

2002

Translation of 'Balika Badhu: A Selected Anthology of Bengali Short Stories'

Monish Ranjan Chatterjee

University of Dayton, mchatterjee1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/ece_fac_pub

 Part of the [Computer Engineering Commons](#), [Electrical and Electronics Commons](#), [Electromagnetics and Photonics Commons](#), [Optics Commons](#), [Other Electrical and Computer Engineering Commons](#), and the [Systems and Communications Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Chatterjee, Monish Ranjan, "Translation of 'Balika Badhu: A Selected Anthology of Bengali Short Stories'" (2002). *Electrical and Computer Engineering Faculty Publications*. Paper 362.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/ece_fac_pub/362

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electrical and Computer Engineering Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

BALIKA BADHU

a representative anthology of
Bengali short stories



translated by
Monish Ranjan Chatterjee

Translator's Preface

This project, which began with the desire to render into English a rather long tale by Bimal Kar about five years ago, eventually grew into a considerably more extended compilation of Bengali short stories by ten of the most well-known practitioners of that art since the heyday of Rabindranath Tagore. The collection is limited in many ways, not the least of which being that no woman writer has been included, and that it contains only a baker's dozen stories (if we count Bonophool's micro-stories collectively as one)—a number pitifully small considering the vast and prolific field of authors and stories a translator has at his or her disposal. I have attempted to explain my rationale for my intent and selections in the introductory essay.

Since beginning this project, I have sustained a number of personal losses, and what makes the completion of it particularly poignant for me is that the individuals who have left my world were almost unanimously supportive of my feeble efforts at upholding Bengal's contributions to the literary and cultural heritage of the world. My work continues, and my only solace is that I had come to know these kind

people with extraordinary wisdom and humility, and that they had extended to me a generosity and affection that exceeded by far my capacity to reciprocate or demonstrate my worthiness.

For their support and encouragement, I must sincerely thank my friend and colleague Nikolaos Bourbakis, and another friend and mentor, Arindam Purkayastha—two individuals with unlimited optimism and uncommon goodness of heart. A special note of thanks is also due to a dear friend, Sandeep Mitra, whose enthusiastic and well-reasoned commitment to preserving and enhancing the history and culture of India is only matched by his genuine interest in all aspects of human civilization.

Finally, let me close this prologue by expressing the hope that my young son and daughter, growing up in a place separated by continents from the land of their parents' birth, may develop an active interest in the history, aspirations and achievements of India and Bengal, and attempt to bring those far-flung outposts of high civilization closer to the rest of the world—a world increasingly interconnected by commerce and communication, yet still so far apart, at times, in spirit and goodwill.

Introduction

Measured even by the standards of excellence achieved by Bengali literature in the past one hundred and fifty years, covering such diverse areas as poetry, fiction, drama, suspense, crime, *belles-lettres*, and historical and psychological novels, the short story as a literary genre stands apart in a class of its own. Several selected anthologies of short stories published in Bengali in the last two decades of the twentieth century emphasize two principal factors: firstly that the editors had to be virtually ruthless in limiting the collection, given the prodigious number of outstanding works in the pool from which the selections had to be made; and secondly that of all the components of Bengali literature, it is the short story which is truly and indisputably *world-class*. A two-volume anthology, entitled *Swa-Nirbachita Shreshtha Galpa* (Self-Selected Best Short Stories), edited by renowned authors Bibhutibhusan Mukhopadhyay and Samaresh Basu, and published by Model Publishing House, Calcutta, in 1987, attempted to cover one hundred years (with author's birth years in the range 1861-1960) of the short stories by bringing together a collection of, *self-selected best* short story contributed by each of one hundred

and seventeen authors, including those widely acclaimed, as well as apparently less well-known. The anthology mentions that the selection was made with deference to *the noble tradition of the Bengali short story*, and to the creativity and variety represented by the collection. Another anthology, thematically compiled as the authors' *first acclaimed stories* (the title in Bengali was *Pratham Shara Jagano Galpa*), and edited by Ananda Bagchi, was published in 1989 by Pushpa Publishers, Calcutta. This anthology emphasizes the distinction between a *self-selected best story* collection, and a *first acclaimed stories* collection. While the former is picked out by the author alone, from the compendium of his or her works, reflecting individual taste or preference, the latter is based on viewing one's own work from the perspective of the wider readership, and finding a resonance within one's own mind. While such a collection may well be regarded as being driven by popular acceptance, and therefore become subject to reservations with regards to its literary merit, the anthology goes on to claim that *instant and spontaneous popularity* does have a measure of lasting value.

A slightly different class of selected short stories in Bengali, developed out of a tradition of *Sharadiya Special Issues* (published annually during the autumn *Durga Puja* festival in Bengal) of *Desh* and other literary magazines for well over fifty years, links the development of experimental and creative writing in Bengali with the proliferation of news and literary magazines. These two components have clearly been mutually supportive, and consequently short stories published in literary magazines have, within only a few decades, been accorded the same admiration otherwise reserved for classic works published by elite publishing houses.

