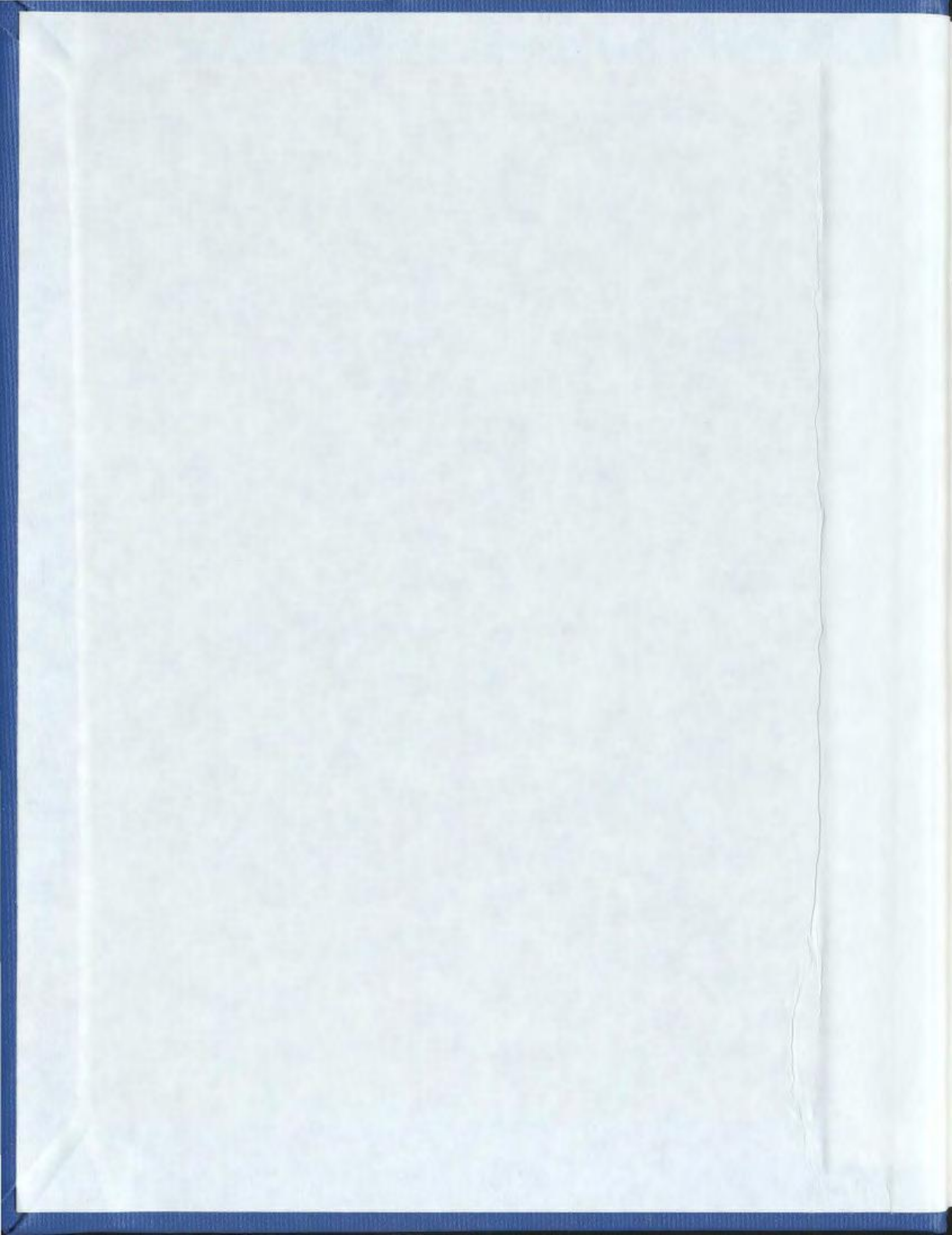


SITUATIONAL STORYTELLING FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG ADULTS IN BENGALI HOUSEHOLDS:  
A STUDY OF TEXTS IN CONTEXTS

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SITUATIONAL STORYTELLING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
ADULTS IN BENGALI HOUSEHOLDS:  
A STUDY OF TEXTS IN CONTEXTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnographic study of storytelling traditions in Bengali households in Calcutta, India. I examine and analyze situational storytelling traditions in private family settings and show how sessions serve the dual purpose of entertaining and instilling in children a sense of cultural norms and values. It is an investigation of the telling of oral folk narratives, observing the narrators and the audiences as a complex whole, in expressing a culture. I explore situational storytelling sessions in family settings from three perspectives: i) the contexts and situations under which stories are told ii) what meanings the stories hold in the life of the narrator and iii) how stories are used as a medium of social control. I also analyze how the genre and content of women's stories reflect their perspectives on their positions in the family and how these narratives lend women a voice to express their deepest feelings and thoughts in the garb of a simple tale.

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“But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.”  
C.S. Lewis: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As the single daughter of two busy working parents, I spent much of my childhood time alone, either looking at pictures in a book quietly in a corner or listening to stories. My brother was born five years after me but even then he provided little company. I was a loner and inhabited a world full of fairies, talking animals, flying horses and princesses who were saved by princes from demons. The images are still as clear as if it was just yesterday: the sun hanging low in the afternoon sky, the soothing rays cutting through the serrated leaves of the coconut tree standing tall next to our house, making some strange symmetrical pattern on the floor of our roof. I am sitting on the concrete floor of our roof which, like those of other middle-class homes in Calcutta, is flat and used for sitting or even at times for sleeping in summers. I am eating puffed rice mixed with milk in a bowl. Next to me, sitting on the roof's concrete bench, is my nanny, whom I fondly called *Mashi* [aunt] who is telling me about the activities of the stray cat Meow-Pussy who lived in the neighborhood and was known to be a master thief. I would never get tired of hearing the anecdotes of Meow-Pussy stealthily entering the kitchens of the neighboring households through a window left ajar and quietly taking off with pieces of fish when no one was looking, or sometimes finishing off the milk from the pan in one straight gulp right under the very noses of the household members. Another sharp childhood memory involves being tucked under warm blankets in chilly winter afternoons, meager sunshine managing to push its way through the slit of the window curtains, falling directly on the bed; grandmother lying next to me narrating a story,

punctuated by the occasional horn of a car or a rickshaw. Even the caw of the crows and the chirping of the sparrows outside in the balcony, would become a part of the story being narrated. Many times the soothing voice in its monotone would lull the other children (my brother and cousins) to sleep even before the prince could slay the demon to save the princess. But I would stay vigilant with open eyes and would not rest till the offender was punished, the demon dead and everyone was happy once again. To me, it seemed to be an essential ingredient for the story: how will it end? Will the kids be reunited with their mother? Will the evil queen be banished from the kingdom? Only after being satisfied that justice prevailed in the end could I fall asleep peacefully. Reinforcing the thought that every good action is rewarded and everyone was happily reunited in the end brought about a sense of peace and comfort in my solitary world. But the best part of it was that I did not have to look too far for these stories. Someone was always available to tell a story or two, be it a parent, grandparent, a nanny or an aunt. On a personal note, I feel I was drawn to this research on storytelling as deep down I felt a desperate need to reconnect once more with the belief that not everything in this world is full of gloom and despair and our own personal stories can have happy endings too. I wanted to go back in search of stories where the heroes stood their ground in the face of all adversity and overcame all challenges to live a happy life. Stories not only help one grow as a person with strong moral values, they also provide moral lessons to children and adults without sounding didactic. While working on this study I realized that people pick up the cultural and moral values more effectively when they are exposed to them in the garb of a simple story. They are not told directly how they should behave but are given examples of good and bad behavior. I have focused on stories told to children by

elders (both male and female) and tried to show how the stories are used as a medium of social control.

Oral narratives have always been an integral part of Indian religion and culture and storytelling in Indian families continues to be relied on as an effective way of transmitting values and thereby sharing a common cultural heritage. Most of the families in India are still joint-families where one can find three generations of a family living under the same roof. In such joint-families, the responsibility of taking care of the children is shared by the women of the household: the paternal grandmother, the mother and the nanny. Stories are told not only for entertainment but as part of household routines like feeding the children and putting them to bed. The aim of this research is to describe and analyze situational storytelling traditions in private family settings and show how cultural norms and values are passed down from one generation to the next through the stories narrated. It is a study of texts in context.

William R. Bascom, in his foundational essay "Four Functions of Folklore," stated that the relationship between folklore and other aspects of culture is in itself very important. This relationship has many facets, the first of which concerns the extent to which folklore, like language, is a mirror of culture and incorporates descriptions of the details of ceremonies, institutions and technology, as well as the expression of beliefs and attitudes (Bascom, 1954). Melville J. Herskovits also argued, "a substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of a people. It is, in a very real sense their ethnography which, if systematized by the student, gives a penetrating picture of their way of life" (Herskovits 1948: 418). Richard Bauman also contends one should "go beyond a conception of oral literature as a disembodied superorganic stuff and ....view it

contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life” (Bauman 1986: 2). More recently Stuart Blackburn has said that “oral stories present a culture’s reflection on itself, a commentary that has been abstracted from everyday life, passed down from generation to generation, and shaped according to local narrative conventions and taste” (Blackburn 2007: 419). Since India is a large country with distinct regional variations, for my research I have focused on storytelling traditions as found in middle-class families in and around the city of Calcutta, in the province of Bengal which is the easternmost part of the country and my home town.

Though stories can arise anywhere and everywhere, for the purpose of this study the contexts for the storytelling sessions have been divided into three main settings: during mealtime, where stories are told to distract the child into eating; during power cuts in the evenings, to stop the children from getting into mischief in the dark; and during bedtime, to lull them to sleep. I have examined how the stories differ in content and genre along with change in their settings; for example, stories told during power-cuts in the evening during the summer and monsoon seasons differ in genre and content from those told during mealtime or even from bedtime stories. A. K. Ramanujan, in his article “Telling Tales,” has noted how the genre of the stories changes depending on where they are told, who tells them and to whom they are told. “The grandmother telling a story to a child in a kitchen at dinnertime, the *vratakatha* (or ritual tale) told in the outer parts of the house or the yard, the mendicant teller who recounts a romantic tale on the veranda, or narratives of the professional bard who is invited to sing, dance, and recite a long religious or romantic epic in a rich man’s hall or public area, these are all different in

genre, style, stock formulas, and topics, in the accompaniment of other actors or instruments or props like pictures” (Ramanujan 1989: 255). I encountered a similar pattern too while conducting my fieldwork and was presented with enriching tales of every kind around every nook and corner of a house.

