
Guruthakur took one of them, the other was claimed by the parakeet,
It's the parakeet's mom's wedding with a red handkerchief
And fig leaves.
The bride's name is Gouri,
The groom is our Noka.
The drum rolls on, their home is in Charakdanga.

Attempts to get a realistic picture from these fragments will lead us nowhere. In the rhyme on page 8, above, the frolicking boy Sitaram, thirsty from eating too much rice, brings us to the Tripurni's bank. A later rhyme describes how Sitanath ended up in the field of Chitpur in search of water, thirsty from munching on *chalkarai*. The rhyme immediately above depicts how a poor girl and her spiteful sister-in-law went to the field of Haragauri after injudiciously consuming some wild berries, and how the latter searches up and down the village for her brother to report his wife's momentary carelessness.

Such is the degree of connection between these three rhymes. The incidents in the individual rhymes are also rather weakly linked. And it is quite clear that most of the descriptions are products of fanciful imaginations. Fabrications are usually presented with an excess of explanation in an attempt to make them appear plausible, but there is no such effort here. The events described in the rhymes are neither true nor false — they are completely beyond any such distinctions. Notice the mention of Subal's wedding. Though not a particularly unlikely event, one does wonder why it is introduced at this point.

> Called my brother a few times, he was not at home,
> Called Subal a few times, Subal was at home.
> Today is Subal's bachelor's day, tomorrow is his wedding.

As soon as the name Subal appears the rhyme takes control, and Subal's wedding is settled in an instant.[11] But this topic does not tarry long either: soon the long-haired maidens of Dignagar capture our attention. This is precisely what happens in a dream. Images jump from one to another on a chain of similar-sounding words or trivial thoughts. Images emerge for a fleeting moment, then dissolve only to reappear as something totally different in the next. No one expresses any concern about the probability of these events. They live for no more than an instant before dissolving into the next portrait. Just as a particular picture is nonexistent until the moment of its birth, so it removes itself, instantly and effortlessly, from the realm of possibility following the rhythms of word association. Thus even if Subal's impending wedding is not so improbable, readers would have to agree that the wedding of a parakeet's mother with the aid of a red handkerchief is totally out of the question in this world of ours. But rigorous reasoning like this is absolutely useless to those interested only in creating and visualizing word-pictures according to the natural cadence of language.

This is all the more so with children, whose imaginative powers are far more acute than those of adults. Earlier I referred to the divine quality of the child's impulsive creativity. We grown-ups can never create as easily as children. Think how difficult it would be for an adult to arouse feelings of love and nurture toward a doll of knotted rag and treat it like a human child. For us to imagine something as human we need to make it resemble the human form as closely as possible — our weak imaginations bridle at the minutest deviation from reality. Adults are completely controlled by the rules of the material world; we are unable to imagine things without the help of our visual impressions. Children, however, are

capable of letting their fancy take wing at the slightest hint from their eyes, their natural creativity making up for all shortcomings. That is why they can so easily love as human a mere piece of rag.

It must be pointed out, too, that the appeal of these images is not limited to children. They move a hard-headed adult just as deeply; in fact, the descriptions are so crisp that they instantly bring visions to even the most skeptical of eyes. They are like pencil sketches in which a few strokes suggest an entire picture. Just as a matchstick can produce a flame in an instant, a single word can immediately evoke an image. Although not the work of a patient craftsman, a description like "Wandered around here and there, came to the Chitpur field; The sands shimmer in the midday sun" instantly transports us to a wide and fallow sandy field on a hot, dry summer afternoon. Similarly, "Striped saris drape their slim figures" is a quite accurate depiction of the way the folds of a flowing sari, like currents in a tiny whirlpool, adorn a charming figure. A variant says, "The striped sari flows around her," a not unattractive portrayal either. Another rhyme goes:

ay ghum ay ghum bāgdipāḍā diye
bāgdider chele ghumoi jāl muḍi diye

Come sleep, O come sleep to the Bagdi[12] village.
Their boy sleeps, cuddling up with a fishnet.

The reader can instantly visualize the Bagdi child fast asleep in a corner, cuddled up with a fishnet. Again, note the following rhyme:

āy re āy cheler del māch dharte jāi
mācher kṅaṭā pāye phuṭlo dolāy cepe jāi.
dolāy āche cha-paṇ kāḍi gunte gunte jāi
e nadir jalṭuku ṭalmal kare,
e nadir dhare re bhāi bāli jhurjhur kare
cṅād mukhete rod legeche rakta pheṭe paḍe

Come on boys, let us go fishing.
A fish bone pricked my feet,
So let's hop on a ride and count our coins as we go.
The water near this bank is filled to the brim,
The sand on this bank crumbles down,
The pretty face is flushed in the midday sun.

Even if the reader dismisses the first three lines as inconsequential, it would be hard for him to deny the picturesque yet concise nature of the second three lines' description of a swollen river with crumbling sand banks.

There is another category of rhymes that manages in a few spare lines to portray an entire way of life. Sometimes the mention of an apparently trivial detail can evoke an image of the Bengali village that instantly touches our hearts. Such trivial details do not easily find their way into the high-flowing descriptions of stylish prose. And any attempt to put them there would transform them into something these homely rhymes are not. Look, for example, at the simple beauty of the following lines:

dādā go dādā, çahare jāo
tin ṭākā kare māine pāo.
dādār galāy tulsimālā,
bau barane candrakalā
hei dādā tor pāye paḍi
bau ene dāo khelā kari

Dear brother, a city traveler,
You earn a salary of three rupees.
I place a *tulsi* [basil] garland on your neck,
How fine a groom will you make.
Dear brother, I fall on your feet,
Bring home a wife, so that I can play with her.

The brother does not earn much, but to his younger sister it is a princely sum indeed. Citing his salary, she implores him to bring home a playmate for her. The girl also knows how to tease him into a promise, softening him up with references to his manly charm. I suspect that the brother readily obliged his sister despite the expense involved in granting her wish, and I am sure he did not do so simply to fulfill his brotherly obligations.

ulu ulu mādārer phul
bar āsche kato dūr?
bar āsche bāghnāpāḍa —
baḍo bau go rānnā caḍā
choto bau go jalke jā
jaler madhye nyakājokā
phul phuṭeche cākā cākā

phuler baraṇ kaḍi
nateçāker baḍi

Get ready, rejoice, *madar* flowers,
The groom is on his way,
How far is he from here?
Is he at Baghnapara?
O dear sister, get on with your cooking,
You, young maiden, go fetch some water.
Weeds float in the water,
Flowers bloom in there,
They are white as shells.
A dish of kale and crumbs.

The image of busy, curious village women keenly awaiting the arrival of a groom is accurately captured by this rhyme, and a Bengali village with its rustic wooden fences and muddy walkways along the ponds appears magically before our eyes. Almost every such rhyme gives us a glimpse of a way of life, reminding us of long-forgotten rustic tunes or leading us into the plain but charming households of Bengali villagers.

Sometimes the pictures drawn in these rhymes are quite fanciful, but I see no problem with that. Fantasy, in fact, may be the best thing. We in our lack of awareness need an unconventional approach. To children there is nothing outlandish, since in their world everything is possible. No child has run to the last limits of reality and come back empty-handed. In his logic, if one thing is possible then anything is possible. If one thing is not considered strange, then why should another thing be? A child says, "I accept the idea of a one-headed person without question since I see one in front of me. I also do not question the reality of a two-headed person because I can easily see such a being in my mind. A headless man is just as real to me because he is perfectly imaginable."