During the 1970s, the National Book Trust of India took up a plan to publish short stories written in the constitutionally recognized regional languages of India, along with their translations in the other languages. This initiative resulted in a collection entitled *Ekushti Bangla Galpa* (Twenty One Bengali Short Stories), edited by Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Professor of Bengali Language and Literature, University of Calcutta, and published by the Trust in 1977. Professor Mukhopadhyay has provided an excellent overview of the different periods, classifications and evolution of the Bengali short story. It turns out that the present collection of English translations, even if decidedly small in number and scope, does however contain samples from each of the key periods discussed by Professor Mukhopadhyay. The introduction presented here will draw generously from Professor Mukhopadhyay's commentary.

While selected anthologies in Bengali based on the works of a number of authors distributed over a certain period have started to appear more regularly in the last twenty-five years, it turns out that the history of collected or selected short stories by individual authors goes back a great deal further. Several of Rabindranath Tagore's short-story collections were published in the years 1895, 1912, 1916 and 1941, and his illustrious *Galpa Guchchha* (A Bouquet of Stories), was published posthumously in four parts in 1964. Likewise, collections of stories by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay were published as early as 1916.

By contrast, and with greater significance in relation to the present effort, English translations of Bengali short stories, taken as a whole, have been virtually non-existent. The same

could in all likelihood be said of other works of Bengali literature, especially those of the last fifty years; however, that matter is beyond the scope of this discussion. With the exception of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, and a handful of others, few authors from Bengal have had their works competently represented, if at all, in English. Tagore was already known in English literary circles as a master story-teller as early as 1912, thanks to the efforts of painter William Rothenstein, *Modern Review* editor Ramananda Chattopadhyay, and others. Moreover, following the world-wide interest generated by his Nobel Prize in 1913 (which was won as the first *non-European* in the world to be so honoured), his short-stories, as much as his other works, began to be translated sporadically in many languages. With Bibhuti Bhushan, part of the impetus, no doubt, was generated by the runaway critical success of the film *Pather Panchali* by India's greatest director, Satyajit Ray. Thereafter, some of his writings appeared in translation under the auspices of UNESCO in the 1950s and '60s. More recently, a collection of Bibhuti Bhushan's short stories, translated by Phyllis Granoff, was published as part of the UNESCO Indian Series by Mosaic Press, Ontario, Canada, in 1984. The collection included the story *Puin Mancha*, which (as translated by the translator of this volume) is also included in the present anthology. Other writers who have received some attention include Mahasweta Devi (thanks in large part to the efforts of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in the United States), Satyajit Ray, and, to a much smaller extent, Premendra Mitra. The overwhelming absence of the best works of the greatest names in the post-Tagorean Bengali literature in the English language

would readily explain why writers of Indian origin, writing in English *directly*, appear so much more successful in the international arena, and reach a much wider audience, compared with those writing in the regional vernacular within India. This leads us directly into the debate spurred by Salman Rushdie's famous (or infamous, depending on one's perspective) 1995 assertion that "*the best Indian writing in the past fifty years has been in English.*" We shall return to this matter a little later.

According to Professor Mukhopadhyay, the first truly successful writer of the Bengali short story was, of course, Rabindranath Tagore. In his magical hands, the short story received its breath of life, and prospered in astonishing ways. His genius touched virtually every facet of the short story: romance, nature, social ills, philosophy, poetic subtlety, history, and humour. He made forays into each realm at will, and wrote almost uninterrupted for close to fifty years between 1890 through 1940.

Approximately contemporaneous with Tagore, we find Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Pramatha Choudhuri (who also wrote under the pseudonym Birbal), and, of course, the writer perhaps second only to Tagore in the areas of the psychological novel and the short story, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (who also occasionally wrote under the pseudonyms Anupama Devi and Anila Devi). These gifted authors enriched the storehouse of Bengali short stories with a rich and varied harvest.

The period following Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra, which began approximately in the mid—to late 1920s, has represented well the evolution and experience of the Bengali

psyche in the second half of the twentieth century. The period immediately following Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra is the well-known *Kallol* period. Chronologically, the period spans the years 1923 through 1939. Interestingly, the *Kallol* writers succeeded in pursuing their literary careers in relative peace and stability despite a worldwide economic recession and a growing opposition to English rule in India during that period. This period witnessed the emergence of acclaimed writers such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Premendra Mitra, Buddhadev Bose, Manish Ghatak (Yuvanashva), Prabodh Kumar Sanyal, and Bhabani Mukhopadhyay. In the pages of the literary magazines *Vichitra* and *Shanibarer Chithi* readers discovered other emerging high-impact writers such as Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay (the latter two, along with Tarashankar mentioned earlier, comprise the so-called Bandyopadhyay Triumvirate of Bengali literature), Annadashankar Ray, Bonophool, Bibhuti Bhushan Mukhopadhyay, Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Parimal Goswami, Premankur Atarthy, Sarojkumar Roychoudhury, Pramathanath Bishi, Ashapura Devi, and others. The same period also produced accomplished writers of humour and comedy such as Parashuram (pseudonym of Rajshekhar Basu).

The generally prolific *Kallol* period was succeeded by an era (1939-1947) marked by the Second World War at the global level, and independence and partition of India at the domestic level. These roughly ten years represent a turning point in the history of Bengal and the Indian nation. These years were marred by a succession of mostly man-made disasters, including famines, air-raids, control and rationing of

the food supply, military movements, an out-of-control black market, a decline in social lifestyles and values, economic crisis, degenerating moral and ethical values, communal riots, partition, and the relentless flow of refugees across the newly-created borders.