## **Methodology**

This is an ethnographic study based on recorded oral narratives, interviews with the narrators, other informants and audiences, and close participant observation. It is an investigation of the telling of oral folk narratives and considers the narrators and their audiences as a complex whole in their joint expression of their culture. Some of the theories I have applied in this research are contextualism, functionalism, performance theory and feminist/social identity theories, with special attention being given to defining gender roles. I have analyzed how differences in language, genre and content of the women’s stories reflect their various perspectives and speak about their positions in the family. It is also interesting to note how the genre of a story changes along with the gender of the narrator. I have tried to examine closely how private family storytelling sessions are used for entertainment purposes while at the same time instilling in the children a sense of cultural norms and values. I have focused on stories told in a particular context and at the same time on how the stories can be classified according to their settings. Much attention has been paid by scholars to how folktales reflect unconscious and repressed desires of humankind in symbolic forms, but in a way this may have diverted attention from the obvious, articulate and conscious meanings that the stories hold.



Folklorists (Dégh 1969; Georges 1969; Bauman 1986; Taggart 1990) have increasingly focused their attention on the complex relationships among the content of stories, the particular personalities of the storytellers, and the storytelling situations. There is an intricate relationship between the oral tales narrated and the narrators, and in this research I have tried to explore how the stories fit into the personal lives of the narrators and what meanings they draw from the tales they choose to perform. While trying to provide a multi-dimensional interpretation of the folktales discussed in this research, I have put the narrators in the forefront and given value to the meanings, observations and perceptions that they as narrators allude to in the tales they perform. I have explored how stories narrated under the living conditions of everyday life provide strength to the listener as well as the narrator. But why a performer chooses to narrate a particular story needs to be probed. As Bascom suggests, a study of the relation between folklore and culture involves an investigation of a series of related facts which are: 1. When and where the various forms of folklore are told. 2. Who tells them, whether or not they are privately owned, and who composes the audience. 3. Dramatic devices employed by the narrator, such as gestures, facial expressions, pantomime, impersonation or mimicry. 4. Audience participation in the form of laughter, assent or other responses, running criticism or encouragement of the narrator, singing or dancing, or acting out parts in the tale. 5. Categories of folklore recognized by the people themselves and 6. Attitudes of the people toward these categories (Bascom 1954: 334). I have tried to adhere to this framework as much as possible.

My study explores situational storytelling sessions in private family settings from three perspectives: i) the contexts and situations under which stories are told; ii) what

meanings the stories hold in the personal life of the narrator; and iii) how stories are used as a medium of social control. The first three chapters describe the contexts and settings for the storytelling events and show how situations for narrating stories arise, within the three main settings of mealtime, power-cuts and bedtime. I have compared and contrasted the stories as texts and show how they differ in style, content and genre from one setting to another. While conducting my fieldwork, it became apparent that each setting had its own genre of stories, which were separate and distinct from one another, and in no cases would overlap with each other. Thus stories told during mealtimes would generally be comic or humorous stories or ghost stories involving supernatural activities to scare the child into obedience and make him finish his food fast; while bedtime stories would always be fairy-tales having happy endings to make the child feel secure and have a good night's rest free from nightmares. On the other hand, stories told during power-cuts would be mainly religious stories, legends, other folktales, or even fables, basically stories with a moral teaching.

It can be observed that the genre and selection of the stories again changes with the narrator, even though the setting might be the same. For example, if it is the nanny who has to bear the task of feeding the children returning from school at noon, more often than not she will narrate ghost stories or other supernatural stories to scare them into obedience. But if it is the grandmother feeding the children, she will always tell humorous animal tales or fables to distract the children into eating. One can say that perhaps this is related to a different set of power dynamics between the children and the domestic helpers versus the children and the elder members of the family. The servant has to bribe the children to behave, whereas the elder family members can command.

However, since this is not the central objective of my thesis, I have not delved into the power dynamics between different classes. While interviewing different families, it came out that female members of the families never approve of telling young children ghost stories, but they cannot always regulate who narrates what stories. Another conflict area over stories could be observed between the different age groups of the same gender, like the mother and grandmother. The grandmothers are usually of the opinion that the children of the family should be exposed to their own heritage and culture and so they would narrate folktales and fairy-tales specific to Bengal, in their vernacular language. However, mothers have a different opinion and prefer to narrate stories of Cinderella, Goldilocks and the Three Bears and other stories of the Grimms, or Hans Christian Andersen, the medium of the narration being strictly English. Again the grandmothers usually narrate their stories orally, while the mothers prefer to read out bedtime stories from illustrated books. This is a source of conflict between the women of two generations as elders lament the loss of Bengali cultural heritage and language; while younger mothers feel it important for children to be exposed to different cultures and ideas.

In Bengali households women are the main narrators of stories, with the children as audiences, and only rarely do men share the same private space as story-tellers in a domestic setting. During my fieldwork, I only came across male members of a family, telling stories to children in private family settings on one or two occasions, and those too in the very specific setting of a power-cut, when the entire family was gathered together. The stories told by the men differ largely in genre and content from those narrated by the female members of the household. The older male members would usually tell hunting tales from their own experiences, or would narrate legends about political heroes who

contributed in India's struggle for independence against the colonialists, or narrate episodes from the Mughal emperors' lives, i.e. of Akbar, Babar and the like. But the younger male members, in a power-cut, would seize the opportunity to narrate ghost stories to the young children just for the sheer pleasure of entertainment and to scare them at the same time, until some elder household member would interfere and put an end to the storytelling session, as the children would get scared in the night and suffer from nightmares. It is observed that grandmothers and mothers do not approve of telling ghost stories to the children as it makes their task of putting the children to bed harder. As one informant (a mother) mentioned, though children appear to be more than eager to listen to scary stories at the time of narration, later on it becomes a challenge to put them to bed and turn off the lights as they get scared and cling to their mother or grandmother. She concluded that since the male members are relieved of the duty of putting the children to bed, they never understand why the children need to be kept away from hearing ghost stories. Thus many feel that stories told to children should be screened and carefully selected to make sure that they are not sending wrong messages or disturbing them. But again it is through these stories that cultural concerns are passed down from one generation to the next, and this is what I will highlight in the third strand of my thesis.

The third perspective of the thesis will deal with folktales that are specific to Bengal and the cultural messages that are hidden in these texts. As Richard Bauman has commented,

Oral narrative provides an especially rich focus for the investigation of the relationship between oral literature and social life because part of the special nature of the narrative is to be doubly anchored in human events. That is,

narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events that they recount, toward narrative events and narrated events (Bauman 1986: 2).

It is necessary to put the folktales into their cultural context as only then will a true interpretation of them be possible. In Chapters Five and Six I examine how socialization of children takes place from a very young age as a result of narration of the tales within the family. I analyze how telling stories is an effective way of socialization of young children, through which they are taught about social roles, for example how boys are expected to be fearless and brave while girls are to be submissive, docile and subservient. I also voice the narrators' opinions of the stories they have performed and put value on the meanings they attach to the stories they narrate. I also emphasize analysis of the role of women within the family hierarchy and how they are empowered by narrating and listening to tales.

### **Fieldwork**

I came back to Calcutta in the winter of 2011 for two months (December – January), full of passion to document and record the folktales I had grown up on, and thereby to relive my childhood days. But reality was far from what I had expected. As I barged into my grandmother's chamber and propped myself on the bed, thrusting an audio recorder close in front of her mouth, I urged: "Now tell me a story. Any story for that matter will do." An awkward pause followed. In a despondent tone, my grandmother spoke, "But I don't remember any story anymore. So many years have gone by since the last time I narrated a story. I cannot tell a story like the old times anymore. My memory has gone weak." Soon I was greeted with these same lines over and over again from every storyteller I knew in my childhood, and my quest for the now elusive folktales

seemed to have reached a dead end. “Ahhh I have forgotten all the tales. Yes, I do remember narrating many stories of *Tuntuni* and the *Sly Fox* and *Lal Kamal* and *Neel Kamal*. But these days who remembers those stories?!” These seemed to be the standard lines that I found myself hearing instead of the stories that I had been expecting. After a while out of sheer frustration, I realized that I had to change my approach. Starting with my maternal grandmother [*dida*], I decided to try a different technique to jog her memory. It was her habit to serve her grandchildren during mealtimes and make sure they eat a full meal under her watchful eyes. I remembered how she would narrate story after story with the purpose of distracting us into eating all our vegetables and making sure that we finished all the food on our plate. I felt a sudden lump in my throat realizing that it had been over a decade since I last sat down to have lunch with her and asked for a story. In our race for life we often take for granted people who devoted so much of their time to us just to ensure that we have been fed and carefully attended to. As I sat down for lunch with her one afternoon I asked for a story and this time the stories poured forth without hesitation.

But now as an ethnographer I was drawn to things I had ignored before. This time I was more interested in probing deeper and finding out where and how she came across the stories for the first time. Did she read the stories from a book or had she heard them somewhere? I was surprised by the answers. I had never realized that there are some stories which can be said to be heirlooms in our family. My great grandmother had narrated the folktale to my grandmother when she was just a child and I was the fourth generation to hear the same story. That story took on a new meaning for me from that day onwards, having previously disregarded it just as a simple story. I perceived slowly

that there is a story behind every story narrated and sometimes it is the background story which makes the actual story much more interesting.