There is an interesting story in this context. A man said to his friends, "I saw a curious thing on my way here. A person got beheaded in a fight, but he still walked ten steps." His friends said, "What? He actually took ten steps?" There was a woman in the group, however, who said, "I don't find it strange that he took ten steps. What is strange is the fact that he managed to take the first step!"[13] Likewise, the first act of creation is what is curious; that is the biggest miracle, not that other marvelous things follow. The child has yet to lose his fascination with this first marvel. With his first glimpse of the world he starts to wonder about everything around him — that is why he is quite willing to accept

the reality of anything. Thus in the world of rhymes there is no conflict between the land of the real and the land of the unreal.

āy re āy ṭiye, nāye bharā diye
nā niye gelo boyāl māche
tāi nā dekhe bhṅodoḍ nāche
o re bhṅodoḍ phire cā
khokār nācan dekhe jā

Come, dear Parakeet,
Come in a sailboat.
The carp took the boat,
The beaver frolicked at the sight.
Beaver, beaver look around,
See my child's delight.

No child can claim to have seen at any time in his life a parakeet sailing a boat. Nor can the child's father. But the very eccentricity of this portrait is its main attraction. What fun it would be to see an angry parakeet flutter and scream, flapping its colorful wings as a big fat carp suddenly appeared from under the water to claim the bird's boat for himself. We share the infectious merriment of the beaver at the sight of the unfortunate bird's treatment by the rude fish, and cannot but enjoy the child's mirth at this highly entertaining melee. Just as a catchy tune can make us feel like bursting into song, so these rhymes inspire us to imagine the scenes for ourselves. Yet rare is the artist capable of capturing the innocent, delightful, and charming mood of these images.

khokā jābe māch dharte kṣīr nadīr kule
chip niye gelo kolā byānge, māch niye gelo cile.
khokā bole pākhiti kon bile care?
khokā bole ḍāk dile uḍe ese paḍe.

Khoka[14] will go fishing in the Cream River.
A frog snatched away his rod, a kite took his fish.
By which lake does my Khoka bird live?
He flies home to me as I call Khoka, Khoka!

We immediately feel like picturing on canvas the details of Khoka's perilous fishing expedition, although we have to admit that we are not as familiar as he is with the Cream River. It is charming to imagine the little

boy waiting patiently for a fish to nibble at the bait at the end of a rod four times his length. It is equally enjoyable to picture the consternation on his innocent, anxious face as he attempts to pull the fishing rod from the clutches of an ungainly, beady-eyed frog, while a big kite swoops down and snatches away his fish.

Khoka's depiction as a bird is also quite beguiling. I can imagine a huge lake, the other shore hazy in the distance. On this bank, where the shallow water laps at a mossy rock surrounded by long stalks of grass, our Khoka, in the company of a few cranes and storks, calmly waits on one leg for an unsuspecting fish. Nearby I see a small cottage standing by a rice paddy ripe for harvest. Leaning against the wooden fence of the cottage is an anxious woman calling for her son in the fading twilight of a fall evening.

Astronomers tell us that when they look into outer space they can see areas where gases seem to be gathering to give birth to new galaxies. One detects similar scattered and half-formed masses of poetry in the world of rhymes. There is nothing complex about these accumulations of imagery — like the fluid state of infant, newly formed planets, these poems have yet to acquire their permanent forms. Let me quote one:

jādu, eto baḍa ranga, jādu eto baḍa ranga
"cār kālo dekhāte pāro, jābo tomār sanga."
"kāk kālo, kokil kālo, kālo phinger beç
tāhār adhik kālo kanyā tomār māthār keç."

jādu, eto baḍa ranga, jādu eto baḍa ranga
"cār dhalo dekhāte pāro, jābo tomār sanga"
"bak dhalo, bastra dhalo, dhalo rājhaṁsa,"
"tāhār adhik dhalo kanye, tomār hāter çaṁkha."

jādu, eto baḍa ranga, jādu eto baḍa ranga
"cār rāṁga dekhāte pāro, jābo tomār sanga"
"jabā raṇgā, karabi raṇgā, rāṁgā kusumphul,
tāhār adhik rāṁgā kanye, tomār māthār siṁdūr."

jādu, eto baḍa ranga, jādu eto baḍa ranga
"cār tito dekhāte pāro, jābo tomār sanga"
"nīm tito, nisunde tito, tito mākāl phal,
tāhār adhik tito kanye, bon satiner ghar."

jādu, eto baḍa ranga, jādu eto baḍa ranga

"cār him dekhāte pāro jābo tomār sanga"
"him jal, him sthal, him çītalpāti,
tāhār adhik him kanye, tomār buker chāti."

"This is great fun, dear, this is great fun,
Show me four blacks and I will go along with you."
"Crow's black, cuckoo is black, black are swallow tails,
But the blackest of all, dear maiden, are your long black tresses."

"This is great fun, dear, this is great fun,
Show me four whites, and I will go along with you."
"Storks are white, cotton is white, swan is white too,
But the whitest of all, dear maiden, are your shell bangles."

"This is great fun, dear, this is great fun,
Show me four reds, and I will go along with you."
"Rose is red, oleander is red, *kusum* flower is red too,
But nothing is more red, dear maiden, than your hair's red *sindur* [vermilion]."

"This is great fun, dear, this is great fun,
Show me four bitters and I will go along with you."
"*Neem* is bitter, *nisunda* is bitter, bitter is *makal* fruit,
But the bitterest of all, dear maiden, is living with one's co-wife."

"This is great fun, dear, this is great fun,
Show me four colds and I will go along with you."
"Water is cold, ground is cold, the mattress is cold too.
But the coldest of all, dear maiden, is your heart."

Poets have sung the praises of women in every language and every age, but the simple, unaffected mood that is captured above is rarely encountered in high literature. The unconscious irony of the lines is intriguing. Compared to the tasks demanded of the suitors of Sitā and Draupadī,[15] those requested of the lad courting our simple girl are quite easy. Lucky is the man who has only to name four examples of things black, white, red, and sweet[16] from the vast array of things in the world in order to demonstrate his willingness. Men have it easy in these, the last days of the Kali Yuga.[17] No longer are they required to pass tests of manly valor to claim their women, such as stringing Śiva's bow or demonstrating great feats of archery. Instead they demand fat dowries from their fa-

thers-in-law, not the least bit ashamed of such unmanly actions. I much prefer the simple test that the hero of our small poem has to take to win his bride. Although the reader is left in the dark about the outcome, I suspect that our hero must have passed with distinction. His answers were clearly quite satisfactory to the examiner, and I am sure they caused him no difficulty. The test seems to have been almost like an open-book exam, but if it satisfied the examiner then it is not for me to complain.

The maiden starts off by saying, "This is great fun, dear, this is great fun." It is clear that the test has already started, and that the examiner, pleased with the earlier answers, is keen to prolong the test. There seems nothing more pleasant than this. If the composition of this rhyme had been entrusted to us, we almost certainly would not have started off in the middle; we would have been tempted instead to begin with a grand and eloquent introduction. First we would have described an examination hall; it may not have resembled the University Senate Hall, but perhaps the Eden Gardens.[18] We would have further improved the romantic ambiance by adding moonlight, a gentle breeze, and the songs of nightingales. I suspect, however, that while such arrangements might have increased the grandeur of the occasion, they would have failed to capture the charm of that simple innocent girl whose hair was darker than swallow feathers, whose bangles were whiter than swans, whose vermilion at the parting was brighter than *kusum* flowers, whose embrace was sweeter than the smile of a child, and whose love was more refreshing than flowing water. A girl so moved by the simple praise of the poet that she was willing to give herself to him would almost certainly have escaped the fetters of our ornate and eloquent composition.