Those writers who had started their vocation during this period had developed an intimate awareness of the all-encompassing calamities of that age. The social environment of the age was filled with unrest and pent-up hostility. The result was a sharper edge to their perspectives, combined with a frayed temperament. The stories from this period are devoid of the *Kallolian* approach to romanticism, bohemian existence, and unrestricted love. The changes in Indian and Bengali society in this period were rapid and numerous. Established social norms were beginning to crumble, and were replaced by anomalous and aberrant behaviour patterns, people were afflicted with subtle psychological maladies, many were taking to deviant experimentation in search of newer thrills, many took unusual vows to face the challenges of life- such changes were unthinkable before the war. The Great War was also a great social earthquake. It shattered the ideas of civility, the protective shield of morality, the codes of honour inherent in familial bonds, and even the shadowy notions of compassion, devotion and religious reform. In the midst of the clang of falling icons, however, one can still discern the dreams of building a new society, and redoubled pledges to realize those dreams.

Authors whose works reflect the above changes include Subodh Ghosh, Satinath Bhaduri, Santosh Kumar Ghosh, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Narendranath Mitra, and Jyotirindra

Nandi. The list also includes some well-established *Kallol* figures, among whom Manik Bandyopadhyay, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Manoj Bose, Saroj Kumar Roychoudhury, Ashapura Devi, Pramathanath Bishi, Parimal Goswami, Bonophool, Bani Roy, and Sushil Ghosh are especially noteworthy.

The post-*Kallol* decade was immediately followed by the blood-drenched independence, disfigured by partition. In its wake, there arrived waves of helpless, uprooted humanity—cross-border refugees further destabilized Indian society. Rising far above the words of hope and reconstruction delivered from the ramparts of the edifices of the newly independent state were the cries of the dispossessed and disinherited. In this disturbed and discontented age there appeared a new breed of storytellers—principal among these were Samaresh Basu, Bimal Kar, Ramapada Chowdhury, Syed Mujtaba Ali, Harinarayan Chattopadhyay, Pranatosh Ghatak, Sulekha Sanyal, Gour Kishore Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi, Kamal Kumar Majumdar and others. By all measures, the authors of this age are on the same wavelength as those immediately preceding them. The two groups are virtually indistinguishable. The majority of writers in the two groups were born in the years between 1916 through 1922. During the turbulent years in Calcutta and elsewhere in Bengal from the beginning of the Second World War, most of them had entered their youthful and psychologically most fertile years. Their active writing period spanned close to forty or more years, and during this time, they contributed to Bengali short stories with unabated vigour by chronicling the strange and

curious changes in people's social and personal lives.

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed another period of the Bengali short story. The authors representing this period were born approximately between 1930 and 1940. They are generally regarded as a new generation of writers, even though at the end of the century and millennium, many of these writers are approaching the age of sixty, and indeed younger writers are already appearing in the horizon. The new generation belonging to the above period includes Syed Mustafa Siraj, Mati Nandi, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shyamal Gangopadhyay, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Dibyendu Palit, Kabita Sinha, Shankar and others. These writers seem to have little in common with those from the preceding period. According to Professor Mukhopadhyay, these writers are viewed by the Great War and post-war writers as a new "blood-group." From the Great War and post-war generations' perspective, the new writers have no relationship or bonds with their predecessors. During their adolescence, the stable foundations of the joint family have started to crumble, and such concepts as devotion and veneration are to them nothing more than *parrot talk*. The relationship between men and women has changed fundamentally in that even though the sexual tensions and interactions are still much the same, these are not tempered or informed by any romantic notions or traditions borrowed from the past. They struggle to accommodate themselves in an alien world, and look for the means to alleviate a sense of complete isolation; therefore, they are in many ways neurotic and clueless. The Great War and post-war generations and the new generation appear to be islands separated by a gulf. The

psychological and temperamental distance between the Great War and post-war writers and the new generation writers is far greater than that between the *Kallol* and the Great War and post-war writers. The *Kallolian* romanticism may have been absent in the Great War and post-war phase, but there was still a sense of joy in life, and reverence for traditional values. The new generation has none of these, and the distance is virtually insurmountable.

Moreover, the distance is not only one of temperament, it is also of language and style. It is not only one of viewpoints, but also of novel applications of the different components of life in the modern and technological age. These evolutions (or even revolutions) prove that the Bengali short story does not necessarily reach its ultimate perfection in Rabindranath alone. If anything, as an organic entity, it has repeatedly moved forward, negotiated sharp curves, persisted with experimentation, and never tired of examining life in fresh new ways. Echoing Professor Mukhopadhyay's words of regret as expressed in *Ekushti Bangla Galpa*, the translator of the present anthology also feels that any collection with limitations of space and selection criteria is guaranteed to leave many interested readers dissatisfied.