Many of the people who had told me hundreds of stories when I was young could not now seem to remember a single one. They would sit in silence when asked for a story and more often than not would send me home asking me to return after a couple of days so that in the meantime they could refresh their memories. However, time was running out and I had to get the stories fast. So I decided to look for people who told stories in the present and were compelled to perform them for a reason. But wherever I looked it seemed that everyone was in a mad rush and no one really had time to listen to a story, let alone tell one. Looking back at my childhood I wondered who told **me** these hundreds of stories which I can still clearly recollect from aural memory. The answer was right in front of my eyes: the nannies and the grandmothers and occasionally the mother. I decided to look for families with children and I was certain that I would find some of the best folktales hidden in those households. However, it soon became clear that it was in joint family households where I would get the best folktales performed by the grandparents. Otherwise, in nuclear families the tradition of storytelling was not that common for a variety of reasons. So I chose to focus on the members of joint family households as my primary informants and after my previous initial disappointment, was successful in documenting exactly what I was looking for. As I wanted to record the stories under natural circumstances as a part of their daily everyday activities I came up with an ingenious idea, though much to the inconvenience of my informants. I would show up at my informants' houses (family friends living in the joint-family system with children) unannounced right during lunch time which was usually anytime between 12



pm to 1 pm right when an already hassled nanny is trying to coax the child to eat and often I would stay for the afternoon rest time, when the child is put to bed for an afternoon nap and all the members of the household retire to their chambers to take some rest. I noticed that if I managed to catch the storytellers off-guard, they would become completely oblivious to the iPhone audio recorder and the stories would come out more naturally without any hesitation. Sometimes the performers got so caught up while narrating the stories they forgot who was present in the room or that I was observing them and their surroundings as well. It was fascinating to notice how the performer's body language would change while narrating a story along with changes in facial expression. Previously I had never felt the need to observe the small nuances that make stories so much more interesting: like the voice modulations, the expressions in the faces and hand gestures, too. But this time as a researcher I paid attention to these details. Also I felt that many times a story was performed not because of the relevance of the story to the situation but because of an overriding emotional value attached to the tale by the narrator. Thus most of the interviews conducted were unstructured sessions and some specific questions were asked only when I wanted an opinion on a particular subject. Otherwise I felt that some of the best insights of the informants about the tales arose in plain everyday conversation or while discussing mundane daily activities.

While most of my informants had no objection to being identified with their real names, some were hesitant about disclosing their identities; abiding by their wishes, I have used pseudonyms instead of their actual names.

After my fieldwork of eighteen weeks (from the 1st of December 2011 to 27<sup>th</sup> January in 2012 and then another ten weeks from 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012 to 10<sup>th</sup> February

2013), in and around the city of Calcutta, and focusing on upper middle-class Bengali households, I managed to collect thirty-three folktales in all, recording sixteen different narrators (thirteen females and three males) from thirteen different households, including my own. From my own family I recorded tales being narrated by my own maternal grandmother, maternal grand-aunt, my paternal grandmother and my aunt. I recorded three of my friends' grandmothers, who are brilliant storytellers, whose stories were the main attraction to go and spend time at those friends' houses during my childhood. Also included among our neighboring family friends, are five mothers with young children, who regularly narrate stories to their children (they chose to remain anonymous). I also recorded stories narrated by two housemaids working in two different households. Apart from the storytellers, I also interviewed sixty-five members of around forty different Bengali households (including my own) to gain a wider perspective of the feelings and thoughts regarding the selection and content of the stories told to children. I also got to observe the narrator-audience interaction closely, noting hand gestures and facial expressions. Apart from the female narrators, I could record only three male performers narrating a story: they were a friend's grandfather in his seventies, an uncle who is in his mid-thirties and a forty year old male family friend who regularly told tales to his children. I have included only thirteen of the stories I recorded, keeping in mind the need to describe settings and contexts, as otherwise the work would have grown to monstrous proportions. But I would like to mention that this work is not just an ensemble of sixteen weeks of field work but a larger tapestry of memories and experiences.

I was lucky to catch some of the narrators narrating stories in natural settings, like Latika the nanny, at work when she was feeding her charge. It was hard to find nannies

telling stories to children during mealtimes as very often they would allow the child to watch television in a bid to make their task of feeding the child easier. But in traditional households, mealtimes are still considered to be private time and televisions for that matter are set in the living room, separate from the dining room. Children are also supervised and forbidden to watch television during mealtime. When it came to recording the stories, I encountered some problems only with the nannies as they would clam up as soon as they spotted the recorder, and grew self-conscious and halting in their speech. It was important for me to place the recorder on the table to get a good clear recording of the voice. But when I realized that they were growing too uncomfortable, I moved the recorder out of their line of sight and immediately the flow of the story returned without any nervousness.

As previously stated, for the purposes of this study I chose to focus my work on upper middle-class families in Calcutta, the capital of the province of Bengal. India is a vast country with distinct regional variations, where every region and state is marked by its own local cultural stamp, its own language, customs and flavor. It is not possible to make generalizations about the whole of India, based on my observations of one city and even Calcutta with its population of 10 million is diverse. So I have decided to stick to Calcutta as my area of study. I was born and raised in Calcutta and had spent a considerable portion of my life as a participating non-observer of various Bengali traditions, rituals, and cultural nuances. But returning to the city after a gap of around four years as a folklore researcher with a recorder in hand in order to document the same culture as a living and breathing thing, which I had previously taken for granted, opened up new perspectives for me. I started looking at the smallest events, starting with the way

people greet each other, in a new light. Interviewing people whom I knew personally as family, friends and neighbours as a researcher was a bit difficult in the beginning as I had to look at them as participants of a culture through the eyes of a detached observer. But as I progressed with my field work, I realized that this familiarity with the participants was actually an advantage as I was armed with a rare insight that comes not from intellect alone but from empathy, an essential ingredient in understanding the people one hopes to learn about, and from.

### **Translation vs. Transliteration**

With a few exceptions (where the mothers read out fairytales from books to children in English) almost all the stories I recorded and documented were in Bengali. Though I was optimistic, soon I encountered the laborious dual process of transcribing and translating at the same time. Though my informants were very accommodating in sharing their comments and insights regarding the folktales, almost all of them were self-conscious and apprehensive about how it would all come out after being translated into English. Many of them voiced a concern that a huge essence of the tale would be lost in translation and perceived as bleak and empty without the rich humour present in the original form. So while translating I had to shoulder the responsibility of not only preserving the inner essence of the story but also of doing justice to the narrator's performance of the story in a different language.

For the representation of stories as texts and for the sake of easy readability, I have employed certain methods. I have provided a dash to signify long pauses and used bold letters to put emphasis on a particular word. In quotations or citations, where I have

elided some part of the whole quote, I have used four periods to signify that. Since I have translated all the oral narratives, comments and interviews from Bengali to English, it was not feasible to transcribe and then translate all of them word by word; and henceforth the texts underwent some alteration for language purposes, though I have tried to stay as close to the original version as possible. Wherever I have used some Bengali words which did not seem to have an English equivalent, I have explained their meanings in English in square brackets.

### **Literature Review**

My work has drawn heavily on Alessandro Falassi's *Folklore by the Fireside*, a contextual, textual and performance oriented study on Tuscan rural folklore, where the family gathers around the kitchen hearth in an evening storytelling, singing, and conversational event called the *veglia*. He begins by showing how folklore and storytelling helps in disciplining the child and instilling family values, and continues to show how each generation in these extended Italian families, like the joint-families in Calcutta, finds something of particular relevance to their stage in life through the sequence of genres typically performed. But the interesting part is how he uses the setting of the *veglia* as a centre-stage for describing the situational storytelling sessions.

Another inspirational book for my thesis is Kirin Narayan's *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*. Kirin Narayan presents traditional tales rendered by women in the North Indian Kangra valley. She divides the book into two sections: the first part called Women's Ritual Tales, which are narrated only during an auspicious lunar conjuncture which comes on Mondays, and it is only then that the telling of these stories gains

priority over all other activities; and the second part, called Winter Tales, which are basically fairy tales, and to listen to them people sit together ‘transcending gender, caste and occupation,’ during the cold winter months. What makes the book important is that the author takes into consideration the context and weaves together the tales accompanied by the digressions and the interruptions, thus giving the narrator-audience relationship primary importance.

Lopamudra Maitra’s article, “100 years of Thakurmar Jhuli (Grandmother’s Bag of Tales): From Oral Literature to Digital Media—Shaping Thoughts for the Young and the Old” is another article that was central to my study; Maitra describes the survival of oral tradition through changing media over a period of time. She also talks about women as narrators and analyzes how Bengali folktales are the biggest reflection of thoughts, fantasies, beliefs and feelings of women in rural Bengal, making the oral tale the simplest medium through which a village woman’s dream of becoming a princess or a queen could come true, in the realm of fantasy.

Another important article that I have referred to is Sarah Lamb’s “The Beggared Mother: Older Women’s Narratives in West Bengal.” Lamb concentrates on the less often heard voices of older South Asian women by looking at the stories they tell about motherhood. Her argument is that it is through such oral narratives that many Bengali women scrutinize and critique the social worlds they experience, giving voice to their experiences through the language of the story. I have drawn upon this article as an important source in my discussion of gender relations and the roles of women.

Last but not the least, *Enchanted Maidens* (1990) by James Taggart has been central to my research. Taggart has shown how in the rural Spanish region of Caceres

orally transmitted tales are metaphorical expressions of experience, and he has analyzed these tales to understand gender relations within Spanish society and culture. Taggart examines the male-female dialogues expressed through storytelling and he makes a connection between the content of the specific tales and the life experiences and gender of the storyteller. Taggart explains that the storytelling dialogue “is one of the several ways that women and men communicate with one another to reduce the distance and mediate the contradictions in their relationship” (Taggart 1990: 7) and express their different perspectives on love and family life. Taggart makes an important contribution as he has presented in this work a comparison of masculine and feminine variants of the same stories.

I also consulted Hans-Jorg Uther’s *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (2004) to identify the tale types of the folktales presented in the study. Though I could successfully identify and match a couple of the folktales with their ATU tale type numbers, not all of them could be identified.



## **A Historical Background of Calcutta**

Bengal has always been a geographically strategic area, being a coastal land and also famous for its fertile alluvial soil, situated on the banks of river Ganga, the most sacred of all rivers in Hindu religion. Because of its strategic location, more than any other province of India, Bengal has been a favorite target for foreign invaders like the Pathans (twelfth century), the Mughals (sixteenth century) and then the British (eighteenth century). These invasions not only disrupted the socio-economic conditions of the province, but also caused distinct religious, cultural and political changes that at the same time enriched Bengali culture. Today the people living in the state of Bengal speak the vernacular language of Bengali, and descend from one or more of four ethnic groups, known to ethnologists as Kol, Dravidian, Mongolian and Aryan. These groups can no longer be divided into distinct categories but are mostly intermingled. The main population of Calcutta comprises Bengali Hindus with Islam and Christianity being the second and third most popular religions after Hinduism.

In terms of western influence, “the Portuguese had started a trading post in Bengal as long ago as 1535, the Dutch had done the same a hundred years later, in 1636; and in 1673 the French had followed, establishing a settlement upriver at Chandernagore. The British came last...” (Dutta 2003: 9).

