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Bengali Folk Rhymes: An Introduction

Abstract

Bengali is an Indo-Aryan language possessing a history and tradition of at least a millennium, with a rich tradition of folklore and folk literature. Folk rhymes form an important part of this tradition. The origins of many Bengali folk rhymes are obscure, but are thought to be of considerable antiquity. Folk rhyme exists in many languages, but is often of secondary importance compared to other forms of folk literature, such as folktales and ballads. In Bengali folk literature, however, rhyme holds a place of equal importance to these other forms. Bengali folk rhyme is not simply an instrument for the amusement of children but a subject worthy of serious study, bearing most of the essential characteristics of folk tradition: anonymous and collective creation, dynamism, textual variation, and social function.

Key words: folk rhyme — Bengali language — folk literature — oral
transmission

INTRODUCTION

BENGALI, one of the Indo-Aryan languages,[1] developed from Sanskrit and the Prākrit languages. There is a difference of opinion regarding Bengali's date of origin: three of the four outstanding experts on the subject believe that it developed during the ninth or tenth centuries A.D. (SEN 1896, 1; CHATTERJI 1926, 1; SEN 1940, 13), while the fourth believes that it existed as early as the seventh century (SHAHIDULLAH 1953, 7). In either case, Bengali is a language with a history and tradition of at least a millennium. It is now the state language of Bangladesh, and is also spoken in the Indian state of West Bengal and in portions of Tripura, Assam, and Orissa. The number of Bengali-speaking people in the world today may be as high as two hundred million. The Bengali name for the language, "Baṅgla," is the same as the old name for the country: "Baṅgla" or "Bānṅg-gālā," derived from "Bangɔ."

Bengali has a rich tradition of folklore and folk literature.[2] This tradition is the creation of the rural folk, transmitted orally from one generation to the next. In addition to the rhymes that comprise the subject of this article, Bengali folk literature includes such forms as folktales, riddles, proverbs, maxims, and songs.

Folk rhymes exist in one form or another in most areas of the world. Examples are the nursery rhymes of Europe, the Mother Goose verse of America, and the *warabe uta* and *komori uta* of Japan. The origins of many Bengali folk rhymes are obscure, and are thought to be of considerable antiquity; certainly a large portion of them are known to have existed in the oral tradition for several centuries at least. This is a characteristic they share with the folk rhyme traditions found in most other cultures. SIDDIQUI quotes the famous folklorist M. Bloomfield as follows:

> There are many popular rhymes which cannot be definitely assigned to any specific moment in history. The very same popular

rhyme may have been in existence for decades, each time adopting itself, now to one and now to another manifestation of actual life, and being subjected sometimes to slight, sometimes to very extensive changes. (1963, 203)

Bloomfield, like many other folklorists, considers rhymes to be "striking examples of the poetic primitive" that existed as early as "primitive archaic" times. Some scholars consider rhyme to be the "genesis of all songs" and hence older than even the earliest of songs (OPIE 1951, introduction). This opinion is shared by such outstanding experts on Bengali folk rhymes as Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Sen, and Muhammad Shahidullah (SHAHED 1988, 53–54).

On the basis of the available evidence, Bengali folk rhymes appear to be at least as old as the Buddhist mystic verses *caryā-pada*,[3] the earliest literary work in the Bengali language. If this hypothesis is correct, Bengali folk rhymes share the thousand-year history of the Bengali language itself.

COLLECTION AND COMPILATION

The investigation and compilation of folk literature was stimulated by a number of factors that emerged during the past several centuries: an interest in humanity's cultural and literary heritage, a desire to link the present with the past, and growing levels of nationalism throughout the world. The collection of folklore material was further aided by the spread of literacy and the wider availability of the printing press.

The collection of folk rhymes began in the eighteenth century, with the earliest known publications being *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* in 1744 and *Mother Goose's Melody* in 1765 (CUDDON 1979, 456). The interest of folklore gained new momentum in 1812–1814 when the German philologist Jakob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm published the two-volume *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, containing a large number of German folktales (VREDENBURW 1917, 8). These stories were for the most part collected directly from the peasantry, since they comprised part of the unwritten oral tradition passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Grimms' collection attracted worldwide attention from researchers with an interest in folk literature, and inspired members of the intelligentsia in various societies to investigate the native folk culture of their own lands, drawing particularly upon the older generation of peasantry whose knowledge of life had yet to be transformed by urbanization.