The initial impetus for the present collection came from the translator's desire to translate the inimitable storyteller Bimal Kar's *Balika Badhu*, in which the author's language and style, while quite original in many ways, may also be viewed as a bridge between Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's powerful classical prose, and Rabindranath Tagore's lyrical mastery. Having read the original as a teenager, as well as seen the film version of this tender tale about the life and times of

young boys and girls growing up at the crossroads of tradition and modernity in a period of transition from colonialism to self-rule, this rather long tale made a lasting impression on the translator's mind. The story addresses several social issues pertinent to traditional Bengali and Indian society: arranged marriages and the marriage of adolescents, patriarchal value systems, the conflict between urban and rural lifestyles, the adaptability of immigrant communities in new environments, and others. The protagonist grows up under the stern stewardship of an idealistic father, himself much influenced by many nineteenth century reform movements in Bengal, led by individuals such as the legendary Vidyasagar Mahashay. Interestingly, the narrator's family had originally migrated from Rajasthan several generations earlier; over the years, their lives had become virtually inseparable from those of ordinary Bengali households. What is particularly appealing about this narrative is its tender yet keenly observant style- it explores the adolescent human mind, and in tracing the events surrounding the young characters growing up from uncertain roles as husbands and wives to life partnerships that mellow with the years, it also holds timeless glimpses of the human experience.

The two short stories that follow are by a master storyteller, sometimes considered second only to Rabindranath Tagore. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay needs virtually no introduction to anyone familiar with twentieth century Bengali literature. His vast collection of novels, short stories and essays have been read and deeply admired by arguably a larger number of Bengali readers (especially women) than have read the works of Rabindranath himself. He has been widely translated into almost every other language in India, and by

all reckoning has been received with as much acclaim in each medium. As much as he was closely associated with the freedom movement in Bengal, Sarat Chandra identified deeply with the poor, the neglected, and the exploited. Women in practically every social category played a vital role in most of his works, and he portrayed their emotions, thoughts, vulnerabilities and longings with such sensitivity and understanding that his writing had a special appeal for housewives and other womenfolk within Bengal's homes. But Sarat Chandra's attention was by no means limited to women only. He frequently dwelt upon social injustice, incongruity, irony, and many stark and often shocking realities, in areas as diverse as religious faith, feudal land ownership and hired labour, poverty and starvation, and life within the lower and downtrodden classes. The two stories selected here deal with two extremely poor and ostracized communities: the *dulés* or palanquin-bearers in *Abhagir Swarga*, and the *tantis* or (in this case Muslim) weavers in *Mahesh*. In the first story, the wretched yet heart-rending and noble lives of a desperately poor *dulé* woman and her son are depicted against a graphic backdrop of deprivation versus affluence within the caste hierarchy. Sarat Chandra carries this contrast to the limit, it seems, by painting a stark picture of abundance and privation even in the finality of death, generally considered *the great leveller*. *Abhagi*, a creature of misfortune, does not have many aspirations—life holds little promise for any tangible improvement in her condition as a destitute with a child, rejected by her husband. She witnesses the grandeur and pomp accompanying the funeral rites of *Bamoon-Ma*, an elderly brahmin lady, and especially the red *alta* bordering her feet

during her last journey. When she sees from a great distance behind the cortege the smoke rising from *Bamoon-Ma's* face when lit by the hand of her son, *Abhagi* wishes with all her heart that her own *Kangali* would offer her that fire when she would herself die. *No expectation whatsoever from life, but only the means to rise to the heavens as smoke from the flame offered by a son's hand.* Death is indeed her greatest romance in life. Yet this humblest of wishes, of course, is not to be granted by repressive and tyrannical society. In addition to highlighting the hypocrisy and cruelty inherent in power and authority, Sarat Chandra portrays a quintessential male chauvinism, which cuts across caste hierarchies, through the character of *Abhagi's* estranged husband, *Rasik Dulé*, who appears at her deathbed only to offer the poor woman the dust off his feet. The nobility of suffering womanhood depicted here, if dramatic, is nevertheless by no means unrealistic.

In *Mahesh*, Sarat Chandra explores with delicacy and deep empathy the privation and routine indignities suffered by another desperately poor community: the Muslim weavers. In this story, weaver Gaffoor lives in a shanty with two other beings he cares deeply about—his daughter Amina, and his pet ox, whom he fondly calls Mahesh. Pitted against a merciless and unscrupulous zamindar, and his hypocritical, scheming and unprincipled higher-caste retinue, Gaffoor has virtually little or nothing to feed himself or his daughter, much less the poor, emaciated beast. As is common in such grotesquely inequitable circumstances, Gaffoor's situation goes from bad to worse during a drought. His family of three is driven to starvation, insults, beatings, and further economic plunder. Driven to the brink of desperation, he even contemplates

selling Mahesh to a butcher, only to change his mind at the last minute. In the end, when the village wells dry up, and Mahesh, starving and thirsty even more than his human companions, drinks from the pitcher of precious water fetched by Amina from a distant well, Gaffoor falls into an uncontrolled rage. He hits his dearest Mahesh so hard on the head with a ploughshare that the weakened animal dies.