Calcutta is the capital of this Indian state of Bengal and plays the role of a major port city. As Tai-Yong Tan points out in his essay "Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta,"

Port cities do not only function as entry or exit points for the movement of goods, labour and capital; they also serve as nodal centres for the

reception and transmission of culture, knowledge and information; their essential functions generating the conditions and space for cultural mixing and hybridization....As nodes and hubs of economic and social networks port cities become natural sites for the meeting of foreign and local societies (Tan 2007: 853).

R. Murphy also comments that port cities are places where “races, cultures and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city”(Murphey 1989: 225).

In 1947 following the independence of India from colonial rule, India was partitioned into Hindu dominated India and Muslim dominated Pakistan. The partition of India constituted a major setback to Bengal and consequently Calcutta. The new borders carved out by the British went through the heart of Bengal on the eastern part of India dividing it into two parts: Hindu dominated West Bengal which came under India and Muslim dominated East Bengal which formed East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh); while in Western India, the dividing lines cut through Punjab and its adjacent areas giving rise to the new state of Pakistan.

According to the provincial results of the 2011 national census of Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, the Kolkata district which occupies an area of 185 km<sup>2</sup> (71 sq mi), had a population of 4,486,679; its population density was 24,252 /km<sup>2</sup> (62,810 /sq mi) making it the third-most populous metropolitan area in India.<sup>1</sup>

Thus because of its long history of displacement and migration as well as its easy absorption of many distinct races and influences of different groups, Calcutta has a

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<sup>1</sup> “Area, population, decennial growth rate and density for 2001 and 2011 at a glance for West Bengal and the districts: provincial population totals paper 1 of 2011: West Bengal”. Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

unique flavor and it is not without reason that it is proclaimed to be the cultural capital of India.

### **The Socio-Economic and Cultural Composition**

Right from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Calcutta, as a centre of trade and commerce, with a huge influx of foreign traders and dominating colonialists, drew in a 'heterogeneous indigenous population' (Banerjee, 1989) encompassing both the rich and the poor.

The prevailing relationships of the people, based not on any traditional moral order, but on business and or administrative convenience, produced new states of mind in Calcutta, which could be described as a 'heterogenetic' centre as opposed to the 'orthogenetic' type of old cities (like Beijing or Kyoto) which carried forward, developed and elaborated a long established local culture or civilization. Calcutta, on the other hand, (like London, New York or Osaka), created new modes of thought, both among the rich and the poor, that were in conflict with the old culture (Banerjee, 1989: 2).

From 1772 till 1912, Calcutta served as the capital of British India, and western education was introduced here first, leading the whole of India, and a new economy was set up that led to the birth of a middle-class intelligentsia [*bhadralok or gentlefolk*].

Calcutta is still considered to be the cultural capital of India. With the emergence of Calcutta as an open, commercial port city, the introduction of western education, a new culture and ideas gave impetus to the educated middle-class among the Bengalis called the *bhadralok* who became the driving force of politics in Calcutta (Tan, 2007).

### **Emergence of *Bhadralok* as a social class**

As Sumanta Banerjee has shown in his book *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta was divided into two distinct socio-economic groups. The first group was comprised of the Bengali elite: the landed aristocrats who helped the British conduct business and administration in relation to the indigenous people; the absentee landlords (agents appointed by the British to collect land revenue imposed by land reform methods like Permanent Settlement); and at the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *bhadraloks*, “a middle-class consisting of professionals who were products of an English colonial education system (conforming in many ways to the standard set by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his famous minute of 1835, ‘...a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’), who evolved a concept of nationalism acceptable within the setup of colonial administration (Banerjee 1989: 1).

The second group consisted of the people belonging to the lower strata in both caste and social hierarchy. They resided in the neighbouring villages and were engaged in physical labour as artisans and craftsmen.

S.N. Mukherjee in his article “Bhadralok in Bengali language and literature: An essay on the language of class and status” sees the *bhadralok* as a *de facto* social group, “the bhadralok status was not ascriptive; it had to be acquired....Caste did not play an important role in selecting *bhadralok*” (Mukherjee 1993: 72-73). Anindita Ghosh in her article, “Revisiting the ‘Bengal Renaissance’: Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta” shares Mukherjee’s observation that the *bhadralok* or the ‘gentlefolk’

mostly belonged to the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy like the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaidyas; previously in the precolonial era they had served as a part of bureaucracy and after the arrival of the British continued with the same responsibilities, now empowered by western education and language (Ghosh, 2002). “Membership of the class was not ascriptive, and had to be acquired by virtues of a lifestyle that was marked by education, abstinence from physical labour—and not absolutely but frequently—a high caste status” (Ghosh 2002: 4335). However the *bhadralok* was never a single homogenous group but was hierarchically divided into many *dals* (groups) (Mukherjee 1993: 77). But for purposes of this research it is not necessary to delve into a deep discussion of the different groups that the *bhadralok* class was divided into.

“Whether they called themselves simply ‘grihasthas’ or householders, or towards the end of the century ‘shikshito madhyabitta’ or educated middle-class, the essence of their identity as *bhadralok* or ‘gentlefolk’ was this contempt for manual labour. This was a self-image strongly coloured by a cultural chauvinism that derived from a pride in western education and inheritance of the ‘Renaissance’ tradition in Bengal” (Ghosh 2002: 4335). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the *bhadralok* was increasingly rising as a cultured, modern and enlightened class and slowly a rigid distinction came to be drawn between the educated, cultured *bhadraloks* and the laboring poor or *chotolok* (Ghosh, 2002).

In this context, a discussion on the *bhadralok* class is essential, as in my research I have focused mainly on the middle and upper middle-classes of Bengali society in Calcutta which consists of the *bhadralok* or the urban educated middle-class. With the exception of three housemaids/nannies (Latika, Bijali and Sita), all my other informants

belonged to *bhadralok* or urban educated Bengali middle-class families. This research is not about analyzing the stories as ‘elite’ or ‘popular’ culture on one hand and ‘indigenous folk culture’ on the other (Banerjee, 1989) (Ghosh, 2002); but rather an analysis of the genre and socio-cultural values of the stories, performed under specific settings within a cultural framework. Again this thesis is not a study of the origins of the folktales discussed so I have not delved into any discussions on whether the history of any tale would show that the oral versions from India are the original sources for European versions of the same motif found in a similar story.

Another reason why Calcutta, the leading centre of Bengali literary production, was the chosen site for my research was because of its old tradition of long idle chats popularly called *adda*. The custom of men gathering together—and women, too, gathering in separate social space—to talk informally about all kinds of things that affect their lives is an old tradition in rural Bengal (Chakrabarty 1999: 118).

### **The Culture of *Adda*:**

An integral aspect of the culture of Calcutta, upholding its conventions of communal fellow-feeling is the concept of *adda* (pronounced “aadda”). As Dipesh Chakrabarty in his article, “Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity” defines the term *adda*, “it is the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations” (Chakrabarty 1999: 110). He also adds that “adda is often seen as something quintessentially Bengali, as an indispensable part of the Bengali character or as an integral part of such metaphysical notions as ‘life’ and ‘vitality’ for the Bengalis” (Chakrabarty 1999:110).

For this very reason, any discussion on storytelling traditions in Bengali households would be incomplete without touching upon the topic of *adda*, an important cultural component of a Bengali's social sensibility. It is a predominantly male-oriented social practice in the public sphere (starting with the youths and continuing up to old age) whereas in my thesis I have focused on the private familial traditions of storytelling among women and children.

### **Composition of a Traditional Bengali Household**

India as a large country of sub-continental proportions has a diverse mix of people speaking different languages and belonging to different castes, and religions. The basic tenets of Indian cultural values are practiced and evolved within the family system. The family is also seen as the basic unit of socialization for all its members (Singh, 2011). In India, most of the households are still joint-families with up to three generations of a family living under the same roof (Shah, 1974). This holds true in the case of Bengal, too, and most of the families I interviewed belonged to middle/upper middle-class joint-family households. Almost all families in South Asia, with Bengal being no exception, are patrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence.

I. Karve in his book *Kinship Organization in India, Bombay* defines the joint-family as, "a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common, who participate in common family worship, and who are related to each other as some particular type of kindred" (Karve 1965: 8).

The traditional patrifocal family is based upon age and gender hierarchies of authority: older members have authority over younger ones, and males have authority

over females. Since these two hierarchies cross-cut each other, both men and women have authority in some contexts but are subordinate in other contexts (Seymour 1999: 272).

The traditional joint-family consists of husband, wife, children and the husband's parents. After marriage, the new bride leaves her parents to settle down in her husband's house, where she is expected to make it her new home complete with her in-laws. The daughter-in-law is often looked upon as the home-maker in the sense that she looks after the family and takes care of her in-laws (Singh, 2011).

A woman's status, and therefore what kind of a life she leads, depends on many things: whether she is in an urban sector or rural household, which caste she is, what socio-economic class she belongs to, and whether she is landed or landless. It is important, therefore, to place the women in a household within this larger social order (Krishnaraj, 1989). Apart from the members of the family, both male and female, multi-generational patrilineal households usually have a high 'internal' demand for the labour of women. A smooth completion of domestic chores depends on the various women in the household, cooperating with each other. More often than not, daughters-in-law are still pressed to remain at home to assist their mothers-in-law with domestic tasks, to be trained in taking on the responsibilities of servicing household needs, and eventually to become mothers-in-law themselves. But in middle/upper middle-class households, female domestic help is employed to help with the daily household chores. These women generally belong to the lower ranks of the caste system, migrating from the neighboring villages to the cities.



It is important to point out that the caste system is still deeply prevalent in Indian society. In every segment of Indian society, including Bengali society, it was caste that determined the class to which people belonged, the education they received, and the nature of their occupation. People belonging to the upper three levels of caste hierarchy were at a higher position class-wise, while those belonging to the lowest rank had no social position. In the traditional Indian society (pre-colonial and even in colonial times) it was not considered appropriate for middle and upper income married women to take up paid employment outside their homes. Inferior status was accorded to working women as generally they belonged to lower classes and were employed in less prestigious occupations. Significant changes have been observed in recent years; however, in the attitudes of family members toward mothers stepping out from the confines of the home and entering the professional field. As Bal Ram Singh observes in his book *Indian Family System: The Concept, Practices and Current Relevance* (2011), the most significant change in the joint-family system in the postcolonial period was the radical transformation of the role and status of female members in a traditional joint-family system. He observes that it was only after economic liberalization and its accelerated growth [1950s onwards] that women in domestic spheres were given a genuine opportunity to break age-old social barriers. Large numbers of women found employment in various professions. A woman, who was earlier dependent for financial security upon her husband and the male members of the household, was now financially independent and subsequently claimed a more assertive role in decision making within the family. Singh also notes that, “the privileged position of the elders in the joint family is under attack because of the gradual withering away of joint family practices, norms and

traditions....The younger members move out of the joint family for jobs in distant places and elders face difficulty in adjusting to nuclear families....The breakup of the traditional joint family system has destroyed the authority structure of the joint family” (Singh 2011: 88-89).