Roughly contemporaneous to this, many of the colonial administrators, Anglican missionaries, and travelers from Victorian England

were recording native traditions in various parts of the world in order
to better understand the peoples they governed (DORSON 1963, 4).
English translations of these collections were later published, sometimes
with romanized versions of the original texts.

These developments had an influence upon the collection of Ben-
gali folk rhymes as well. From the eighteenth century the region of
Bengal was occupied by the British East India Company,[4] whose ad-
ministrative personnel and Christian missionaries[5] acted as links be-
tween Western civilization and the elite of the developing city of
Calcutta. Credit for the first few collections of Bengali folk literature
goes to these people. Four compilations of Bengali proverbs were
published between 1832 and 1872 by the missionaries William Mortan
and James Long, and folktale collections were issued by Sir George
Griarson[6] in 1873 and Reverend Lalbihary Dey in 1883. Folk rhymes
found their way into these collections when the authors mistook them
for the genres they were researching.

The advent of the twentieth century saw the establishment of
folklore societies in various parts of the world and the publication of
a number of journals devoted to folklore studies.[7] This created a
viable organizational structure for research and lent new impetus to
the collection of folk literature. Yet another stimulus came from the
rising spirit of nationalism and independence in colonial lands, which
inspired many among the native elite to search for their cultural roots
and explore various avenues of cultural revival, one manifestation of
which was the collection of folk literature. In Bengal, interestingly
enough, this effort was led mainly by the English-educated citizenry
of Calcutta, whom the British had intended to make "English in taste,
in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (THOMPSON and GARRET 1934,
315).[8]

It was Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel-laureate of Bengal, who
at this stage played the major role in the collection of folk rhymes.
The fruit of his conscientious and painstaking work during the last
decade of the nineteenth century was published in the form of two
articles containing about one hundred Bengali folk rhymes (TAGORE
1958). In a very short period of time this collection assumed the
stature of a classic, and encouraged many others to follow the path
pioneered by Tagore.

At about the time that Tagore was collecting these rhymes, the
Bangio Sahitya Parishad (Bengal Literary Council) was established in
Calcutta, which subsequently became the center of most Bengali writ-
ing and research. The council's journal began printing Bengali folk
rhymes; in its first decade of publication (1896–1905) it serialized about

three hundred rhymes that had been collected by experts from various corners of the then-undivided Bengal (DAS 1971, 71–102). The first collection of Bengali folk rhymes in book form was published in 1899 in Calcutta. Compiled by Yogindranath Sarkar under the title *Khu-kumonir chara*[9] [Rhymes for kids], it contains four hundred rhymes (SARKAR 1899). This collection was unique in character, and became a permanent source for researchers in this field.

The publication of folk rhymes in journals continued during the first half of the twentieth century. The end of British rule in India in 1947 resulted in the division of Bengal[10] and led to the concentration of Bengali cultural and literary studies in two centers, Calcutta and Dhaka. In Calcutta the study of folk rhymes was continued by eminent scholars like Sukumar Sen and Ashutosh Bhattacharya during the 1950s and early 1960s. Ashutosh Bhattacharya alone compiled and published more than six hundred rhymes in two volumes (BHATTACHA-RYA 1957, 1962). Younger researchers like Kamalkumar Majumdar, Bhabataran Dutt, and Nirmalendu Bhoumik joined this movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. The compilation of DUTT (1970) consists of about one thousand rhymes, while that of BHOUMIK exceeds five hundred (1979).

The stream of Bengali folk rhyme study centering around Dhaka, the provincial capital of what was then East Pakistan, was associated mainly with the University of Dhaka and in particular its Bengali department. Muhammad Shahidullah took the pioneering role in this effort, researching folk rhyme with Muhammad Abdul Hye as part of a UNESCO project on the traditional culture of the region (SHAHIDUL-LAH 1963).