The next story in the selection is by another legendary Bengali author, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay of *Pather Panchali* fame. Incidentally, it is important to mention here that Bibhuti Bhushan, together with Tarashankar and Manik Bandyopadhyay (who are also represented here), comprised what is known as the “tin Banrujje” or the “three Bandyopadhyays” of Bengali literature. These three writers have occupied a prominent place in twentieth century Bengali literature, with each having contributed major works to the literary archives. Bibhuti Bhushan, identifiable as a chronicler of simple village life in the rural areas of Bengal (in presenting which he skillfully portrays the virtues and vices of people in all walks of life in these communities), is also noted for his deeply insightful and sensitive observations of both nature and people. The story selected here, *Puin Mancha* (a translation of which previously appeared in the literary magazine *Sangbadik*, published from Long Island, New York, in 1995), brings out these characteristics of Bibhuti Bhushan’s writing quite well. The young girl Khenti, who also happens to be the oldest of her parents’ children, has only one observable vice—she has a sizable appetite. Now, in affluent homes, this would likely be considered perfectly healthy and normal. In fact, in her own home, her fondness for the fleshy *puin* plant, and other

delicacies was well recognized, and her parents, despite their rather modest means, always attempted to satisfy her growing hunger. In describing the lives of Khenti and her family, the storyteller for the most part describes a tender and loving family, no matter that Khenti and her father occasionally incur her mother's wrath, such as following the yam-stealing episode. The tragedy central to the story is connected to the institution of marriage, according to which it is taboo to keep a daughter of marriageable age in her parents' home. Throughout traditional and typically rural society, this was quite common even until a significant part of the twentieth century. The resulting extreme social pressures, including covert and overt threats of ostracism and excommunication (as was brought to bear upon Khenti's father Sahayhari by the village elders), often forced unwilling parents, especially those with daughters for whom matches were difficult to come by, to marry the poor girls off to entirely unworthy prospects, including vastly older men, and even those gravely ill, mentally retarded or lunatic. Such a fate befell Khenti, and the tale of her tragically short life is only brightened, somewhat ironically, by the amazingly vigorous life, acquired against all odds by the *puin* vine she had planted prior to leaving her parents' home.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, whose work appears next in the selections, was another highly acclaimed and admired author. Although a "Bandyopadhyay" outside the "tin Banrujje" triumvirate, Saradindu nevertheless acquired an exalted status among Bengal's writers by virtue of his exceedingly original, daring and stylistically refreshing creations. Saradindu was neither a social commentator nor a

messenger as such. He was an experimenter, and in many ways a modernist in terms of his themes and techniques. Even though the middle decades of the twentieth century produced several Bengali writers specializing in *detective* and *suspense* stories and novels, and Bengali super-sleuths and detectives such as Arindam Bose, Kiriti Roy, and several others earned considerable following among modern and forward-looking readers (incidentally, noted scholar Sukumar Sen in his introduction to the *Saradindu Omnibus*, Ananda Publishers, 1970, observes that the concept of the *super-sleuth* existed conceptually in India presumably even before it appeared in Western literature. To this end, he quotes several well-known folk idioms, including “*churi vidya bara vidya*,” i.e., stealing is a great art, and mentions that even in ancient times, expert thieves were trained to serve as policemen. Sen maintains that characters in many Indian children’s stories may be seen as precursors of Sherlock Holmes’ older brother Microft), the distinction of creating the first truly modern and versatile detective in Bengali fiction belongs to Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. His remarkable creation, the private detective Byomkesh Bakshi, was modelled no doubt after Sherlock Holmes; however, Byomkesh proved to be quintessentially Bengali in temperament and style. Saradindu’s writing is characterized by a warm and what is referred to in Bengali as a *majlisi* or conversationalist style. The Byomkesh stories gripped the imagination of the Bengali readership during the 1960s and 70s—the present translator can still recall the suspense that surrounded the serialized publication of *Shajarur Kanta* (The Porcupine’s Quill) in the literary magazine *Desh* in the late 1960s, when he was not quite a teenager. For this

anthology, we have selected a short story, *Dehantar*, based on the occult. This story, like many others, brings out the great versatility of Saradindu as a writer. He had ventured into many different territories in his works, including suspense, crime, the occult, mythology, and, most of all, a number of historical intrigues. In *Dehantar*, Saradindu sets up the atmosphere for paranormal and psychic events by moving the principals to a hill station in the middle of the summer, where they encounter an attractive young widow being pursued madly by a young and infatuated bachelor. The story reaches its climax where first the persistent suitor's soul, and eventually his body appear to become possessed and transformed by the spirit of the widow's late, possessive husband, who was killed in an accident sometime earlier.

Another highly innovative author who was at the height of his creative powers from the 1950s through the '70s was Balaichand Mukhopadhyay, more widely recognized by his pseudonym, Bonophool. A doctor by profession, Bonophool was a keen observer of people from virtually every station in life—from the pauper and the destitute to the artist and the politician. His stories are rich and varied in content, and it is generally safe to assume that much of his material was gathered from direct life experiences. One of his stories, *Agnishwar*, which received wide acclaim as a film by the same name, is believed to have autobiographical overtones. Bonophool introduced a genre of ultra-short stories in Bengali (most of them between one-half to one page in length)—the current translator has defined these as *micro-stories*, and has selected six of them here. The beauty of these stories lies in the quirkiness of their message, which the author delivers with extreme

brevity, while packing substantial punch. In order not to leave the reader with the impression that the micro-story was Bonophool's only *forte*, one of his more regular short stories, *Taj Mahal*, has also been included. Even though longer than the micro-stories, *Taj Mahal* illustrates Bonophool's imaginative use of atmosphere and theme, often leading up to climactic oddities and bizarre occurrences that leave the reader in a state of incredulity. With the peerless monument to love, the Taj, as the backdrop, Bonophool does not proceed to write another gushy story of love and romance. Instead, he introduces two shockingly pathetic destitute figures who, through the magic of Bonophool's pen, leave the reader at the end in complete bewilderment as to their identities.