Increasingly with both parents working away from home during the daytime, managing the children becomes the responsibility of the grandmother and the housemaids. It should be mentioned that in average middle-class families in India, where both the parents are working or even if the mother is a homemaker, a house-maid is usually employed, whose duties among other things involve taking care of the children of the house. Here by middle-class, I refer to families where there are one or more than one earning member in the family, having educational, technical, office or retail jobs, and where at least three generations of women in such families are educated, at least up to the level of high school graduation also known as the *bhadralok* (as discussed above).

In my attempt to weave together a larger story about life as found in and around the city of Calcutta, what I have managed to produce inadvertently is a narrative in auto-ethnography. When I had set out to write my thesis I was overwhelmed as to where to start from and how to pull the thread of stories seamless in a narrative pattern. But as I started writing—from the chirp of sparrows, to the clinking of bangles, the aroma of hot tea in the midst of the sharp chill in the air—each and every sound, smell, sight, taste and feeling came alive. I hope I have done justice to the narrators and their renditions of the stories in translating the tales and in bringing them alive.

## Chapter 2

### “Listen and Eat” Stories for Mealtime

“So when do you feel compelled to tell a child a story?” This was one of the main questions that I asked each of my informants and surprisingly the most common answer was, “during mealtimes.” “Accomplishing the task of feeding young children, particularly those within the age group of three to eight, can be tedious and exasperating,” remarked an informant, who had worked as a daytime nanny for approximately fifteen years in five different households. Hearing this I had to suppress a quiet smile remembering how I used to torment my poor nanny, whom we called *Mashi* [mother’s sister; aunt], during lunch hours when she waited on me for hours just to make me swallow a tiny morsel. With both our parents away for work, *Mashi* had to bear the task of fetching me and my brother from school and then came the hardest part, getting us to eat our lunch. *Mashi* had her own technique of getting around the job of feeding her charges. During lunch time, if *Mashi* was around and in charge we could expect a good story and even swallowing vegetables would become much easier. Though there were other maids in the house attending other chores, nobody had the patience that *Mashi* had. We knew it even as young children and we took absolute advantage of the fact. While serving food on the plates, she would start, “Work your mouth, the same way your ears are working.” That was the cue that we would get to hear stories only if we ate quickly. During the course of my fieldwork, I found a similar pattern as I visited different households and observed grandmothers, mothers and aunts narrating stories to children, with the purpose of distracting them into eating.

Apart from the grandmother and mother, the other female story-tellers in the family are usually the nanny or the housemaid. As one of their main jobs around the house is to look after the children and keep them engaged, it becomes necessary for them to tell stories. In fact, one of the mothers whom I interviewed back in Calcutta, told me that whenever she hires domestic help, one of the first questions she always asks is, "Are you good in narrating stories? My children love to hear stories so please make sure that you have some stories in your stock." The housemaids usually help with the daily household chores like cooking and washing. Their help in managing the children is only called for when the grandmother or mother is busy with work or unavailable for some reason. For example, one of the mothers whom I was interviewing, a housewife, who also lives in a joint-family with both in-laws, had to take her aged mother-in-law at noon for a doctor's appointment. I was supposed to join her for lunch, but she cancelled at the last moment as she had to escort her mother-in-law to the doctor's chamber. She explained that her husband was originally supposed to escort his mother, but now because of a last moment meeting, she had to go. Then she mentioned in passing how difficult her son gets when he comes home from school and finds her not at home. But then she mentioned that the house-maid was really good at telling stories and so can manage her son well. I was curious and wanted to see how the housemaid pacified the difficult child and so I asked if I could still come over to their house and maybe help with baby-sitting.

By the time I arrived, the child, seven year old Bablu, was already home from school and after a lot of cajoling had changed out of his school uniform and was sitting on the dining table while the food was being warmed up. Lunch consisted of rice, vegetables and fried fish. As soon as the food was placed on the plate, the child started

throwing a tantrum, declaring that he was not hungry and would not eat a morsel. The housemaid seemed quite used to such fussy behaviour and carried on with mixing the rice with the curry, calmly stating, "If you finish off the food without creating trouble, I might consider telling you a story." This seemed to pique Bablu's curiosity and calmed him down. He thought for a moment and with a gleam in his eyes said, "Then you have to tell me a true ghost story. I promise I will not get scared." Latika, the domestic-help, laughed and then started on a story.

### **The Ghostly Village and the Lemon Tree:**

In a village, there was a man. He lived with his parents and his wife. One day their next door neighbor told the man that there is a very good job in the city which would give him a lot of good money. Hearing this, the man happily packed his suitcases and boxes—and leaving behind his parents and his wife—went to the city—to earn a lot of money. He stayed in the city for a long time—from time to time wrote back to his parents and wife, asking about their health. Months passed and he did not go back even for once to his old village—his parents grew old asking him to visit them all the time—His wife wrote him long letters—Gradually he became so absorbed in his work that he did not even have time to write back to his parents and wife. After a while he changed his house and forgot to give his parents the new address—and the letters also stopped coming. Months turned into years—one morning he woke up and started remembering his parents and wife. He decided to apply for a leave to visit his old village home. It was a long journey by train and when he reached the old station of the village—it was exactly 12 o' clock in the night.

The village does not have any electricity—and as he gets off the train—it is in complete darkness. But it's a full moon night and in the silvery moonlight the surroundings gleam in a strange manner—But it's a beautifully strange night and the stars twinkle brightly above in the night sky, and the wind blows strongly—*hoosh, hoosh hoosh* [swishing noise of wind]—And on the other side—there are the crickets—*jhi jhi jhi jhi*—they keep on singing.

She then paused to put a spoonful of food into the child's mouth, who listened with rapt attention, forgetting all the previous fuss over food. While stuffing a spoonful of rice and curry into Bablu's mouth, Latika commented conversationally, outside the story, "You poor city-born fellow, what do you know about open skies and green meadow—you should see how beautiful it is when you visit our village—the open green meadows with cows grazing, the rich yellow-ochre paddy fields—" But Bablu, getting impatient, urged her to go on with the story.

Well yes—so the man after getting off the train, looked around in the old dusty station and nothing looked familiar. Everything looked different and he thought that may be it had all changed while he was away in the city. The stray dogs were also not there—Anyway so he started walking towards his house in the darkness—only the moonlight shining on. There were no kerosene lamps burning in any of the houses he passed by—he was not surprised. He thought, after all it's late in the night and everyone has fallen asleep. After walking for an hour, he finally reached his house and in excitement he called out, "Ma, open the door. Look who has come. It's me, your son." For some time there was absolute silence and no sound came out from inside the house. He carefully looked around the house and saw the signs of wear and tear and felt bad looking at the dilapidated state the house was in. He promised himself that as soon as dawn breaks, he will search for the best carpenter in the village and fix the tin roof and the mud walls. But seeing no one open the door, he called out again, "*O bou* [wife], open the door and look who is here. It is your husband." Then slowly he heard a creak and saw the door opening and his parents with his wife with the veil covering her head—standing there—The man went in and was surprised to see all lamps turned off. He said, "Now that I am here, after such a long time, why is there so much darkness? Light the oil lamps and get me food. I am hungry." While his wife went to prepare food for him, he started unpacking and brought out all the gifts that he had bought for his parents and wife. He gave his mother two new sarees and jewellery—new pants for his father—and a gold necklace for his wife. Then he sat down to eat—He was served delicious rice with lentil soup and fried fish. He was very hungry and so he started eating immediately. Halfway through, suddenly he wanted to eat some lemons. So he asked, "*Bou* [wife] get a lemon from the lemon tree from the garden." He could not believe the next thing that happened—(Latika, 2011).

Here she again paused to push another spoonful of rice into the child's mouth and said, "Hurry up and chew your food. Otherwise I am not going to tell what happened next" (Latika, 2011). The child obliged immediately and then she started again.

Now as soon as the young husband asked his wife to get him a lemon from the lemon tree, she extended her hand to get the lemon without even moving from where she was sitting. The husband was horrified to see his wife's arm going on extending itself through the window till it reached the lemon tree and plucked the lemon from the tree. Then the arm shrank back to its normal size and the lemon was placed beside the husband's plate. Seeing this, the husband let out a huge howl, ran outside the house and fainted on the ground—Next morning, he woke up to see a few faces peering over him and sprinkling water on his face. He remembered last night and told them the entire story of what he had seen. The men then told him the real story. They replied, "While you were working in the city, the entire village suffered a mass epidemic. Slowly it ate away almost all the inhabitants of the village, and your family also suffered—First it was your father, then your mother and lastly wife. All of them died one after the other. Now the epidemic is over and only very few families have survived the attack. But your parents till their last days, cried to see your face. Maybe they returned just to see you for the last time." The young man was horrified to hear the story and cried for his dead family—But he had nothing left in the village anymore—So before dusk could break out, he caught the last train and came back to the city, never to return to the village again. (Latika, 2011).

After the tale ended, I was jolted back to the present world by Bubla's voice asking the housemaid, "Is it a true story? And did it happen in your village?" Latika quickly replied, "These are very old stories, long before I was born, even your grandmother was born. And who knows whether they are true or not" (Latika, 2011). Then she playfully added, "Now don't get scared and create a fuss while going to bed in the night. Otherwise your mother and grandmother will scold me for filling up your head with such stories and I will never tell you another ghost story ever" (Latika, 2011).

"*Uff didi* [sister] I have to think on my feet and go on stretching the story as much as possible. What to do, you see if it finishes fast then I have to think of another story and

tell him. So I go on pulling one story for as long as possible,” said Latika, bending towards me. I replied, “But it seemed that you really enjoy narrating stories too. And you perform it so well.” She replied, “*Didi*, who doesn’t like to narrate stories? It gives me a lot of pleasure as I can go back to my own memories and think about the good old days I spent in my village.”