We could, if we wanted, polish and rework such rhymes to ready them for publication. We could also read into them somber moral rules and inscrutable philosophical observations. If nothing else we could certainly make them into vehicles of social awareness and modern education. If, for example, we had wished to invite the moon into our civilized company, would we have tempted him with the simple things described in the following rhyme?

āy āy cṅādmāmā, ṭī diye jā
cṅāder kapāle cṅād, ṭī diye jā.
māch kuṭle muḍo debo,
dhān bhānle kṅuḍo debo,
kālo garur dudh debo,
dudh khābār bāṭi debo,
cṅāder kapāle cṅād ṭī diye jā.

Come, come, Uncle Moon, come adorn,
Come, dear, and adorn the forehead of my darling baby.
I will save you the fish head when I prepare the fish,
I will save you some grains when I husk the paddy,
I will save you some milk from our black cow,
I will save you a bowl to drink from,
Come, dear Moon, and adorn my darling.

What sort of moon is being described here? This is the homely moon seen from a Bengali cottage, the familiar Uncle Moon of all Bengali children. This is the moon that glimpses the delight of playful naked babies in the courtyards of village huts through gaps in the leaves of wind-blown bamboos. This moon is the intimate relative of all Bengali families. How, otherwise, could anyone dare to tempt the hero of the night sky, the love-object of the stars and the keeper of the divine ambrosia,[19] with such inconsequential things as fish heads, rice grains, and warm milk? Others might have tempted him with the fragrance and honey of flowers and the songs of nightingales, or with rarer things like sweet dreams, the bliss of love, the longing of the heart, or the innocence of new brides. But the moon would have stayed right where it was.

The rhyme-makers, though, do not tempt the moon with empty promises. To them it is not impossible that the moon might come down to earth and join in the children's play. They are not such cynics. They do not get swayed by the passion of grand poesy, and they do not promise the moon anything they do not themselves possess. Meanwhile, the moon, hearing the innocent calls of the Bengali village households, smiles without committing himself to anything. He even gives the impression that someday, on his way to the eastern horizon, he might make a detour and appear grinning at the doorstep.

I have already mentioned that these rhymes seem like pieces of a lost world. They are filled with the fragments of vanished human emotions. Just as the footprints of prehistoric birds on the shores of ancient seas are seen as fossils with their forms intact, so long-forgotten smiles and tears, and the sadness they contain, are preserved in these rhymes. Age-old human emotions float by on these rhymes, acquiring new life as they touch the feelings of the living and finding nourishment in our tears.

"o pārete kālo raṅg
bṛṣṭi paḍe jham jham
e pārete lankā gachṭi raṅga ṭukṭuk kare
guṇabati bhāi āmār man keman kare."

"e māsṭa thāk didi, kṅede kakiye
o māsete niye jābo pālki sājiye."
"hāḍ halo bhājā bhājā, mās halo daḍi"
"āy re āy nadīr jale jhṅāp diye paḍi."

"The sky grows dark on the other side,
The rain pours heavily.
The pepper tree is filled with red fruits on this shore,
Sweet little brother dear, I feel heartsick."
"Please somehow stay for another month, dear sister,
I will definitely bring you back home next month."
"The inner core of my body burns in pain."
"Come, O come to the river and drown yourself in the water."

Who knows the identity of the young bride who uttered the above lines in the moment of her deepest sorrow and despair? Many similar expressions of sorrow have vanished into the air without leaving a trace. This particular one somehow survived:

The sky grows dark on the other side,
The rain pours heavily.

One cannot but feel heartsick on such a day. This is how the great poet of the court of Ujjain[20] described it:

meghāloke bhawati sukhinopyanyathābritti cetaḥ
kaṇṭhasleshapraṇayinijane kiṃ puṇardūrasangsthe

A sudden cloud can mute the mind
of the happiest man — how much more
when the one he is dying to hold is far from him.

The emotion that the masterly poet has captured in a sigh has overflowed its bounds in the lines

"Sweet little brother dear, I feel heartsick."
"The inner core of my body burns in pain."
"Come, O come to the river and drown yourself in the water."

Who could ever record all the pain and suffering that burden these lines? The young woman may have been suffering for days in an unfamiliar,

unloving household when her dear brother — her childhood playmate — came to visit her. Could she have controlled herself on such a day? Memories of childhood games, of her loving parents and pleasant home, rushed in and no one could stop the emotions from taking over. That day, when the dark clouds gathered on the opposite shore, she felt she could take the pain no longer and wished to take shelter beneath the cool waters of the river.

There is a grammatical error in the poem that I hope the careful editors of Bengali will forgive. By applying a feminine adjective to her brother, the poor girl shows her utter ignorance of the rules of our language. She never imagined that this trivial error would be immortalized, along with her sorrow, in this rhyme. Had she known she probably would have died of shame. The error is not that serious — it is even possible that she was addressing her sister. I would hope that those of my colleagues who, in their concern to preserve the integrity of the language, often sacrifice its many homely charms, yield sometimes to playfulness and indulge in the habit of inappropriately addressing members of the opposite sex as their brothers.[21]

Bengali society nurses a deeply felt wound: that caused by sending our young daughters to the households of their in-laws. As they leave, inexperienced and innocent, to make their homes with completely unknown families, we look upon them with a special, keen tenderness. This heartrending emotion has come to be associated with the Bengali fall festival. This festival honors not only Ambika[22] but our daughters as well, expressing the sweet yet sad love of all Bengali households and lending it objectivity. The welcome songs and farewell songs in praise of Durgā voice the emotions of every Bengali mother.[23] This sentiment has also found expression in children's rhymes.

āj durgār adhibās, kāl durgār biye
durgā jāben çuaçurbāḍī, saṅsār kṅādāye
mā kṅāden, mā kṅāden, dhulāye luṭāye
sei je mā palākāṭi diyechen galā sājāye.
bāp kṅāden, bāp kṅāden darbāre basiye
sei je bāp ṭākā diyechen sindhuk sājāye
māsi kṅāden māṣi kṅāden hṅeçele basiye
sei je māsi bhāt diyechen pāthār sājāye
pisi kṅāden, pisi kṅāden goyāle basiye
sei je pisi dudh diyechen bāṭi sājiye
bhāi kṅāden bhāi kṅāden āṅcāl dhariye
sei je bhāi kāpaḍ diyechen ālnā sājiye

bon kṅāden, bon kṅāden khāṭer khuro dhare
sei je bon gāl diyechen svāmikhākī bale

Today is Durgā's bridal shower, tomorrow is her wedding,
Durgā will travel to her in-laws', drowning our *sansar* [household][24]
in sorrow.
Mother weeps, mother weeps on the floor
After she has adorned her with a coral necklace.
Father weeps, father weeps in the *darbar* [parlor],
He has filled his dear daughter's trunk with money.
Aunt weeps, our aunt weeps in the kitchen,
This is the aunt who has served her rice on stone platters.
Cousin weeps, cousin weeps in the barn,
This is the cousin who has served her milk in big bowls.
Brother weeps, brother weeps holding on to her sari,
He is the one who filled her dresser with clothes.
Sister weeps, sister weeps holding on to her bed,
She is the one who had once called her a husband-devouring witch.