The rise of Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan during the early 1950s gave birth to a new interest in the roots of Bengali culture and literature. Urdu was declared the state language of both portions of Pakistan following its creation in 1947, angering the 56% of the Pakistani population who spoke Bengali and leading to a movement for the recognition of Bengali as a state language. The movement culminated on 21 February 1952, when a number of students were shot to death by soldiers during a demonstration in the streets of Dhaka. The outcome was a moral defeat for the Pakistani government, which was compelled to provide institutional support for the development of Bengali art and culture. One result was the establishment in 1955 of the Bangla Academy, committed to work in the field of Bengali literature. During the 1960s the academy undertook the collection of folk literature from a vast number of villages, with approximately five thousand rhymes being recorded by about thirty researchers. About half

of these were published by the academy during the 1960s, 1970s, and
1980s, but a large number have yet to appear in print (SHAHED 1988,
50–52).   In addition to these major organized efforts, a small but steady
source of rhymes has been provided by journals and newspapers pub-
lished in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

In his book *Folklore: An Introduction*, Jawaharlal HANDOO divided
the growth of Indian folklore studies into three periods: the missionary,
the nationalistic, and the academic (1989, 127–44).   The development
of Bengali folklore studies as described above can be viewed in roughly
the same way; a slightly more detailed analysis is presented in table 1.

TABLE 1

Time	Collectors	Sociopolitical factors	Purpose/remarks
1830–1885	Christian mis-sionaries	Christian evangelism	To increase the effective-ness of missionary activi-ties
1860–1885	British colonial administrative personnel	The incorporation of In-dia into the British Empire (August 1858)	To better understand and govern the Indian peoples
1886–1945	Bengali elite and scholars	A rise of the spirit of na-tionalism, patriotism, and independence	To increase knowledge of the Bengali cultural heritage
1947–	Large numbers of amateurs and scholars	The division of Bengal as a result of the indepen-dence of India	Folk-rhyme study divid-ed; new study developed centering around Dhaka
1955–	Academicians and semiprofessional collectors	The triumph of the 1952 Language Movement in Dhaka and the recogni-tion of Bengali as a state language of Pakistan	A large number of rhymes collected under organiza-tional framework

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS
Folk rhyme may be basically defined as that segment of folk literature
or oral tradition that consists of rhyming verse, usually recited or sung.
Certain other characteristics are also looked for, however.   These in-
clude:

    a.   Short verses with lines that almost invariably rhyme;
    b.   A basis in sound, sometimes with a musical setting;
    c.   A structure with, generally, no logical idea, story, or continuity
        of event, but composed rather of a series of images;
    d.   Composition in simple meter and language;
    e.   Marked by nonsense, fantasy, absurdity, impossibility, etc.—
        most are free from didacticism and idealism.

This definition excludes several rhyming forms of Bengali folk literature that do not show all of the essential characteristics of folk rhyme; these forms include mantras,[11] magical rhymes, proverbs, riddles, and maxims (the most popular of which are those of Khona and Dak). The following may be presented as examples of true folk rhymes:

1. Ghumparani masi-pisi[12] moder bari esɔ,
   khat nai palɔng nai khokar chokhe bɔsɔ.
   Bata vɔre pan debɔ gal vɔre kheo,

   Khokar chokhe ghum nai ghum deye zeo.

   Oh aunts of sleep! Come to our home,
   There is no cot or bed, so be seated on child's eye.
   A tray[13] full of betel leaf will be served, eat them with full mouth,
   Sleep has gone away from child's eye, give him some sleep.

2. Chhele ghumalɔ para juralɔ bɔrgi elɔ deshe,
   Bulbulite dhan kheyechhe khajna debɔ kise?
   Dhan furalɔ pan furalɔ khajna debɔ kee?
   Ar kɔtadin sɔbur kɔrɔ rasun bunechhi.

   Kids slept, locality silent, looters came,
   Birds have eaten the paddy, how can I pay the tax?
   The rice and betel leaf are finished, what would I pay as tax?
   Kindly wait a few days, I have sown garlic.

3. Brishti pare tapur tupur nɔde elɔ ban,
   Shib Thakurer biye hɔlɔ tin kɔnney dan.
   Ek konney radhen baren arek kɔnney khan,
   Arek kɔnney na kheye baper bari zan.