Latika later said,

*Boudi* [mistress of the house; also sister-in-law] and *dida* [grandmother], actually do not approve of me telling such scary ghost stories to Bablu, as sometimes he gets scared in the night and troubles them. And since I do not stay in this house in the night, they have to bear the trouble of managing him then. But sometimes I cannot help it but have to tell him stories like these, otherwise it gets impossible to make him have his food. And then *boudi* gets upset if he does not have his lunch properly. So sometimes I concede and tell him a story or two. And usually his mother is there feeding him, I act as a back-up person only when she is not here. (Latika, 2011).

Though Latika could not remember where she first heard the story or who had told it to her, she definitely recalled picking it up during her childhood days in the village of Moynahati. She commented that, “I do not try to change it consciously, but sometimes I add to the descriptions of the village the way I remember my village while growing up. Those of you who are born in cities can never know the tranquil rustic beauty nature provides us with. So I try to describe that beauty through the tales I tell” (Latika, 2011).

In choosing to tell such stories despite her employers’ disapproval, Latika manages her young charge, and thus her work environment. Although a rendition of a traditional tale, her narrative is also a subversion of authority.

Latika is a forty-five year old woman, who grew up in a small village called Moynahati, which is a good seven to eight hours train journey from the city of Calcutta. She spent the first twelve years of her life in the village and then was brought to Calcutta



by her aunt, her mother's sister, who found her a job as a domestic help in an affluent family.

I never really had any choice in deciding whether I want to stay back in the village and help my parents with agricultural work, or come to Calcutta, the big city. The decision was made by my father and I guess I had to sacrifice my comfortable life, in order to make sure my parents are happy and by contributing to family income—Life was not really easy in the village—too much poverty and too little to eat—but we were happy. We could run freely and see the open sky and steal mangoes from the tree—I always get nostalgic when I start thinking about my village and my childhood. (Latika, 2011).

Saying all this, she paused and I noticed her discreetly swishing the corner of her saree over her eyes. She continued after a while,

But you know, this city-life has given me a lot too—I learnt a lot. And I have been really lucky—I have worked in eight different households for long stretches of time and ALL of them have been so kind to me. And I made good money too. My parents are also happy. And it was in this city, that I met my husband. I guess I am better off in the city—and it is convenient too to live here. I never went to school, but see my son goes to a corporation school and he will have a very good life. And you know, he can recite poems in English too. (Latika, 2011).

As I asked her about her parents, she said,

Yes, both my parents are still alive and they live in the village. They will never come to this city. It is too much for them to take. But now that they are old, I have this constant fear—who knows what might happen and when. Whenever someone I know is going to visit our village, you know, like neighbours or some acquaintance, I hand over as much amount of money from my salary as possible for my parents. Earlier we had a mud house, with thatched roof, now we have a tin roof. It is so much better! And just think about it, it was me, a woman, who provided the money for all this. (Latika, 2011).

As Leela Gulati notes of poor working women in Kerala: '....the households which can afford not to send their women to work, specially manual work, gain in social esteem'

(Gulati, 1981: 167). Poor families are much more dependent than middle-class families on women's earnings to meet survival needs.

The story that Latika narrated highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity. The apprehensions and excitement of moving to a city are balanced with the serenity of the village environment, where life is familiar and mundane. It showcases the fast life of the city and how it makes people disconnected from their family and roots, so even if they want to go back, the lure of money gains control over their life. It may also serve as a warning to those wanting to leave the village and migrate to the cities for a better livelihood, to keep in touch with their families; otherwise they might lose them forever and never know about it, until it is too late. Though she may not have told the story with a conscious intention of drawing parallels between her own life and that of the young man in the story, maybe she did identify with the tale at some level.

Fundamentally this story shows the continuation of ghost belief—which generally indicates a conservative vision of the way life should be lived, with the implied wishes of past generations being considered by living people. One informant, a sixty year old male friend of our family, Buro Das, commented that:

This story, like many other ghost stories reflects the age old beliefs and traditions in our society highlighting the necessity to perform funeral rites. When an immediate family member dies, it is the duty of the husband, son or grandson (mind you, it has to be a male) to perform the last funeral rites after cremation of the body; until and unless that has been carried out, the soul cannot cross over the boundaries of the earth and remains stuck within this mortal world, as is mentioned in our Hindu *shastras* [Hindu canon laws]. Stories like these [The Ghostly Village and Lemon Tree] actually act as a cautionary tale that departed souls won't or rather can't rest in peace in their after-life as their souls would be attached to this mortal world, till proper rites have been observed in their respect. As in this story, the young man was oblivious that his parents and wife had passed away and he never performed any funeral rites for them. So the

departed souls could not leave the boundaries of the earth and by showing themselves to the son reminded him of his duties. (Buro Das, 2012).

However, when I discussed this folktale with another informant he gave a different, and politicized, perspective of the story. According to him, this story came into circulation in the aftermath of the introduction of the railway system by the British in 1857 in India. Apparently, the railway line was normally raised onto an embankment for smoother transport purposes, but often during monsoon season, the surrounding plain land would accumulate huge amounts of rain water. Having no way to flow out, this water became the breeding ground of thousands of mosquitoes which in turn brought about the worst malaria epidemic the country had ever witnessed, in which thousands of villages were reduced to ghost-lands (Parimal Sen, 2011). However, it is necessary to mention in this context that as in most legends, there is flexibility, a range of potential meanings and rhetorical uses.

As I progressed with my field work, I observed that most of the stories narrated during meal time to distract the child made some reference to food, and the narrators would also alter the story a bit from its original version by referring to how tasty the food mentioned in the story was. One of my informants confirmed that she would choose a story to narrate which has some reference to food. Also, the tastier the food sounds the easier it is to make the child eat, since they imagine it in their mind's eye and find it tempting.

I got to observe this as I watched one of my informants, Eela *dida* [grandmother], coaxing her five year old granddaughter into drinking a glass of milk. I was lost for a

while in the folktale she started to narrate to distract the child into finishing off the milk.

It was the “Story of Tuntuni [Tailor Bird] and the Tiger.”

### **Story of Tuntuni [Tailor Bird] and the Tiger:**

Tuntuni and Tuntuni’s wife happily lived in their house in the forest. One day Tuntuni felt like having some creamy sweet rice-pudding—So he asked his wife, “*Bou* [wife], make me some rice-pudding.” Wife answered, “O.K. all right—bring me all the right ingredients and I will make it for you.” So Tuntuni said, “Whatever you need just tell me—I will get them for you.” The wife answered, “I need rice, milk, jaggery, bananas, purified butter, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, powdered sugar and a pinch of saffron and some wood to make the pudding.” So Tuntuni flew out of his house to collect all the ingredients—First he went to the forest to get the wood for the fire. Now what happened—A tiger who lived in the same forest, heard the snapping of the branches, *mot mot mot* [sound of breaking branches]—he slowly approached Tuntuni and asked him, “*Aiii*, what are you doing, breaking the branches of the trees? Don’t you know this forest belongs to me and you have to ask for my permission before tearing off even a single leaf from the trees?” Tuntuni answered, “I am sorry, but I just wanted some wood to light up a fire—so that my wife can cook some rice-pudding for me.” Now the tiger had never tasted rice-pudding in his entire life—he became curious and asked Tuntuni, “What is rice-pudding? How it tastes?” Tuntuni replied, “Oh—it tastes as sweet as sugar, as creamy as purified butter and smells as heavenly as the smell of earth after the first rain of the season.” The greedy tiger told Tuntuni, “I will let you go only if you invite me to your house—and share with me the rice-pudding that your wife will make.” Tuntuni was very smart and told the tiger, “Yes, you are most welcome to our humble abode, **but**—you have to collect all the ingredients and bring them over to our house.” The tiger asked, “So what are the ingredients that you need?” As Tuntuni gave the list of the necessary ingredients—

“And what are they?” Eela *dida* tried to elicit the answer from Jhumki. She promptly started counting on her fingers while listing off the ingredients. “Milk, jaggery, bananas, cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, butter and—and rice and then a little bit saffron.” Her grandmother prompted, “And?” The child pondered for a bit and then smiling

brightly answered, ‘Powdered sugar.’ Eela *dida*, with a satisfied smile, continued with the story.

Tiger now told Tuntuni to go home with the wood and rest and promised to deliver all the ingredients by himself—Next the tiger went to the bazaar and *haalum haalum* he roared. And as soon as the people heard the *haalum*, they started screaming, “Tiger, Tiger” and fled from the market. The tiger collected all that he needed without any disturbance and then went over to Tuntuni’s house to deliver the packages. Tuntuni now told the tiger to go home and rest and come in the evening to taste the rice-pudding. And so the tailor-bird’s wife started to cook—As she finished cooking, the smell was so good and the rice-pudding looked so delicious, the tailor-bird could not stop himself but gobbled up all the food—he ate and ate and ate—and only when a little bit was left in the corner of the pot, he realized that there was nothing left for the tiger. Now feeling **very scared**—they mixed some water in the little rice-pudding that was left and hid themselves inside a huge pot at the top of their house—After a little while, the tiger came—and as soon as he saw the rice-pudding on the plate he sat down and started lapping it up. He tasted some and said, ‘*Mmmmm* it’s so delicious.’ But after two licks he realized that it was awful to taste as the texture was too watery and the taste was bland—So in his anger he started roaring—And in the meantime, Tuntuni and Tuntuni’s wife—was sitting inside a pot right above the mantel-piece. Suddenly Tuntuni wanted to sneeze. And before he could help himself, he gave out a huge sneeze “*Hacchooo*.” Hearing that noise, but not seeing anyone around, the tiger jumped out of his skin and due to the impact of the sneeze the pot gave way and fell from the mantel-piece, straight on top of the tiger. The tiger now got so scared that he curled up his tail and ran off from the scene and was never seen or heard of again. (Eela Datta, 2011).

After the story ended, she looked at me and said beaming, “It’s a timeless tale which our grandmother used to tell us, the young girls of the family, during *poush mash* [winter solstice] when in every Bengali household it was the norm to prepare rice-pudding and serve it to the family members. But these days people are hardly aware of our cultural heritage and do not even know the proper way to make it.” After a brief pause she continued,

This story is special for another reason. I was debating whether to share that with you or not, but I guess I will now. It contains the secret recipe to

make perfectly authentic rice pudding which my great grandmother used to make. I have heard others telling the exact same story but the one that we heard was always special because of the detailed ingredients it contained. And for some reason, I think my great grandmother altered this story a bit to include the ingredients in their proper order and then told the story to her children who have since then passed it on to the future generations. And it was this special addition of saffron and cloves with cardamom that makes our family's rice-puddings the very best. Usually other families are not aware of this recipe and their rice-puddings are not quite as good as ours. (Eela Datta , 2011).