Before going any further let me just interject a few words. Although the past actions of the sister who now weeps by the bed were not particularly admirable, and although it is of course best if sisters do not fight, still such things happen quite regularly in all households. A gentlewoman should never use inappropriate language in public, but I cannot take too seriously the girl's calling her sister a husband-devouring witch during a fight, given that the harshness of the comment seems far outweighed by the depth of emotion betrayed in the lines above. The bride's mother adorns her with ornaments, her father provides for her future, her aunt gives her meals, her cousin feeds her milk, her brother presents her with clothes; in such a loving family we would naturally expect nothing but the most exemplary behavior from the sister as well. That is why we are so affected by the final line that describes the sister's past actions. The sadness of the parents is expected, but the grief of the girl who never missed a chance for a good fight is possibly even more heartbreaking. Unexpectedly discovering her tender love for her sister, she bursts out crying by their childhood bed. This must have been the same bed that the two sisters shared when they were young, in the same room that witnessed the two girls playing, fighting, and growing up together. The sister's lonely sobs in this familiar room seem to wash away all the pains of the past.

These rhymes contain huge chapters of our social history in seem-

ingly trivial lines. The next rhyme expresses the age-old concern of all Bengali mothers.

"dol dol duluni
rāṅga māthāy ciruṇī
bar āsbe ekhuṇi
niye jābe takhuṇi"
"kṅede keno maro?
āpani bhābiye dekho kār ghar karo."

"Swing, dear child, swing
With a comb on your red head,
Your groom is going to arrive soon,
He will take you away in an instant."
"Why are you fretting so much and being so unhappy?
Think whose house you made your home."

Such thoughts come naturally to a mother as she gently rocks her little girl to sleep. The only solace when in such a mood is the fact that such things have always happened. She herself left her childhood home one day with a heavy heart, but the intense pain of that occasion has now completely disappeared. Her daughter too will leave someday, but again, the pain of that parting will not be permanent.

There are numerous references to Putu's journey to her in-laws' house in these rhymes.

pṅuṭu jābe çuaçurbāḍi sange jābe ke?
ghare āche kuno beḍāl komar bṅedheche
ām-knāṭhaler bāgān debo chāyāy chāyāy jete,
cār minse kāhār debo pālkī bahāte,
saru dhāner cṅiḍe debo pathe jal khete,
cār māgī dāsī debo pāye tel dite,
uḍki dhāner muḍki debo çuāçuḍi bhulāte

Putu is to travel to her in-laws',
Who is going to give her company?
We have our tomcat at home, all ready to go along,
We shall let them pass through our shady, cool mango groves.
We shall provide four strong palanquin bearers.
We shall provide four servant maidens to anoint her feet,
And we shall have to provide sweet rice puffs to please her mother-in-law.

It is clear from the last line that concern with pleasing mothers-in-law was as intense at that time as it is now. If, however, simple rice puffs sufficed for this purpose in those days then I am sure the parents of many present-day brides must long for that golden age — they are only too painfully aware of the measures needed to please the modern mother-in-law.

The imminent departure of a beloved daughter is not the only reason for sorrow. A far more serious and difficult situation is the marriage of one's daughter to a worthless groom. Often parents, owing to financial concerns or pressures to maintain the family honor, consent to totally inappropriate matches. The pain of such injustices is sometimes expressed in rhymes like the one below. The reader must remember here that all emotions expressed in rhymes are fragmented, a curious mixture of mirth and sorrow.

ḍālim gāche parbhu nāce
ṭākdhumādhum bāddi bāje
āyī go cinte pāro?
goṭā dui anna bāḍo
annapūrnā dudher sar
kāl jābo go parer ghar
parer beṭa mārle caḍ
kṅādte kṅādte khuḍor ghar
khuḍo dile buḍo bar
hei khuḍo tor pāye paḍi
thuye āye ge māyer bāḍi
māye dile saru çṅākhā, bāpe dile çāḍī
bhāi dile huḍko ṭhengā "cal çvaçurbāḍī"

A bird dances on a pomegranate tree,
The drum beats a happy tune.
Dear nanny, do you know me?
Serve me some rice, please!
Annapurna, butter cream,
Tomorrow I will go to the unknown house.
Their son slapped me on the face,
Came weeping to uncle's place.
Uncle matched me with an old groom.
Dear uncle, I implore you,
Get me back to my mother's room.
Mother gave me a fancy bangle, father gave me a sari,

Brother gave a hard shove, "Go back to your *sasurbari* [in-laws' house]."

In those days before the rule of British law, responsibility for reinstating marital contracts lay with the relatives and not with the police, and the task had to be accomplished as swiftly and expeditiously as possible. Perhaps the rules of the family were better than those of the court! These days we ask a judge to help restore our legally wedded wives to us; next, perhaps, we will appeal to the governor to solve our marital misunderstandings! Whatever the process may be, it is doubtful that any greater cruelty exists than marrying one's own daughter to a worthless man under the threat of brute force.

Society is quick to forgive the parents' mistakes. The old groom, however, is a constant irritation. The only weapon at society's disposal is biting sarcasm.

tālgāch kāṭam boser bāṭam gaurī elo jhi
tor kapāle buḍo bar āmi karbo kī?
ṭankā bhenge çankhā dilām,
kāne madan kaḍi,
biyer bela dekhe elum buḍo cāpdāḍi.
cokh khāo go bāp-mā, cokh khāo go khuḍo
eman barke biye dile tāmāk kheko buḍo!
buḍor hṁuko gelo bhese,
buḍo mare keçe
neḍeceḍe dekhi buḍo mare rayeche
phen gālbār samaye buḍo nece uṭheche!

The palm tree was cut down at the Bose's household,
The maiden is as pretty as Gouri.[25]
Destiny gave you an old groom, what am I to do?
Bought a conch bangle for you with good money,
Gold earrings for the ears,
On the day of the wedding noticed an old man with dense beard.
Did you chew off your eyes, parents and uncles?
You married off your daughter to a tobacco-smoking wretch!
His hookah floated away, he died coughing,
Shook him a little and found him dead.
Lo! As I was draining the rice, he was up and ready to be fed!

What treatment for that poor old wretch!

Neither of the two groups of verses above can be faulted for lack of heritage. The heritage of rhymes, however, lies not in their literary pedigree but in the fact that they are in every age the first expressions of human creativity. They are every bit as fresh on this hot summer afternoon in the nineteenth century as they were at the dawn of human history.

We have yet to talk about the undisputed monarch of the Bengali household: our Khoka and Khuku. Just as the ancient *Ṛgvedas* were composed in honor of gods like Indra, Chandra, and Varuna, these rhymes were composed in honor of Khoka and Putu, the two divinities of the Bengali mother's heart. The beauty, cheer, and tender delight in the lines of these new *Vedas* devoted to children are limitless. The enchanted devotee of the goddess Khuku has fashioned numberless idols of her beloved — the child is looked upon sometimes as a bird and at other times as the moon, a precious gem, or even a flower garden.

dhan ke niye ban ke jābo
sekhāne khābo kī?
nirale basiyā cṅāder mukh nirakhi.

I will go away with my beloved to the forest,
What should I eat there?
I will sit at peace and admire the pretty face of my moon.