Tarashankar and Manik Bandyopadhyay, whose works are represented next in this anthology, were the other two pillars of the Bandyopadhyay triumvirate mentioned earlier. These two authors, and especially the former (perhaps by virtue of a longer life), captured the imagination of the Bengali readership for several decades. Of the two, Tarashankar achieved a broader range in his writing career, and wrote novels and short stories with equal efficacy, many of which received great acclaim. His subjects were primarily based on the mores of rural life (as the selection in this anthology exemplifies), even though he frequently explored unusual vicissitudes such as mythology, folklore, and the occult. The short story *Tarini Majhi* portrays the life of a river boatman, who admires and almost dotes on his beautiful wife Sukhi. Tarini is a strong, even intimidating individual who, in addition to being a skilled boatman, has an uncanny ability to rescue hapless victims of the dreaded Mayurakshi river at full

flood. The human limit of Tarini's devotion is tested to the extreme in this story, proving in the end that self-preservation is an instinct that is nearly impossible to overcome in all of nature, including the human. Manik Bandyopadhyay was only forty-eight at the time of his death. Yet, in a relatively short life, he wrote novels and stories that bear testimony to a writer with deep empathy for those in the lower strata of society. Manik was skeptical, even contemptuous of urban life, and all the trappings of capitalist exploitation and decadence in that environment. The story *Level Crossing*, selected here, examines the contrasts of rural and urban lives through the experience of a chauffeur who straddles both. The level crossing for trains is here a metaphor for *the great divide*, and the author deftly transports the reader between the two entirely different worlds on either side of the crossing. Ironically, even though Keshav has his roots in the relatively nurturing joint household in his village, and a caring young widow pursues him with genuine love, his heart is caught in a dilemma: loyalty towards, and responsibility for, his own family members (unsophisticated though they may be), on the one hand, and a dark attraction for the charms and comforts of city life, complete with the youthful infatuation of his employer's young daughter, on the other. At the end, the author demonstrates that Keshav maintains his village ties grudgingly, more as an unfair dictate of fate than out of any compelling allegiance towards the simple, plebian, and rustic lifestyle.

Subodh Ghosh, two of whose stories are featured in this collection, has been described in his *Collected Works* as a writer who literally *arrived, wrote, and conquered*. He began his writing career relatively late in life—more in response to a

request from friends at a literary gathering to read a story of his own. This resulted in two stories that immediately earned him a lasting place in Bengali literature—coincidentally, these two stories, *Ajantrik* and *Fossil*, have been selected for the present anthology. Beginning with these, Subodh immediately gained widespread acceptance by readers, and placed himself in a position of inspiration for younger, aspiring authors. Ramapada Choudhury reminisced, “When we started to write, there were two avenues open before us—Tarashankar and Subodh Ghosh.” Bimal Kar conceded, “His writing inspired us.” Mahasweta Devi observed, “He opened a completely new vista in the realm of Bengali short stories.” Subodh Ghosh is most noted for the remarkable freshness and vitality of his stories. They are characterized by an almost unmatched variety of themes—in story after story, plot after plot, he created relentless waves of intrigue. In *Ajantrik* (which the present translator first encountered during the screening of a retrospective of Ritwik Ghatak’s films), Subodh portrays a fatally possessive, almost bizarre relationship between *man* and *machine*. Long before authors such as Stephen King (*Christine*) and others explored the subject, Subodh probed with extraordinary keenness the boundaries between human intelligence and consciousness, and that of the non-human or inanimate world. We must note, further, that in stories such as *Christine*, the machine actually *performs* acts of intelligence, thereby crossing the threshold between the purely psychic (where things happen within the human mind), and the fantastic (where strange events happen outside the human mind). In *Ajantrik*, however, the author carefully connects every nuance of the relationship back to the human partner

and the workings of his mind. This approach makes the latter story more realistic, even as it explores the complex dimensions of the human psyche. *Fossil*, which depicts the machinery of oppression in a mining town- first, through the tyranny of a feudal lord who, rather anachronistically, rules his simple subjects with ruthless efficiency, and later, with the arrival of a team of European merchants (who collectively establish a so-called mining *Syndicate*), an equally cruel and despotic bureaucracy that sees the miners and other labourers as nothing more than potential tools for profit. Not surprisingly, then, that despite the apparent hostility between the Maharaja and the Syndicate, the two powerful rival groups band together in the end to eliminate their common rival, the union leader, and later, a group of vocal and unionized miners.