She then added, "I like to tell this particular story during mealtimes. Firstly because it has the power to make the child mentally imagine the taste and the smell of food and when they hear the description of how the food tastes, it speeds up the workings of their mouths and they finish the food faster. I have seen it work on my children and now my grandchildren too."

Diane Tye contends that, "although recipes shape women's words by means of cultural notions of what a recipe is and how it should be recorded, as well as through preconceptions of a woman's place in the family, they do represent a site where women are able to tell some of their life stories in their own words" (Tye 2010: 32). In the telling of this narrative that contains a recipe, Eela *dida* constructs herself as an upholder of her own Bengali tradition and culture, especially that of a secret family recipe.

Eela *dida*'s tales also contain hidden cultural messages that emerge when examined closely. For example, the birds in "Story of Tuntuni [Tailor Bird] and the Tiger," are married and conform to gender roles similar to those in the human world as when the bird husband asks his wife to make food for him. The wife is expected to make and serve food while the husband gets the necessary ingredients from the market. Anthropologist Carole Counihan asserts that, "food provisioning often reproduces female subordination by requiring women to serve, satisfy, and defer to husbands or boyfriends

who do not feel a similar need to serve their women” (Counihan, 1999: 13). Maybe the tiger can be seen as an authoritative male figure and outwitting him could mean silently triumphing over male domination. This reading supports Radner and Lanser’s argument that, “it is sexual dominance that makes women likely to express themselves, and communicate to other women, through *coded* means” and that such coded messages might be in “a set of signals—words, forms, behaviours, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing their particular messages” (Radner and Lanser, 1993: 3). The kitchen area and the food are essentially a woman’s department and it is expected that she will cook dishes according to her husband’s taste. One can notice how observant the tiger (perhaps representing a male authority figure) is, of the taste of the rice-pudding, particularly when he feels that it is “too watery” and “bland” and thus displeased with the taste of the food, gives out a “loud roar.” Thus as Diane Tye points out, “some women have also used food as a path to power, either symbolically—th(r)ough fasting, for example—or materially, by “exert[ing] power over men by refusing to cook, cooking food men dislike, forcing them to eat, or manipulating the status and meaning systems embodied in foods” (Tye, 2010: 24).

James M. Taggart in his book *Enchanted Maidens* also points out, “...women in nonliterate societies are silenced by a symbolic system controlled by men that draws attention to women’s connection with animals....The relegation of women to nature is clearly one way that men can keep women in their subordinate position by maintaining male primacy through public control of symbols” (Taggart 1990: 219).

However, a new interpretation of the tale came from an aged male informant, Apurv Das.

See if you go back in time you will see that these stories were prevalent in the rural countryside before they came to the cities. And who actually narrated them? It was the peasant community. Tuntuni actually is a voice of the peasant community—the peasants who had to withstand and survive the whims and demands of the zamindars and landlords who in their greed to collect revenue were ruthless and without an iota of mercy. And these zamindars and landlords in turn are represented by the tigers or other bigger ferocious animal. (Apurv Das, 2012).

The theme of subversion of authority is thus clearly evident in many of the folktales though the tellers may not be overtly conscious of the fact.

I had decided to visit my maternal grandmother in her house, in search of the stories of the past. I came with my bags packed and planned on staying with her for a few days to relive my childhood days, when the words “tension” or “deadlines” did not exist, and the biggest torture was drinking a glass of milk in the mornings. I had spent a considerable part of my childhood in my grandmother’s house, and she was the one who first introduced me to the world of fantasy and fairy tales. An expert story-teller with a sharp memory, she knew how to use words to paint colourful pictures. Her idioms contained some kind of magic and the stories she created would cast a spell over everyone, keeping us suspended in time until she had finished. I was meeting her after a span of two years, as I was living abroad and had not been home for quite a while. She was elated to see me and when I told her that I was writing my thesis on Bengali folktales, she was pretty amused and I could feel a quiet pride emanating from her. I promptly told her, “So now you have to tell me not just one but all the stories you used to tell us. Otherwise I will not eat or sleep and literally drive you crazy.” She laughed out



loud and commented, "But I barely remember any stories nowadays—it has been so long since any of you came up to me and made a command like that. I have to recall all those tales back." Over the next few days the stories started coming back slowly. The next day as lunch was being served, I asked, "*Dida*, do you remember the stories that you used to tell while feeding us, when we would come here for the holidays?" She laughed and said, "Oh how can I forget those days? Before summer vacations would start, I would have to prepare myself and stock up countless number of stories, so that you children would not be bored and let me tell you, an idle mind is a devil's workshop." She paused for a second and then playfully added, "But it was not just at lunch time that I had to tell stories—how about bedtime or countless other idle moments when I would be surrounded from all sides demanding a story?" It was then that I realized that though lunch time and bed time were the two main settings when stories would be told, in reality there was no definite setting where the main purpose was to share stories. Stories came alive anywhere and anytime. Likewise as Sarah Lamb has shown, older women told stories primarily to friends or to grandchildren in back rooms, in inner courtyards, or on the cool platforms of temples in the middle of the day while other people were busy doing work. Their stories did not constitute part of special ritual performances, nor were they formally performed before large groups of friends. Rather, they were told as parts of everyday conversations, as a means of scrutinizing and commenting upon the social worlds they experienced (Lamb, 1997). And during the course of my fieldwork this fact was reinforced over and over again. I watched stories being told while the narrators were oiling and braiding the long hair of young girls, making pickles and laying them out to dry on the roof and

guarding them from children or birds, or soaking up the warm afternoon sun on chilly winter days over cups of *masala* tea in open verandas.

The next day as lunch was being served, consisting of steamed rice with lentil soup, hilsa fish with mustard sauce and chicken with red curry, with *dida* sitting next to me, I asked her, “Now tell me a story.” Grandmother had finished her lunch earlier and was free and relaxed. She started serving rice on my plate and as I shrieked looking at the huge portions, she said “Finish all of that and only then will I tell you.” I knew I had no other choice and with a sigh started eating. “So which story do you want to hear?” she enquired. I pondered for a while and replied, “Any story that you remember telling us. And narrate it exactly the same way you did in the past.” As grandmother started with the story, I began to eat.

### **The Sly Fox and the Seven Crocodile Babies:<sup>2</sup>**

A big crocodile had seven babies—Every morning, the crocodile would go for work, and the babies would stay in the house, colouring with pastels or reading story books. They were very quiet and obedient and never ever did they fight amongst themselves. Days go by like this—One day crocodile decided to put the kids to a good school. But there was no good school nearby and crocodile got worried. Now what happened—there was a sly fox that lived near the crocodile’s house. That fox was very clever and he got to know that crocodile is searching for a good school to put the seven children in. So what he did—he put out a signboard saying “School” outside his house and quietly waited. Crocodile was going to work next morning, when its eyes suddenly fell on the signboard—Quickly it rang the bell. Now the fox slowly came out to open the door. Crocodile said, “Fox *babu* [a term of respect], I have seven children. They are very obedient and well-behaved—Will you teach them A, B, C, D?” Laughing, the sly fox replied, “Yes, yes, of course. But as you can see, this is a residential school and so they will have to stay with me—You can come to see them sometimes, but they cannot leave till they learn all the letters of

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<sup>2</sup> ATU 56B The Fox (Jackal) as Schoolmaster

the alphabet and can count all the numbers as well.” Hearing this crocodile was very pleased and promised to bring the babies to school the next day. The babies were sad to leave their mother, but they knew they had to go to school to learn. So the next day, crocodile dropped off its children to school and said tata tata—The children also waved back tata tata—Then what happened—the fox was very greedy—the moment he saw the fat cute crocodile babies, his mouth started watering—. He thought to himself, “The babies look so soft, tender and healthy—I wonder how they will taste—I will cook them in onion, ginger-garlic paste with dollops of butter and sprinkle some salt over it. Delicious!” Even thinking about it, made his mouth water. But he controlled himself that day—But the next day the fox could not control himself and before anybody could stop him, he swallowed up the eldest crocodile baby. Like this, every day for the next five days he swallowed up one after another crocodile baby, till only one baby was left— It was a Sunday, and the crocodile came down to visit its babies—As it rang the bell, the fox opened just a tiny part of the door and whispered that the babies were sleeping and so she should not disturb them. But mother crocodile was sad being away from her children and would not go till she saw them—The fox was now in a fix. But being a clever fox he asked the crocodile to wait in front of the window, and from afar he held up the only crocodile baby left, and showed it to her seven times.

The crocodile, happy to see its children safe, left. And the next day, the fox swallowed the last baby too. Now there were no babies left to eat and the fox was scared of mother crocodile—So he left his house and ran away deep in the forest. Next week when the crocodile again came down to visit her babies, she found the house empty—With a shock she realized what the greedy fox had done—Crying hard, she vowed to hunt him down and punish him for eating up her babies—For five days, she roamed and searched but could not find the fox. Then one night, it saw the fox sleeping and snoring in a hole by the river. With a knife she quietly ripped open its belly and as soon as she did it, all her seven children jumped out of it. And she went away happily with her children. (Aparna Dutta, 2011).

I was listening with rapt attention and mentally trying to match every detail of the story with the version I used to hear as a child. As grandmother stopped at this point, I looked enquiringly and asked, “Then what happened?” Grandmother gave me a questioning look and said, “Well, that was the end.” I cried out, “No—you forgot what the mother crocodile did to the fox after that—filling up the stomach with stones!! Mention that part!!” Grandmother was flustered for a second then said, “Oh all right—I

have not narrated this story in such a long time—It is only evident that I will forget some parts—Now stop talking and finish up fast—” She continued,

So the fox had swallowed the babies and had not chewed them properly and they were still alive inside his stomach. Mother crocodile was overjoyed to see her babies and counted to see if all of them were there or not. Then she quickly filled up the fox’s stomach with huge big stones, sewed it back with a needle and thread and went away.<sup>3</sup> The fox after waking up was thirsty and as soon as he went to drink some water from the river, the weight of the stones unbalanced him and he fell straight into the river and drowned, never to be seen or heard ever again. The crocodile family then lived happily forever— (Aparna Datta, 2011).