There exists nothing as odd as love. Love has accompanied God's creation from the very beginning, yet it always attempts to break the rules of creation. It behaves as though it were a captured bird in the iron cage of the world. In spite of repeated and harsh disappointments it is unable to give up the idea that the rules are easy to break if one wants to — in its awareness of its power to fly it forgets the iron bars of the cage. There is no need to take one's love into the forest as the speaker of the rhyme above wants to; staying home may in fact be far more convenient. It is far more peaceful in the forest, of course, but that's about it (especially when even the speaker acknowledges the possible scarcity of food in such a place). But still love asserts itself and says, "So you people think that I can't do that?" Such rash and impertinent statements manage to distract even wise old men like me! And we do have to admit, "Why not?" Should a mean-spirited realist come along and ask, "And what do you propose to eat there?", love immediately answers, "I shall admire my beloved's face in peace." Statements that would normally seem to be exaggerations, lies, or the musings of a madman are readily accepted

when said in a spirit of love.

Another quality of love is that it can magically transform one thing into another. Love refuses to abide by the accepted boundaries of the material world. Readers will have already noticed that it readily transformed a little boy into a bird, and that no biologist expressed concern. Again, when the same child was made into a member of the heavenly family, no astronomer dared voice an objection.

Love asserts itself most in situations where it first carefully builds up an image, then demolishes it with contempt the next moment. The next poem furnishes an example:

cṅād kothā pābo bāchā, jādumani?
mātir cṅād noy gāḍe debo
gācher cṅād noy peḍe debo
tor matan cṅād kothāy pābo?
tui cṅāder çiromaṇi
ghumo re āmār khokāmaṇi.

Where shall I find the moon, my darling?
I cannot make one as it is not made of clay,
I cannot pick it like a fruit from the tree,
Where am I to find a moon like you?
You are the king of the moon,
Go to sleep, dear son, go to sleep.

The moon is not within anyone's reach, so these statements are perfectly logical and correct. If, however, one next tells the child that he is the king of the moon, then why bring up all the rational nonsense in the first place?

One comment may not be totally out of place here. The irrationality often associated with women does not reflect any limitation of their intelligence. The world they live in is primarily ruled by love, and love is an inhabitant of Heaven. "Why," it asks, "should anything be more important than me? Why shouldn't all obstacles fall by the wayside simply because I wish them to?" Love still operates by the laws of the heavenly realm. But alas! What could be more irrational than Heaven in this material world? I suspect that the little bit of Heaven still remaining here has been captured by women, children, lovers, and other such highly irrational beings. They often forget that this world is ruled by the laws of matter, and that it is due only to carelessness that bits of Heaven sometimes remain.[26]

Love erases the boundaries between flowers, children, birds, and the moon, but it also draws limits where none exists and creates new forms from nothing. No biologist, for example, has ever attempted to include sleep within the folds of the animal kingdom. But a mother can give sleep a living form simply because it is known to alight on the eyes of her darling child.

hāṭer ghum ghāṭer ghum pathe pathe phere
cār kaḍā diye kinlem ghum maṇir cokhe āy re

Sleep wanders through streets and markets,
I bought you for four pennies, come sit on the eyes of my precious darling.

As darkness falls the streets and marketplaces are gradually deserted, and sleep, which freely rested on weary people's eyes during the day, seeks shelter for the night. Possibly that is why it accepted such a low wage from the mother even in these days of high prices.

We are told that the ancient Greeks often personified sleep in their literature. A similar technique was used by the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta.[27] Our rhymes appear to be unique, however, in their personification of dance.

thenā nācan thenā. baṭ pākuḍer phenā
balade khālo cinā, chāgale khālo dhān
sonār jādur janye jāye nācnā kine ān.

Jingle dance jingle. The froth of fig and *pakur* [a wild fruit].
The bullocks ate the sugar, the goats ate the paddy,
Go buy some dance for my precious darling.

And not only that — another rhyme manages to describe a child's every movement as a separate entity:

hāter nācan, pāyer nācan, bāṭā mukher nācan,
nāṭā cokher nācan, kṅāṭāli bhurur nācan,
bṅāṣi nāker nācan, mājā-benkur nācan,
ār nācan ki?
anek sādhan kare jādu peyechi.

The dance of the hands, the dance of the feet, the dance of the pretty face,
The dance of the gorgeous eyes, the dance of the arching brows,
The dance of the perfect nose, the dance of the bending hips,
Have you ever heard of any other kind of dance?
I found my darling after a lot of *sadhan* [penance].[28]

Love often sees unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. It can lend magnitude to things that are simple, and change grand things into simple ones. In this poem dance itself is granted an existence independent of the dancer.

The language used in some rhymes also reflects the exalted status of the child.

khokā jābe beḍu karte telī māgīder pāḍā
teli māgīrā mukh karche, "ken re mākhancorā?"
bhṅāḍ bhengeche, nani kheyeche, ār ki dekhā pābo?
kadamtalāy dekhā pele bṅāçī keḍe nebo.

Khoka will visit the Teli neighborhood.
The women there screamed at him, "Who are you, a butter thief?"
He broke the pots, finished off the cream, will I ever see him again?
If I meet him in the Kadamba grove I will certainly take away his flute.

Here the unconventional but endearing verb form *beḍu karte* is used instead of the regular *beḍāite*, as would have been more appropriate if the intention had been to maintain the integrity of our language. Use of the more ordinary form, however, would most certainly have marred the glory of master Khoka. *Beḍāite* may suffice to describe the walks of the rest of us, but it certainly cannot adequately describe the special charm of Khoka's wanderings.

khokā elo beḍiye, dudh dāo go juḍiye
dudher bāṭi tapta, khokā halen kshyāpta
Khokā jābe nāye, lāl jutuā pāye.

Khoka has returned from his walk. Cool some milk for him.
The milk bowl is hot. Khoka gets mad.
Khoka will go sailing with red shoesies on his feet.

It is a big event in the household indeed when Khoka, upon his return home, gets mad because the milk bowl is hot. The circumstances of his expedition to the water are also worth noting. Notice the way Khoka's shoes are described in the last line. Even if we flaunted the best pair of shoes from the most eminent of British merchants, people would still call them shoes. However, the simplest of Khoka's footwear attains the glory of being called "shoesies," simply because they belong to him. Obviously the value of a pair of shoes depends primarily on its owner.

Finally, I wish to direct your attention to one more thing. Man's worship of God finds fruition only in intimate association with human love; love of God becomes real only through love of other human beings. "I gaze at the face of my precious child at peace" — this is ideal meditation. There must be something in the face of a young child that tempts people to leave other things so that they may enjoy it in solitude — it makes the world seem meaningless, a mere distraction from this pure pleasure. Mothers find in the faces of their children the deepest pools of delight, the same delight that tempts yogis away from the lesser pleasures of the material world. That is why the mother in one of our rhymes above sings, "I will go away with my beloved to the forest, what should I eat there? I will sit at peace and admire the pretty face of my darling."

In many rhymes we can see little distinction between human children and the divine child of Devakī.[29] In other cultures such liberties would probably be considered blasphemous. But, I think, to relegate the world of the gods to a place far away from the living and loving world of humans is not only an insult to humanity but contributes little to the adoration of God. In these rhymes the two worlds come together without effort, the portraits of the mortal child and the immortal God magically merging with each other; no one notices when the divine child quietly takes the place of the human child. And when we say of our Khokababu, "If I meet him in the Kadamba grove I will certainly take away his flute," only one who has heard him play can understand how it is that he managed to bring the divine flute from Vrindavan to the Teli neighborhood.