   It is raining tapur tupur,[14] rivers are flooded,
   The marriage of Shib Tagore held with three brides.
   One busy with cooking, another eating,
   The other left for home[15] without taking food.

Like other oral literature, Bengali folk rhymes are anonymous in the sense that once created they become common property (unless recorded and placed in collections that identify the creators). The dynamic and lively nature of the genre leaves room for continuous change, resulting in many variations on a single rhyme. These textual variations occur in three principal ways:

I. Variation due to word changes, otherwise known as making *terminus post quem*:

1. Agdum bagdum ghoradum   *Agdum bagdum ghoradum*[16] are

saje	preparing
Dhak mridɔṅg jhajhɔr baje	Drum, tom-tom, and gong are being beaten,
Bajte bajte challɔ ḍhuli	The drummer is moving while beating,
Dhuli gelɔ shei kɔmɔlapuli.	The drummer goes to that Komo-lapuli.
2. Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje	*Agdum bagdum ghoradum* are pre-paring,
Ḍhai mirgel ghaghɔr baje	The drummer is beating the tom-tom and cymbals,
Bajte bajte pa'lɔ ṭhuli	The beating continues and blink-ers fall [on the eyes],
Ṭhuli gelɔ kɔmɔlaphuli.	The blind man goes to Komo-lafuli.
3. Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje	*Agdum bagdum ghoradum* are pre-paring,
Lal mirgel ghaghɔr baje	Red tom-tom and cymbals are being beaten,
· Bajte bajte elɔ ḍhuli	The drummer comes while beat-ing,
Dhuli gelɔ shei kɔmɔlapuli.	The drummer goes to that Komo-lapuli.
4. Agdam bagdam ghoradam saje	*Agdam bagdam ghoradam* are pre-paring,
Dan mecra ghaghɔr baje	To the right, *mecra*[17] and cymbals are being beaten,
Bajte bajte paṛlɔ ṭuri	The beating continues and blink-ers fall [on the eyes],
Ṭuri gelɔ kɔmɔlapuri.	The blind man goes to Komo-lapuri.
5. Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje	*Agdum bagdum ghoradum* are pre-paring,
Lal gheghɔr ghagɔr baje	Cymbals are beating and [the woman in the] red skirt [is dancing],
Bajte bajte challɔ ḍhuli	The drummer is moving while beating,
Ḍhuli gelɔ shei kɔmɔlapuli.	The drummer goes to that Komo-lapuli.
6. Agadɔm bagadɔm ghoradɔm saje	*Agadom bagadom ghoradom* are preparing,

Dan migri ghugur baje

To the right, a string of bells[18] is sounding in the *migri*,[19]

Bajte bajte paṛlɔ ṭhuli

The beating continues and blinkers fall [on the eyes],

Ṭhuli gelɔ mor kɔmɔlapuri.

The blind man goes to my Komolapuri.

7. Agdum bagdum ghorardim saje

Agdum hagdum and a mare's nest is preparing,

Dan mirgel ghaghɔr baje

To the right, tom-tom and cymbals are being beaten,

Bajte bajte challɔ ḍhuli

The drummer is moving while beating,

Ḍhuli gelɔ shei kɔmɔlapuli.

The drummer goes to that Komolapuli.

8. Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje

Agdum bagdum ghoradum are preparing,

Dhal mridɔng ghaghɔr baje

Shield, tom-toms, and cymbals are being beaten,

Bajte bajte paṛlɔ saṛa

Everyone is aroused by the beating,

Saṛa gelɔ bamɔn paṛa.

Awakened, they reach the Brahmin area.

9. Akdum bakdum ghorardim saje

Akdum bakdum and a mare's nest are preparing,

Dhal vekur kakur baje . . .

Shield, horn, and stones are playing . . .