The 1986 *Selected Short Stories* of Narendranath Mitra in Bengali by Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, mentions that a French publication on contemporary India included one representative short story. The story was *Headmaster* by Narendranath Mitra. The Ananda volume goes on to suggest that while no doubt a curious development, the selection was by no means surprising, especially to those familiar with short stories of the world and "the world of Narendranath's short stories." Writer Abu Syed Ayub in a 1978 article in the literary magazine *Desh* ranked Narendranath's *Bikalpa* among the best short stories in the world. In a 1983 article by writer Santosh Kumar Ghosh, published in *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, Narendranath is praised for his magical ability to present stories in the style of stories, yet maintain a delicate artistry as deftly as a dewdrop is held atop a blade of grass. For this

natural talent, he is compared with the likes of O. Henry, Maupassant, and Tagore. In the present collection, we have selected Narendranath's *Ras*, a story later made into a feature film in Hindi by the name *Saudagar*. Interestingly, Narendranath, like several of his predecessors (Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Subodh Ghosh, among others) had the distinction of having several of his stories transferred to the film medium. Principal among these are *Mahanagar* by Satyajit Ray, *Headmaster* by Agragami, and *Palanka* by Rajen Tarafdar. In *Ras*, which revolves around a Muslim community of boatmen and sap collectors, Narendranath draws a sharp contrast between the sincerity and commitment shown by women in marital relationships, and the sometimes wavering, wandering and even devious response from men in return. Motalef, a handsome and skilled sap collector, has his eyes trained on Phoolbanu, a curvaceous and attractive young woman from the village. However, in order to garner her father's consent for his proposal of marriage, he needs to accumulate a large sum of money. To achieve his goal, he devises a sly and underhanded scheme. He proposes, and receives the hand of Mazu Khatun, an older and generally plain-looking widow, who has one great talent. *She knows better than anyone else how to turn sap into the best khejur gur (palm jaggery nuggets)*. Mazu Khatun's devoted, backbreaking labour, combined with Motalef's unmatched tapping skills produce the highest grade *gur* for the marketplace, and Motalef is rewarded with brisk sales. When he has collected the necessary funds, Motalef offers Mazu Khatun *talak* (an Islamic annulment of marriage), and immediately brings Phoolbanu home. In this manner, he has acquired both his object of sexual desire, as well as Mazu

Khatun's assets from her previous marriage. The fact that he subsequently suffers greatly from serious losses to his *ras* business at the hands of his beautiful but incompetent wife pales in comparison with the magnitude of his treachery towards the trusting and faithful widow.

The story *Ekti Shatrur Kahini* (of which the present translation was also published previously in *Sangbadik*) by Narayan Gangopadhyay rounds out the works by the ten authors selected for this anthology. Like Manik Bandyopadhyay before him, Narayan Gangopadhyay lived a tragically short life; yet, his literary contribution is by no means meagre. As with most of the writers selected here, Narayan also devoted a considerable part of his literary life writing for young readers. The present translator recalls from his youth the thrills and laughter that accompanied the reading of his many stories that chronicled the adventures of the *Char Murti* (The Gang of Four) whom he immortalized in his *Tenida* series. It was much later that this translator became familiar with the considerably more serious component of Narayan's works. As Professor Jagadish Bhattacharya notes in his 1949 (when Narayan was only 31) preface to *Narayan Gangopadhyayer Sreshtha Galpa* (The Best Short Stories of Narayan Gangopadhyay), first published by Prakash Bhavan, Calcutta, in 1954, "... (his) genius has already added a bright lustre to its signature upon the pages of time." Professor Bhattacharya goes on to maintain that Narayan's artistic world is filled with richness and variety defined by form, humour, reflection and anguish. From the violent hilltop forests of *Duars, Terai* and *Arakan* to the river deltas and the brackish coasts of lower Bengal, Narayan's vision has surveyed the

entire panorama of human settlements and colonial interactions. His writing was shaped by the Great War and the Great Famine (the latter implying the infamous Bengal famine of 1943). Re-reading Professor Bhattacharya's extensive critique of 1949, it seems that this often greatly underrated author had acquired a significant degree of prominence in the world of letters at a surprisingly young age. The fact that in the remaining 21 years of his life he also explored areas of humour and light-hearted fiction only goes to show that Narayan was a writer with diverse talents who had not spent himself entirely in reaction to his early, stark experiences. In the domain of serious fiction, Narayan has created diverse and multi-hued characters: the devious coolie-recruiter Sadhu Sundarlal; the day-dreaming Rai-Bahadur of Manoharpukur Park who is obsessed with the bones of a sacrificed virgin; the mahajan and hoarder of Golapara Haat, Nishikanta; the modern-day Duhshasana (a reference to an infamous Kuru brother from the Mahabharata), textile merchant Devidas; and the transformed Christian missionary-turned-India-lover, Leipzig University Blue Hans, among many others. In *Ekti Shatrur Kahini*, Narayan explored the age-old quest to determine the friends and enemies of India. The old padre Donalds is shown as a failed missionary who is utterly dejected by the futility of his efforts to transform the "idolators" in the heathen land, India. In the latter years of his frustrating career among the tribals, his only companion (whom he despises with all his heart) is the former Donga Santal, who is transformed via conversion to Joseph Emmanuel, and who is relentless in his efforts to erase all traces of his Indian past. The little children of his enemy land, unfortunately, are his

Achilles' heel—they do not let him forget who he really is. In this environment there appeared one day the young German padre, Hans. His religious affiliation turned out to be no more than a clever disguise: in reality, he had fallen in love with India upon reading the works of Max Mueller. In virtually no time at all, he achieved what neither the missionary Donalds, nor the metamorphosed Santal Emmanuel could achieve in years: he won the heart of India. His victory was, of course, unforgivable to the missionaries. He was not supposed to love India, he was supposed to deliver her from the evil of idol worship. Then the war started in Europe. Germany became England's enemy, and by association, also the enemy of England's colonial crown-jewel, India. Hans' final act in the story graphically raises the eternal question: are *they* the friends of India, who perpetually treat her with contempt and condescension as the land of idolatry, and yet do not hesitate to worship Mother Kali when victory in the war becomes critical, or is *he* an enemy of India, who has embraced her by offering her, unconditionally, his heartfelt love? The war, Professor Bhattacharya concludes, is just a metaphor for the greater irony central to the story.