I have compared these rhymes to clouds. Both are ever-changing, both display multitude of hues, and both float about without any effort. Both appear meaningless to us. Rhymes are beyond the regulations of literature, just as clouds are untouched by the rules of meteorology. Both, however, accomplish wonders in our material world. Clouds nourish juvenile plants with their rain; rhymes nurture the infant heart with their rich and loving imagery. It is this freedom from the fetters of convention that enables both to be such sources of delight.

Discussion

Tagore examines three distinct issues in this essay. First is the relevance of these rhymes in the lives of their composers and the significance they have for the narrative community. Although intended for children, the rhymes also express the social concerns and fears of adult females. Tagore thus stresses the importance of community experience in the composition process. Tagore's view of the *chhelebhulano chharha* as vehicles for unburdening community anxiety resembles the psychoanalytic approach to the interpretation of European fairy tales. But although Freud's ideas have greatly aided folklore research in Europe, their application to non-Western materials has so far been less than satisfactory. An examination of Tagore's rather different analytic approach may thus provide clues for a better understanding of the oral composition process in general, and explain why Freud's theories often prove inadequate for the understanding of non-Western folklore. Freud, for example, noted that uncomfortable social problems are suppressed and as a result surface in folklore in various disguises. Bengali rhymes, however, do not subvert the problem — the fear and sorrow is laid out in the open for all to see, sometimes to the extent of obsession. A similar obsessive concern with women's social problems is seen in the contemporary feminine discourse recorded in ethnographic accounts (Roy 1975, Fruzzetti 1982).

The second issue examined is the nature of spontaneity in oral composition. Tagore cites the phrasing patterns of the oral formulas in rhymes when he links the spontaneous thought of the composition and performance process to the innate rhythms of spoken Bengali. He also emphasizes the importance of wordplay in rhymes, comparing this process to the free association of thought that occurs in dreams (a view reminiscent of the connections drawn by Freud between folklore and dreams). Tagore claims that the composition process for these rhymes is analogous to dreaming because both deal with transitory images reflected on the mind, and because both are directly linked to word association. Tagore thus proposes parallel origins for dreams and folklore in wordplay and the association of thought. This hypothesis provides an alternate to the model of the composition process that links memory with innovative wordplay.

The third issue is the connection of religious and folk themes in these rhymes. The indigenous and community-oriented nature of religion in India has resulted in a very fluid demarcation between folk religion and folklore. This tendency, which is peculiar to Hindu culture, makes it quite difficult for scholars interested in disentangling the two spheres of intellectual activity. For Indians such a merger of religious

and lyrical feelings is not awkward at all; it may even be essential for the arousal of the *rasa*s necessary for aesthetic enjoyment (DIMOCK 1974, 158). The recognition of the dependency of aesthetic appreciation on specific religious and cultural sentiments may be particularly useful in achieving a better understanding of the worldview of the community from which the lore is generated. This is particularly stressed in Tagore's writing, as a result of his mystic temperament. A clear example is the passage in "Chhelebhulano Chharha" where Tagore refers to the similarity between the fleeting images in the poems and the thought process of children:

> Children are incapable of adhering to such rules — they have only recently arrived from the carefree, cheerful, and impulsive land of the gods. Unlike us, they are not yet used to long periods of servility. The child, building castles in the sand and forming rhyming images in his mind, imitates the actions of our Creator in this mortal world.

This comparison of the carefree acts, or *leela*, of the Hindu Creator with the acts of children might be hard for readers to appreciate if they do not share the Indian spiritual ethos. Thus before considering Tagore's ideas any further it might be helpful to further clarify the meaning of the word *lokashahitya*. This word, often used in Bengali as a synonym for the English "folklore," is a direct joining of the Sanskrit words *loka*, meaning people, community, and, by extension, society, with *shahitya*, meaning literature. According to A. K. RAMANUJAN, *shahitya* suggests a joining together of word and meaning; the term stresses the nature of this relationship and the aesthetic pleasure derived from the interplay of word and meaning in defining the identity of verbal acts of creation (1974, 115).

This is a very different criterion from that used in the West to define literature. One major quality by which literature is judged in the West is its existence in writing, and thus its separation from verbal creations, which are transmitted primarily by word of mouth. The same stress on mode of transmission can be seen in the current popularity of the term "oral tradition" in the literature departments of this country. As we have seen, the distinction between written and oral has little relevance in the Indian context (probably because of the comparatively low rate of literacy). This is why the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* can move so effortlessly from the high literary to the popular oral milieu.

The term *lokashahitya* further suggests that it is a kind of *shahitya* generated by the community or the people. Hence the issues of

authorship and individual creativity are of little importance. Moreover, the idea of community-generated verbal creation has a special significance in the context of the Hindu worldview because Hindu belief systems, unlike Judeo-Christian religious traditions, are essentially community-generated. This parallelism in the origins of folklore and religion has made the acceptance of *lokashahitya* among educated people relatively easier in India than in the West.

A different kind of discrimination, however, works against such literature in India. The association of folklore with regional (and often tribal) cultures is often viewed in a negative light by the classically oriented elite. This factor was strengthened during Tagore's time by the influence of Indian romantic nationalism. The stark marginality of tribal cultures vis-à-vis mainstream Indian society led the Bengali romantics to associate noble simplicity not with the "simple" tribal folk but with women, the other disenfranchised group in Indian society. Tagore's tone in this essay clearly reflects that bias, as when he says, "I suspect that the little bit of Heaven still remaining [in this world] has been captured by women, children, lovers, and other such highly irrational beings." Such blatant sexism was part of the nineteenth-century Bengali Zeitgeist. Ramendra Sundar TRIVEDI'S preface to a later collection of nursery rhymes captures this spirit clearly.

> For some time respected Mr. Rabindranath Tagore has expressed a keen awareness of the absence of this kind of collection. A few years ago he read an essay entitled "Feminine Rhymes" at a public gathering. . . . However, Mr. Tagore did not satisfy himself with merely reading an essay, but involved himself in the collection process. It is due to his efforts that this collection is being published in the quarterly journal of the Bangiya Shahitya Parishat. . . . I admire the compiler of the current volume as he was not deterred from his so-called childish efforts despite the ridicule of his learned older colleagues. (1981, 5–6)

Tagore's interest in "naive and childish" poems stems from his empathy with the English Romantics.[30] Like Wordsworth, Tagore extols the simple pleasures of the rural population and the intensity of emotion that arises from these pleasures. However, unlike the Romantic poets, who in their efforts to create poetry that imitated folklore ended up composing verses as far as could be from "spontaneous overflows of powerful emotions," Tagore recognizes the essential difference between creative literature and folk traditions, and repeatedly stresses the latter's appeal to

our aesthetic sense.

Tagore uses spontaneity as the key to explaining the nature of creativity in oral tradition. According to Tagore, the spontaneous playfulness of these rhymes reflects the absence of any systematic development of thought. Tagore summarizes the contrast between the organized thought process that leads to high literature and the thoughts that give rise to these rhymes:

> Rhymes, like children, are born naturally of the human mind. This claim is a significant one. Disconnected reflections on the outside world drift regularly across our minds without any conscious effort. They take on different shapes and forms, effortlessly jumping from one subject to another. Just as dust, pollen, smells, noises, leaves, and drops of moisture float aimlessly in the world around us, colors, smells, sounds, fantasies, scattered thoughts, snatches of conversation, and discarded fragments of experience wander randomly through our minds.
>
> When we concentrate our thoughts on a particular topic, however, these excess murmurs cease, these thoughts fly away, these fantasies shatter, and our mind and imagination start flowing in a single stream.