Analysis of these nine rhymes shows that only *saje* in the first line, *baje* in the second line, *bajte bajte* in the third line, and *gelo* in the fourth line remain unchanged throughout all the verses. The other words show the following variations:

agdum	bagdum	ghora	dum	dhak	mridɔng
agdam	bagdam	ghorar	dam	ḍhai	mirgel
agadɔm	bagadɔm		dɔm	lal	mecra
akdum	bakdum		dim	dan	gheghɔr
				dhal	migri
					vekur
jhajhɔr	challɔ	ḍhuli	shei	kɔmɔlapuli	
ghaghɔr	pa'lɔ	ṭhuli	mor	kɔmɔlaphuli	
ghagɔr	elɔ	ṭuri		kɔmɔlapuri	
ghugur	paṛlɔ	saṛa		bamɔn paṛa	

It is clear that these changes in wording bring about definite changes in meaning, sound structure, and sometimes meter. Certain minor variations can even cause radical alterations in the entire context and content of the rhyme.

II. Change in the light of variations in local experience and culture:

Chhele ghumalɔ para juṛalo bɔrgi elɔ deshe	Kids slept, locality silent, looters came,
Bulbulite dhan kheyechhe khajna debɔ kise?	Birds have eaten the paddy, how can I pay the tax?
(Second version)	
Mɔni ghumalɔ para juṛalo gɔrki elɔ deshe	Baby, slept, locality silent, land flooded.
Gulgulie dhan kheyechhe khajna debɔ kise?	*Gulguli*[20] has destroyed the paddy, how can I pay the tax?

The first of these two variants was collected in the western part of Bengal, while the second was recorded in Chittagong in the eastern part of Bangladesh. The word *bɔrgi* in the first rhyme has been transformed into *gɔrki* in the second; the other changes are minor. *Bɔrgi* is the local Bengali name for the Mahratha cavalry, notorious for their freebooting inroads. Their raids into the western part of Bengal in the first half of the eighteenth century led to social and economic disruption (HOSSAIN 1982, 11–15), the memory of which is depicted in the first version of the rhyme. The eastern section of Bengal had very little experience of this event, but the coastal areas were frequently affected by the *gɔrki*, a high tidal wave that flooded the paddies and destroyed the rice. This difference in folk experience is reflected in the above textual variations.

III. Change due to expansion and reduction in size
Various texts of the above-mentioned "*agdum bagdum ghoradum saje*" rhymes also differ in length. Four versions of this rhyme in the Tagore collection have fourteen, twelve, sixteen, and four lines respectively (TAGORE 1958, 610–11). Three in other collections have eleven, eight, and eleven lines respectively (SHAHED 1988, 57–58).

Bengali folk rhymes in dialect[21] may be considered as yet another kind of textual variation.

CLASSIFICATION

The classification of Bengali folk rhymes is complex and difficult. Attempts to this end have been made by Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Sen, Ashutosh Bhattacharya and many others, but unfortunately most of the systems are incomplete, unscientific, and at times self-contradictory. The major defect of most of these classifications is that the divisions are based on more than one yardstick: some rhymes are classified according to function, others according to subject matter or main theme. Proverbs, mantras, riddles, maxims, etc. are sometimes mistakenly included because of their form and meter.

BHATTACHARYA's system is the major exception: it is well thought out, broad, and, for the most part, logical (1962, 28–36). A modification of his divisions results in the following classification of Bengali folk rhymes:

I. Lullaby and cradle songs

1. Ay ay chad mama ṭip diye za,	Come uncle moon! Give a *tip*[22]
Chader kɔpale chad ṭip diye za.	Give a *tip* on the moon's [baby's] forehead, O moon!
Machh katle muṛu debɔ,	When I cut a fish I shall give you the head,
Dhan vaṅgle kuṛu debɔ,	When I husk the paddy I shall give you the chaff,
Kalo gɔrur dudh debɔ,	I shall give you the milk of a black cow,[23]
Dudh khabar bati debɔ	I shall give you a pot for drinking the milk,
Chader kɔpale chad tip diye za.	Give a *tip* on the moon's forehead, O moon!
2. Dol dol dulɔni	Swing, cradle, swing
Ranga mathay chiruni,	A comb in the color[fully decorated bride's] head,
Bɔr asbe ekhɔni	The bridegroom will come right now
Niye zabe tɔkhɔni.	And take you then and there.

II. Feminine rhymes of marriage and other domestic functions

1. Alta pɔra pa'go	O lac-dyed feet,
Jamai ante ja'go,	Go and bring the bridegroom,

Jamai ana emni nɔy	It is not so easy to bring the bridegroom,
Tinti taka khɔrɔchh hɔy.	It would cost *taka*[24] three.