Returning momentarily to the matter of the so-called "*Best Indian Writing*," the present translator takes a view sharply different from that expressed by Salman Rushdie as mentioned earlier. Speaking strictly from the Indian context (although the conclusions, from this translator's perspective, apply just as well to established writers in other non-English languages), it is virtually needless to point out that languages (such as the many distinct languages of India) with long and evolving literary traditions almost always produce works that reflect the

human experience and human genius at the highest level. To even imagine that there can be an objective, much less scientific, yardstick to judge what is the “best writing” across different languages and cultural experiences is extremely naive at best, and fraught with presumptive arrogance at worst. As an example of how meagre the process of literary migration from one language to another can be, and indeed how potentially misleading, let me cite Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* as an example. Any reader sufficiently fluent in Bengali will agree that even the inspired English translation by the great poet himself of the original *Gitanjali* poems does not, by any measure, do justice to the absolute beauty and perfection of his vernacular work. Yet, one must marvel at the fact that a fairly competent Western readership (including the likes of Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and a host of others whose credentials Mr. Rushdie can hardly dispute) gauged the greatness of the original work from the otherwise excellent, albeit significantly downgraded, English version. If a severely limited sample of his original Bengali work can, thankfully for Tagore, generate such unabashed enthusiasm in the minds and hearts of the greatest writers of the West—does this not at the very least indicate the immeasurable greatness that potentially exists in original vernacular writings that can only be tasted by developing a competent literary sensibility *in that language*? The fact that English has, through historic evolution and global adaptations, become the predominant language of our time, obviously lends to talented writers in that medium a range of advantages, such as access to a wider readership, sometimes at web-speed; immediate world-wide recognition (a phenomenon that began about a century ago); and, in many

cases, far greater financial rewards. However, none of these parameters, and especially the dubious measure of international acclaim, necessarily elevate a work in English to the category of “best writing” in relation to works in other languages. To say so is to simply take an elitist position that places an unfair burden upon practitioners of vernacular literature, many of whom, in this translator’s opinion, have achieved literary greatness that will outlive a great many award winners selected by the global imperial enterprise of the English language. Taking Bengali as a case in point, this translator considers it preposterous to believe that winning one or more awards recognized in Western literary circles, automatically elevates an Indian writer in English with a limited literary career above vernacular writers who have established a sustained body of work with a proven record of excellence. If, perchance, an argument is made that a vernacular writer is not *international* enough, or sufficiently in tune with the contemporary, globally interconnected world—such an argument can be refuted almost immediately by citing any number of examples to the contrary. This translator considers such relatively modern Bengali authors as Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Bani Basu, Joy Goswami, Sanjib Chattopadhyay and others, not to mention the illustrious pre- and post-war writers discussed in these pages, to be perfectly worthy of being considered truly world-class, if indeed such a classification is based on unbiased and objective parameters. Furthermore, this translator postulates that such an objective classification may well yield unpleasant surprises for the pro-English establishment.

Finally, a few crucial words are in order with regards to

the specific selections presented in this collection. One of the most glaring shortcomings of this slender collection, without any doubt, is the absence of any woman writer in the group of ten represented here. As difficult as it has been to compile a representative collection from the vast galaxy of accomplished Bengali authors, male or female, this translator can only offer unqualified apologies that some of the great woman writers are not among those selected here. This was not by any means a conscious or deliberate decision. As it is, even among the male writers, several pre-eminent ones are not to be found here. Rabindranath Tagore is absent, as are Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Pramatha Choudhuri, Rajshekhar Basu, Prabodh Kumar Sanyal, Nihar Ranjan Gupta, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Harinarayan Chattopadhyay, Premendra Mitra, Premankur Atarthy, Samaresh Basu, Manoj Bose, Umraprasad Mukhopadhyay, and indeed so many others. This project began, as was mentioned before, with the initial impulse to translate *Balika Badhu*, and thereafter, stories were simply added to provide diversity and depth to the collection, representing a sample of writing from each period beginning with Sarat Chandra, and continuing with the *Kallol* age and thereafter. It speaks volumes for the magnitude of short story writing in Bengali that a true compendium rightfully deserves a series of well-crafted tomes. This translator regrets that he has been unable to include the fine works of Ashapura Devi, Mahashweta Devi (who has thankfully been translated by very competent hands), Pratibha Basu, Nabaneeta Deb Sen, Bani Basu and other first-rate exemplars. A project of this nature is almost always ultimately an experiment, an inherently imperfect one. It is to be hoped that parallel efforts will add

to, and further enrich this one, such that in the end a sizable body of Bengali short stories will become available to the English-speaking readership worldwide.

Monish R. Chatterjee
Binghamton, New York, 2001