Children's rhymes are a product of a different mental state.

> The thoughts, sounds, and images that cross our minds when we are in a state of repose continuously change their shape and configuration, like clouds floating in the sky. If these aimless reflections could somehow be recorded on a piece of canvas, we would find some similarity between these pictures and our rhymes. Rhymes are only reflections of our ever-changing inner mind; they are like the fluid shadows of clouds on the clear waters of a lake. This is the reason I say that rhymes are born spontaneously.

Rhymes are products of the part of the human mind that is related to dreams and affect us at a deeper level than conscious thought. Tagore points to the fleeting nature of the images in both dreams and rhymes as evidence that similar mental functions are at work. Describing Shiv Sadagar's snack at his in-law's house, Tagore asks, "Could this be like a dream, with the *shalirice chira* having somehow changed itself into *binnirice khoi* between one glance and the next? Who can say that Shivuthakur did not similarly transform himself into Shiv Sadagar?"

On the basis of this rhyme, Tagore further claims that consecutive images in oral poetry are often linked through the association of sounds or words. For example, the natural cadence of the line *shali dhaner chira noy re, binni dhaner khoi* is maintained by repeating the *dh* sound twice using the word *dhan.* These natural rhythms, expressed through such simple alliterative techniques, are easily imprinted on the child's mind and play a vital role in memorization and transmission by attracting attention to certain catchy phrases. Changes in the imagery, too, are dependent on this natural play of sound, which explains the abrupt transformation of images and the preponderance of nonsensical jingles.

Dreams, according to Tagore, follow the same rules of sound association as rhymes; the parallel nature of the mental states that give rise to dreams and to rhymes explains the overall similarity in their forms. Thus Tagore's view of the connection between dreams and folklore rests on quite different premises from Freud's: Tagore explores the possible role of language and wordplay in the development of both processes, while Freud makes dreams and the subconscious the source of folklore. Tagore appears to be linking two important approaches to the interpretation of folklore — the oral-formulaic and the psychoanalytic — in his analysis of rhymes.[31]

Interestingly, Tagore's theory places him squarely within the mainstream of the classical Indian literary tradition. An illustrative example is his comment that it is very hard for him to dissociate his childhood memories from the imagery in his favorite rhyme, "The rain falls tip tap, the river gets flooded." These lines bring back images he probably visualized when he first heard the poem. Thus certain sounds became permanently associated with certain images.

> These few lines were like the classic epic *Meghadūta* to me at that time. I could vividly see a majestic, heaving river rushing downstream on a dark and stormy day. I could also see a few small boats moored by the bank and the three new brides of our Shivuthakur busy preparing the evening meal.

Such scenes are familiar to anyone who grew up on the Gangetic plains of Bengal. Through his description Tagore attempts to strike a sympathetic note in the minds of his readers, who recall similar emotions. Thus the line transcends the immediate scene described, and, through sympathetic resonance in the mind of the audience, stimulates the recollection of similar scenes. The enjoyment derived from such recollection then reinforces the lines in the memory and paves the way for their further

transmission. In this way these poems become part of the community and cease to be the poet's personal property.

This view of verbal composition is essential for understanding the concept of *rasa*, as it is more conducive to the appreciation of community-generated verbal creations than to the products of the individual imagination. How similar is the above description to what Richard BAUMAN describes in his analysis of verbal performance.

> In an artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, "Interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey." This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal. (1977, 9)

Thus Tagore's comment,

> How am I, an aged, somber, and status-conscious man, to capture the soft, loving, and simple voices that are eternally associated with the telling of these rhymes? I fear that readers will have to contribute that tender essence from their own childhood memories. With what magic can I bring back the love, the tunes, the memories of softly lit evenings with which these rhymes are linked? I can only hope that at least some of that charm has been captured in the following lines,

could be intended to draw his readers into a shared supraliteral interpretive frame.

However, Tagore's emphasis on spontaneity in the composition process presents a problem. He claims that these poems are the products of spontaneous thought, while at the same time recognizing that it takes serious effort to make a poem appear spontaneous. If these poems are conscious creations, then the spontaneity is not sincere. According to Tagore, the spontaneity of these children's rhymes is similar to the mood of playfulness in children's games. The rhymes and the games both are results of passing fancy and devoid of any grand forethought, the innate free-floating quality of both is the source of their attraction. He writes:

> The mind of the child, however, is for the most part free of such conscious rigor. The child is affected independently by his own

> imagination and by the outside world; one arrives after the other. The fetters of the conscious mind are distressing for children; they find it difficult to pursue anything along a well-defined path of cause and effect. Children build castles in their minds just as they build sand castles by the shore. Sand lacks the ability to stick together, so the castles are not solid. But it is precisely this quality that makes sand suitable for the creations of children. One can build a grand structure in minutes with fistfuls of sand, and if the architecture turns out not to be to one's liking one can easily correct the mistakes. The playful creator, when exhausted, can instantly level the structure with a kick and happily return home. When one builds by design, however, one is forced to follow the rules of building.

However, Tagore also says:

> The reader must remember that one cannot deliberately create a dream. The rhymes above may have been written effortlessly under the impulse of carefree fancy, but such a sense of the carefree cannot be consciously captured. We have conditioned ourselves to conscious and directed effort, and thus simple and natural things have become terribly difficult. A mood of anxious stress shadows all our efforts even when totally uncalled for. The moment such feelings make their presence felt all carefree impulses and fancies congeal and lose their freedom to fly. That is why I maintain that those who are able to compose children's rhymes do it naturally, while those who have to make the least bit of effort find the task impossible.

Since these rhymes are products of the playful mode of the mind, an analysis of children's games provides a way out of Tagore's problem. Brian SUTTON-SMITH's analysis of play is helpful in this regard.

> For me play is what a person does when he can choose the arbitrariness of the constraints within which he will act or imagine. In its most primordial form, it is an attempt to control the circumstances of habitual action by reversing the direction of control. . . . The player substitutes his own conventions and his own urgencies for those of society and nature. . . . Once play has commenced, however, even this play "set" can be put to one side. Perhaps play itself can become taxing, the players often seek further excitement in breaking it down. Thus, after a long period of concentrated block building, the young associates will gain great enjoyment from destroying their

> own efforts. What we describe as playfulness is often a state in which a further escalation of "sets" takes place and the play involvement gives way to wild invention, hilarity and sometimes complete nonsense. (1972, xiii–xiv)

What Sutton-Smith describes as the escalation of the "play set" may appear arbitrary to those not in tune with the play mode, but can be a source of pleasure for children and adults alike. It appears that the adult composers of *chhelebhulano chharha* may have capitalized on this arbitrary quality in composing these poems. And in a traditionally male-dominated society where women are the caretakers of children, who else but women would be more aware of this balance of control, and in a better position to play with it? Though these poems expertly mimic a child's sense of logic, the contents reveal the voice of women composers. The majority of them reflect a Bengali girl's fear of the unfriendly and often cruel household of her in-laws. The system of negotiated marriages and patrilocal residence, which does not allow prior contact between the bride and the groom, gives rise to great anxiety in the minds of adolescent girls. The poems consequently acquire an immediacy in the lives of the women listeners, who in turn act as the main transmitters and retainers of the rhymes.