III.   Rhymes used in rituals and folk-religious ceremonies

1. Helencha kɔlɔmi lɔklɔk kɔre — Watercresses are dangling,
    Rajar beta pɔkkhi mare, — The prince is hunting birds,
    Maren pakhi Sukɔr bil — Hunting birds in the Sukor[25] marsh,
    Sonar kouta rupar khil. — The container is made of gold, the bolt of silver.

2. Laṛia re laṛia-haloi — Fighter! O Fighter—*haloi*,[26]
    Hatir piṭhe chaṛia — Riding on an elephant's back,
    Hati gelɔ Kɔrimpur — The elephant goes to Karimpur,
    Peye elɔ Chɔmpaphul. — Back with some *Champak*[27] flowers.

IV.   Rhymes used in games and leisure

1. Shai kabadi Brindabɔn[28] — Royal *kabadi* Brindabon,
    Ghoṛi haje ṭhɔnṭhɔn. — The clock sounds *tthontthon*.
    Ghoṛir kɔpale phota,[29] — A round-mark in the clock's forehead,
    Mɔish mare gota gota. — Kills whole buffaloes.

2. Lal ranga ghuṛi ayna uṛi — O red kite!   Let us fly,
    Nil ranga ghuṛi ayna uṛi, — O blue kite!   Let us fly,
    Kɔrchhe kemɔn gata — Are you stricken with nausea?
    Poṛli tɔbe tui kata. — Then you are cleaved.

V.   Rhymes on weather, nature, and animals

1. Khajur pata hɔldi, — The date leaf has yellowed,
    Megh nam jɔldi. — O rain, come quickly!
    Ek biṛa pan, — One *bida*[30] of betel leaf,
    Jhupjhupaya nam. — Fall splashingly!

2. Chad uṭhechhe phul phu-ṭhechhe — The moon has risen, the flower has bloomed,
    Kɔdɔm talay ke? — Who is there under the *kodom* tree?
    Hati nachhe ghoṛa nachhe — Elephants and horses are dancing
    Ramshaliker be. — At Ramshalik's[31] wedding.

VI. Historical rhymes

1. Sa-re-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni[32]   *Sa-re-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni,*
    Bom phelechhe Japani,   The Japanese have dropped
                                          bombs,

    Bomar maidhe keuṭe sap   There is a cobra in the bombs.
    British bɔle bapre-bap.   The British shout, *bapre-bap*.[33]

VII. Work songs and counting rhymes

1. O buṛi o buṛi suta kat   O old lady! spin some thread.
    Kail biane Olir hat,   The Olir-bazaar is tomorrow
                                          morning,

    Olir hatɔt zabi ni?   Would you go to the Olir-bazaar?
    Chɔrka bandha dibi ni?   Would you mortgage the spinning
                                          wheel?

VIII. Rhymes used in folktales, fairy tales, etc.

1. Amar kɔthati phuralo   Thus my story ends
    Nɔte gachhti muṛlo,   The Natia-thorn withers,
    Keno re nɔte muṛli?   Why do you wither, Natia?
    Goru kenɔ ghas khay?   Why does the cow eat grass?
    Kenɔre goru ghas khas?   Why do you eat grass, cow?
    Rakhal kenɔ chɔray na?   Why does the cowboy not let me
                                          graze?

SUMMARY
Bengal has a rich treasury of folk literature, of which folk rhyme is an
integral and important component possessed of its own universe and
notable in terms of both quality and quantity.   In many languages and
cultures folk rhymes are of secondary importance in comparison with
folktales, ballads, etc., but in Bengali folk literature rhyme holds a
place of equal importance to these other forms.   Bengali folk rhyme
is not simply an instrument for the amusement of children but a sub-
ject worthy of serious study, bearing most of the essential characteristics
of folk tradition: anonymous and collective creation, dynamism, textual
variation, social function, etc. (BUNGI 1977, 101–103).   Local culture
and folk experience play a dominant role in the composition and varia-
tion of these rhymes.
    The origins of most Bengali folk rhymes are obscure, and are
thought to be of considerable antiquity, possibly sharing the thousand-

year history of the Bengali language itself.   Classification of the rhymes
is difficult and still in a fluid stage, although certain hypotheses have
been advanced.   The collection and compilation of Bengali folk rhymes
in a systematic way has a history of one century.   It was inspired by
the worldwide interest in folklore collection on the one hand, and by
the rise of Bengali nationalism and cultural consciousness on the other.
It may be mentioned here that the early collection of rhymes took place
before the study of folklore assumed any organized or institutional
shape in Bengal.   A few literary journals and a handful of devoted
scholars deserve the credit for this early work.   As a result, collection
came first and discussion afterwards.

   The collection of Bengali folk rhymes was also inextricably linked
throughout its history with sociopolitical change in Bengal.   The col-
lection process continues, with many of the recorded rhymes still un-
published.   The production of a complete anthology, handbook, or
dictionary of Bengali folk rhymes remains a task for the future.

NOTES

   1.   Indo-Aryan is one of the two major divisions of Indo-Iranian, the easternmost
major division of the Indo-European language family.   Classical Sanskrit is the best-
known example of Old Indo-Aryan, while the label Prākrit subsumes all Middle Indo-
Aryan varieties.   Māgadhī Apabhraṃśa was one of these varieties.   Gradually a lan-
guage later identified as Udra-Bangɔ-Kamrupi developed from this Apabhraṃśa.
With the passage of time Udra became Uṛia (the language of Orissa), Kamrupi became
Ahomia (of Assam), and Bangɔ became Baṅgla (COMRIE 1987, 110–41).
   2.   The use of the term "literature" to define the aesthetic productions of "il-
literate" creators has long been a subject of controversy.   In order to bridge this ap-
parent gap, such terms as oral literature/tradition, traditional literature, verbal art, and
unwritten literature were invented.   In spite of the slightly pejorative connotations and
a few limitations, folklore and folk literature are still widely used to define orally
transmitted literature (BUNGI 1977, 101–102; UTLEY 1961, 194).   In the present article
the terms folklore, folk literature, oral tradition, etc., are used in a very general way.
   3.   A book of fifty celebrated Buddhist verses (of which 3.5 are missing) that is
accepted as the earliest specimen of literature in the Bengali language.   Assamese,
Uṛia, and Maithili also treat the same hymns as the earliest specimens of each language.
   4.   Business interests had drawn the Europeans to India in the late medieval
period.   The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English were the main contenders.   In
the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Company (the "United Company of Mer-
chants of England trading to the East Indies") was poised to control business in Bengal,
obstructed only by Sirāj-ud-Dawla, nawab of Bengal.   The Company defeated and
killed him at the battle of Plassey (1757) with the help of Mīr Ja'far, the chief general
of the nawab and a man whose name is now synonymous in Bangladesh with "traitor."
   5.   The missionaries failed to find many converts in Bengal, but their contribu-
tions to education, literature, journalism, and printing in the eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries were significant (GUPTA 1971, 192–94).

6. A member of the Indian Civil Service (SHIGEMATSU 1984, 46).

7. The first folklore society was established in London in 1878, and published a journal entitled *Folklore*.

8. The Bengali elite was nourished by the English rulers in the hope that it would strengthen colonial rule, but the result was the reverse. The rulers wished to use folklore as a means to approach their subjects; nationalists used it to fight colonial power.

9. Nirmalendu Bhoumik claims that *Puturanir chaṛā* by Baishnava Basak is the first compilation of Bengali folk rhymes in book form (BHOUMIK 1979, 272). He has been unable to obtain a copy of the book, however, so this claim cannot be evaluated.

10. Bengal was a part of Suba-Bangla, along with Bihar and Orissa in Mughal India. The British divided the province in 1905 but were compelled to reunite it in 1911. With the end of British rule in 1947 and the division of the subcontinent on the basis of religion, Bengal was separated into two sections. The eastern part of the province with its Muslim majority became part of Pakistan, the western part remaining in India. East Bengal (East Pakistan) became sovereign Bangladesh following a bloody war of liberation with West Pakistan in 1971.