Finally, Tagore directs our attention to the explicit religious overtones of many of the rhymes. The lines, "Today is Durgā's bridal shower, tomorrow is her wedding / Durgā will travel to her in-laws', drowning our *sansar* in sorrow," reflect more than the general melancholy associated with the final day of the annual festival of Durgā. The Hindu myth of the wedding of Himalaya's daughter Uma (an incarnation of Durgā) to Śiva has been annexed by Bengali folklore, which has transformed Uma into a simple village maiden married to an older, indifferent husband.[32] The festival of Durgā is seen by the community as the time when Uma — like all married daughters in Bengal — can spend a few days at her parent's house. Thus the myth reflects an immediate social reality. Here the personal (and even community) concerns of Bengali women transcend their limits through their connection with the general religious sentiments of all Bengalis. Thus the creator of this rhyme manages to impart a universal pathos simply by using the name Durgā.

Similarly, the worship of the divine child Kṛṣṇa by his mother resonates through poems that on the surface have no religious connotations. By using certain formulaic descriptions closely associated with Kṛṣṇa, such as calling the child a butter thief, the creator of the folk rhyme

manages to arouse a feeling of bhakti and tenderness among adults. Thus these rhymes very cleverly manipulate classical traditions in ensuring their own popularity.

Tagore's interest in folk traditions and folklore was that of a creative artist. Many of the issues that he commented upon have recently emerged as important in current folklore scholarship, while others reflect then-fashionable views on folklore. However, for me the charm of Tagore's writing lies in the way it arouses feelings of nostalgia for a place and time to which I no longer belong, but to which I feel connected. His work is thus immensely pleasurable for me.

NOTES

1. For a detailed bibliography on Tagore see HENN 1985. Additional entries can be found in KIRKLAND 1966.

2. William RADICE has translated the first two pages of *Lokashahitya* (1985, 183–86). Durga N. BHAGVAT examines *Lokashahitya*, but does not present a detailed analysis of Tagore's views (1961).

3. A series of Bengali fairy-tale collections by Dakshinaranjan MITRA-MAJUMDAR was published at this time (e.g., 1908, 1911). A collection of children's rhymes was published by Jogindranath SARKAR (1899). Other notable folklore collections include Dinesh Chandra SEN n.d. and 1923–1932.

4. Collections of Hindu mythological stories possessing a relatively lesser degree of sanctity and authority than the Vedic scriptures. There are eighteen *Purānas*, the oldest of which was probably recorded during the early Christian era; the latest one dates to around A.D. 300.

5. *Kajitala* literally means "under the *kaji* tree." The word *tala* is very often added to the name of a tree to denote an area, comparable to the use of "oak grove" or "walnut grove" in English.

6. I could not find the word *tapal* in any Bengali dictionary. However, its usage in this rhyme suggests that it denotes a kind of a container. I would also like to note here that other variants of this particular rhyme use the word *kochor* in place of *tapal*. Carrying grains or other dry foodstuff in a fold of one's dress (*kochor*) is a common practice among little children.

7. Literally, "the teacher." However, the suffix *-thakur* suggests that he is a Brahmin and possibly a priest by profession.

8. The well-known literary epic or *kavya* by Kālidāsa. It describes the voyage of a monsoon cloud that acts as a messenger for a love-sick *yaksha*, or male nymph.

9. This is an instance where a variant of the rhyme may clarify the meaning. The Bengali expression *ke rekheche?* meaning "Who has kept it?" sounds very similar to the Bengali expression *ke dekheche?* meaning "Who has seen it?" The second expression would be more appropriate in the context of this rhyme. I suggest that *ke dekheche?* was changed to *ke rekheche?* without an awareness of the shift in meaning that resulted. This substitution also illustrates one of the mechanisms behind the development of oral variants.

10. This particular oral formula (Eng. "tomorrow is his wedding") appears frequently in the rhymes, indicating, perhaps, the importance of weddings and related rituals in the lives of the community.

11. The association of thought brought about by the use of the oral formula *āj subaler adhibās, kāl subaler biye* plays a significant role in the composition of the rhyme. Also note the

use of the same formula in the rhyme *āj durgār adhibās, kāl durgār biye* on page 26.

12. The Bagdis are one of the untouchable castes in Bengali society. Many members of this caste work as fishermen.

13. Tagore seems to be suggesting that women, because of their relative unfamiliarity with worldly ways, can see things more clearly than men. Such a view is clearly incompatible with our modern sensibilities. However, I think his comment was probably rhetorical in nature, designed to provoke his male readers.

14. "Khoka" is the most common diminutive used in Bengal for a male child. The corresponding word for a female child is "Khuku" or "Putu."

15. Sitā is the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Draupadī is the wife of the five brothers, or Pandavas, in the epic *Mahābhārata*. Both of these women acquired their husbands during the *swayambara*, a ceremony in which courting princes gathered at the princess's palace and underwent a test. This test often included an archery competition.

16. Although the poem does not mention sweetness, Tagore mistakenly mentions it in the text.

17. The final age in the Hindu cycle of time.

18. A well-known park in Calcutta.

19. According to the classical Hindu myths, the moon is a slightly lascivious god who spends most of his time in the company of *apsaras* (nymphs). He also keeps the divine nectar *amrita* in a silver cup.

20. Kalidasa, the poet who composed the *Meghadūta*, lived in the North Indian city of Ujjaini. The English translation of the excerpt from Kalidasa's epic is taken from NATHAN 1976 (17).

21. According to the conventions in spoken Bengali, the word *bhāi*, meaning "brother," is often used to address a person, male or female. This practice is most common in the spoken language, which is why Tagore comments on it at this point.

22. Another name for the goddess Durgā.

23. According to Hindu myths, the goddess Durgā is the daughter of the mountain Himalaya, an inhabitant of the earth. Bengali folklore has many stories and songs that deal with the theme of Durgā's annual visit to her parents' home and her departure from the mortal world to her husband Shioa's home on Kailāsa mountain. The Bengali Hindus believe that the goddess's visit coincides with the Durgā festival in fall. This is also the time that married daughters traditionally come to stay with their parents. Also note that "Durgā" is a name given to many Bengali girls.

24. The word *sansar* is a heavily weighted one in the Bengali language. At the simplest level it means "household." However, it may also connote the entire universe and all of God's creations.

25. Another name of Durgā. It literally means "fair maiden."

26. This blatantly sexist view of women can be traced to the romantic view of women prevalent in nineteenth-century Bengal. The Bengali men of the period were ambiguous about the value of Westernization as they were constantly being pulled between their nationalistic loyalties and their admiration for many of the Western ideas of the Enlightenment. It is also possible that Tagore's comments echo the Upanishadic view of knowledge as suprarational.

27. Dutta was a typical product of the Bengal renaissance. He converted to Christianity in his youth and tried unsuccessfully to write in English. Later, however, he acquired considerable fame as a poet in Bengali, experimenting with many Western literary techniques in his writings.

28. The word *sadhan* has interesting connotations in this context. The closest English equivalent would be *penance*. The religious undertone reflects the adoration a male child receives in a Bengali Hindu household. A male child is viewed as a child Kṛṣṇa, and the elders in the household frequently equate the child's activities with those of Kṛṣṇa's childhood. Mothers often refer to their sons as "my Gopal," another name for Kṛṣṇa.

29. Devakī is Kṛṣṇa's mother.
30. See BHATTACHARYA 1966, BHATTACHARJEE 1962, and BOSE 1964.
31. See LORD 1990, 44.
32. See Akos ÖSTÖR's discussion of the various aspects of the legend of Durgā (1971, 16).

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