11. Originally a portion of the Vedas containing sacred hymns. Gradually any mystical or esoteric word recited or incanted became known as a mantra.

12. The phrase *ghumparani masi-pisi* has many textual variations, such as *ghumparanir ma* and *nindorolir ma*. Sometimes these lines indicate that the common people imagined a supernatural power that controlled sleep and was able to distribute it.

13. The word "tray," which suggests a flat-surfaced container, does not convey the full meaning of the word *bata*. The traditional *bata* used for betel leaf has a cylindrical shape and is usually made of metal, with three or more compartments separating the betel leaf, lime, nuts, etc.

14. The sound of the rain as traditionally imagined in Bengal.

15. The journey of a bride to her parent's house after marriage is a ceremonial one. The journeys usually continued at regular intervals, and were known as *naior*. It is apparent from many folk rhymes that the bride never considered her in-laws' house as her own, and used to return to her parents' house whenever undesirable incidents occurred.

16. *Agdum bagdum ghoradum* has no apparent meaning, but some scholars have tried to explain it in the following way: *Dom* is a lower-caste Hindu whose responsibility is to burn dead bodies and look after the crematorium. Fishing and playing musical instruments are their alternate professions. *Agdum* means "Advance, *Dom* soldiers"; *bagdum* means "sideline *Dom* soldiers"; *ghoradum* means "*Dom* cavalry," since *ghora* means "horse" (BHATTACHARYA 1962, 228). SHASTRI even relates this rhyme to a Dom-Brahmin war (1980, 294).

17. Meaning uncertain; perhaps a type of musical instrument.

18. "String of bells" is inadequate to express the full meaning of *ghugur*. A *ghugur* is an anklet set with small bells used by dancers, predominantly female. The jingle of bells in an anklet usually suggests the appearance of professional dancers for entertainment, sometimes associated with drink. They were even used to entertain soldiers at the front.

19. Meaning uncertain; perhaps a type of musical instrument.

20. Yet to be identified; it may be an imaginary creature. Another possible explanation is that the sound "gulguli," which sometimes means rolling, may suggest the advancing form of a tidal wave.

21. Horizontal differentiation of Bengali dialects is very extensive both in terms of

the number of regional dialects that occur and in terms of their mutual divergence. The extreme eastern dialect of Chittagong, for instance, is unintelligible even to many speakers of other eastern Bengali dialects (KLAIMAN 1987, 511).

22.   The most common meaning of *tip* is a finger impression on the forehead common to Indian women. But here no actual impression is made. The reciter of this rhyme stretches his or her hand toward the moon and then, turning the fingers, puts an imaginary impression on the forehead of the child whom he or she is trying to lull to sleep.

23.   It is generally believed in Bengal that the milk of a black cow is superior.

24.   The monetary unit of Bengal.

25.   In Bengal almost every household, bazaar, marsh, tank, pond, etc. has a popular name. *Sukɔr bil* and *Olir hat* in these verses are examples.

26.   "*Haloi*" is a popular refrain used in rhymes and songs.

27.   The *Michelia Champaca*, a flower of the magnolia family.

28.   *Shai* is the corrupt form of *shahi*, which means royal, *kabadi* is the name of the game, and Brindabon is a sacred place in Mathura (near Delhi) associated with Radha-Krishna.

29.   The literal meaning of *phota* is a drop or blob of liquid, but the word has a special connotation in Bengal. A *phota* or roundish mark on the forehead symbolizes a victorious person. Sometimes it is used as a sectarian mark for religious preachers like vaishnava.

30.   *Bida* means a bunch of twenty leaves.   In Bengal there is a tradition of counting things in which twenty (*kuri*) is the highest number.

31.   A *shalik* is a special kind of black sparrow with a yellow beak. *Ram* is an adjective meaning big or large, a usage that derives from Rāma of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. A number of folk beliefs center around the sparrow in Bengal. For example, it is believed that the appearance of a yellow sparrow indicates the imminent arrival of guests.

32.   It is the Indian equivalent of *do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do*.

33.   During World War II all Indian leaders except Subash Chandra Bose supported the British, but the popular mood was anti-British since there was a history of oppression. "Bapre-bap" is a common exclamation in Bengal indicating fear or surprise.

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