As the story ended, a few minutes of silence prevailed. No one said a word. Only a shrill chirping of a group of sparrows could be heard. This story was one of my favorites when I was young. The sorrow of the mother crocodile on losing her babies never failed to move me. And in the end when she gets reunited with her children, just because the fox swallowed them, not chewing them properly made me happy and anxious at the same time. It brought back an old sense of apprehension that if the food is not chewed properly it might stay alive and grow inside my stomach. It was a tale told which incorporated events and activities from our everyday human lives: like the mother leaving for work in the morning and then the babies reaching a certain age, joining school. But this story, though apparently a humorous tale for children, now seemed to strike a different chord in me. It struck me that this fable highlighted the suspicion and mistrust towards western education introduced by the British during colonial rule. For administrative purposes the British wanted to educate the native people in English. “English education was made the only passport to higher appointments available to the Indians, and hence its popularity and rapid progress were equally assured”

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<sup>3</sup> Can be compared to ATU 123 The Wolf and the Kids

(Majumdar 1946: 818). However, there are criticisms of western educational policy like that the British education policy was inadequate in its conception; only being promulgated for the production of efficient and loyal civil servants (Whitehead, 2005). They also neglected the needs of the Indians to be educated in their own culture. The concept of a school was also different. Indian schools were not institutionalized as they are in current days; they were non-institutionalized and called '*pathshalas*.' The medium of instruction was strictly vernacular. So when the British introduced the school system, teaching English language, it was looked upon with suspicion and mistrust.

Grandmother had a different perspective on the story. As I asked what prompted her to tell the tale back in our childhood, she said,

Well, firstly because it was everybody's favorite story. Do you remember the fights over the story selections that used to take place particularly during meal time? The girls would want to hear a particular story, while the boys would start arguing that it is a 'girlie' tale and would demand for a different one. Especially when I had to manage two girls and two boys [me, my brother and our cousins put together] all between the age group of three to eight, and make them eat together, fighting over choosing a story would be the last thing I wanted. Soon I realized that animal stories without any gender were the best stories for such a situation. Both boys and girls loved the tale, especially in the end when the babies leap out from the fox's stomach, alive! It also served the purpose to remind you children to chew your food and not just swallow, otherwise the food will not digest properly and will cause stomachaches. (Aparna Dutta, 2011).

I was curious about where she had first heard this story. I had always assumed that she had read it from some story book, but she surprised me when she said that she had heard it back in her childhood from her own mother. I was pleasantly shocked to hear that and asked her, "But why did not you ever mention that great grandmother told you this story?" She was amused and replied, "But no one ever asked—maybe that's why."

Suddenly I remembered another literary version of the same tale I had stumbled upon, where the name was *Shyaal Pundit* or *The Fox Pundit*. The literary version was quite different from the one narrated by grandmother; particularly the events that followed after the fox ate up the crocodile babies and ran off. In the literary version, the crocodile waits for the fox in the river to come for a drink, planning to avenge her babies' death. The fox eventually comes to the river for a drink and the crocodile waiting silently under the water, grabs hold of the fox's leg. But the smart fox outwits the crocodile by yelling out that she has got hold of his walking stick and should therefore let it go. The naïve crocodile believes the fox and immediately lets go his leg, enabling the fox to escape. There are other incidents of the smart fox outsmarting the gullible crocodile and running away every time the crocodile tries to get him. Also there is no mention anywhere of the crocodile reuniting with its children. I could never find any English translation of the tale even after searching high and low. I asked grandmother if she had heard about that particular version and she nodded that she had come across that version in quite a few places, both orally and in print. But when it came to narrating the story, she stuck to the version she had heard in her childhood as she felt biased towards it. "I do not know why my mother's version of the story differed so much from the one in the books. Maybe she felt that it would make the children sad if the crocodile babies were not reunited with the mother or that it was not fair that the unjust triumphed in the end. So that's why she altered it. Or maybe she had heard it from somewhere and that was how she knew it." But now I wanted to hear the folktale as it appeared in the literary version, but in grandmother's voice. I coaxed her, "Please tell me this version of the story—I have

never heard it before from you.” Grandmother laughed and said, “But you have already read them—Then?” But as I went on cajoling, she finally relented.

O.K. I have already told you how the cunning fox had gobbled up the crocodile babies and was hiding from the crocodile, away in the woods. Now the crocodile was also smart—It knew that the fox loved to eat crabs and would come to the river to catch crabs some time or the other. So it patiently waited under water for the fox to come—After a few days, the fox became very hungry. “Oh, I need some crabs right now—otherwise I will die. Even if the crocodile is waiting for me, I don’t care. But I want my crabs. They are **so** tasty little things—I will crack open their shells, slurp down their juices and relish the soft, tender meat,” it said to itself. So one night it slowly went to the river to catch some crabs. The crocodile was waiting for that moment. As soon as the fox jumped into the river, after some crabs, the crocodile with all its might snapped its jaws against one leg of the fox. As soon as the fox realized what has happened, instead of fighting it started laughing. The crocodile was puzzled and asked, “You fool, why are you laughing? Don’t you know that now I am going to eat you alive?” Laughing, the fox replied, “Look who is the fool here—You have gotten hold of my walking stick and yet you think that you have got my leg!” The naïve crocodile believing the crocodile immediately let go of its leg and taking the opportunity the clever fox jumped out from the river and in three leaps was out of sight, yelling, *Hukka hua, Hukka hua, Hukka hua*. [The sound a fox always makes in Indian folktales.]

Days go by—the crocodile still waits to get the fox and punish it, but without avail. At last after a lot of thinking, the crocodile came up with a plan. It turned over and laid itself out straight on the banks of the river and pretended to be dead. Soon the word spread that the big fat crocodile is dead. The fox decided to pay the crocodile a visit and see for itself whether the crocodile is indeed dead or not. As it approached the crocodile the fox said out loud, “Sigh, what a pity that he is dead! He was such a nice old crocodile. We will all miss him. But first we have to be sure that he **is** dead. If he is really dead, he will swish his tail and move his ears!” The foolish crocodile thought, “Oh I **have** to prove now that I am really dead!” So he started swishing his tail and as he didn’t have ears, moved his head instead—The clever fox laughed out loud and fled from the scene, yelling, *Hukka hua, Hukka hua, Hukka Hua*—(Aparna Dutta, 2011).

This tale clearly references subversion of authority. Though the crocodile is more powerful than the fox, the fox manages to outsmart it every time. According to A.K. Ramanujan,

Animal tales are among the most ancient. They occur in the Buddhist Jatakas and in Panchatantra. These tales are greatly enjoyed by children, enter their stock repertoires through primers, and express their powerlessness regarding adults. They are usually about small animals like themselves, who outwit their oppressors. The most striking feature of these didactic fables is their persistent political nature. The nature of power, the qualities of leadership, mother wit and cunning as weapons of the weak, subversion, betrayal, and con games are regular themes. Here too, powerful tigers, crocodiles and black snakes do not win.... Some, of course, reflect the way of the world where the tiger or wolf gobbles up the lamb (Ramanujan 1991: xxix).

As I prodded on with more questions, grandmother said, “See all the food remains has dried off on your fingers, while we were talking—it has been a long time since you finished eating—go and wash off your hands and join me in the bed for an afternoon nap. Then I will answer all your queries in peace.”

Thus from what I experienced in my own family as well as from what I observed in other households too, stories are still a much preferred means for distraction to make the child eat his food. Although in many households televisions have taken over this traditional function, especially in nuclear families, where no one is available to engage the child while eating. One of my informants, a thirty-three year old housewife, regretfully said,

I really wish my mother-in-law was alive. I could have done with some of her help—When she was alive, she used to help me so much with taking care of my then two year old son—She would feed him and also tell him stories and keep him engaged—Now he six years old and I have another two year old girl to manage—Most of the time he eats alone and I can’t



really tell him stories all the time—So I switch on the television and let him watch cartoons—But given an option I would prefer him to hear stories than watch mindless cartoons on television. (Payal Das, 2011).

One of my informants laughingly mentioned, “I always select funny short stories to narrate while feeding my son—that way whenever he opens his mouth to laugh, I push another spoonful into his open mouth. Also he has to chew and swallow his food to laugh or smile!” (Rupa Gupta, 2011).

Another informant, Sarbari Kumari, a mother of a seven year old, commented,

Well you should see what happens at our place! My mother-in-law has completely spoilt my son! Whatever he wants, she has to give him. Not only that his habits are also becoming unmanageable. These days he would not put even a morsel in his mouth if stories are not told to him. But I am strict about it, he can't do much when I am around—But my mother-in-law has to tell him stories everyday to feed him. (Sarbari Kumari, 2012).

Though stories told during mealtime are usually short stories, generally meant to amuse and entertain the child to distract him into finishing off the food on the plate; they also have a covert purpose of instructing the child about the values and ways of life. Also one major feature of the stories performed during meal times is the motif of food: how delicious the food tastes—even though the original story might not contain any special mention of food, the narrators often weave that motif into the story, with the intention of getting the attention of the child back onto the food. Thus, though the stories may seem simple enough at a glance, listening to them closely makes one aware of all the messages that they have to offer.

Apart from mealtimes, other specific settings under which stories are told to children generally include the evening power-cuts or load-shedding at home when stories

are performed to engage children in some form of activity to deter them from running around in the dark. In India, during summer time when there is a higher usage of power and electricity (due to increased usage of air-conditioning, fans and coolers), the government makes it a policy to interrupt the electricity for a few hours in the evenings as frequently as almost four to five days per week. Since Calcutta is in the eastern part of the country, the sun usually sets by six o' clock and by six thirty in the evening, darkness sets in. So with a power-cut during that time, the entire household is enveloped in darkness making it unsafe for children to run around. During such power-cuts, people engage in storytelling activities to entertain themselves and at the same time to keep children away from making mischief in the dark. In the following chapter this context of telling stories under power-cuts is discussed in detail. Here we can find that though the audience is mainly the children, the storytellers are different. For the first time we can find male narrators performing stories to children, whereas they are usually absent from the other storytelling settings like those of mealtime or bedtime.

### Chapter 3

#### “Yay! The Lights Went off! It’s Time For a Story!” Stories Told During Power-Cuts

If someone asked me what was the most vivid memory that I carried from my childhood I would not pause to think even a bit. The images accompanied by sounds and smells are as clear to me as if it happened just yesterday: the sudden power-cuts in the evenings followed by the smell of wet earth and cool moist air heralding the approach of a thunderstorm, a heavy downpour interjected by the occasional thunder rolling in the distance, all of us cousins huddled closely in a circle around grandmother telling us a story, with tall elegant candles casting mystifying shadows on the wall.

While growing up in the nineties in Calcutta, frequent power cuts during the seasons of summer and monsoon were a part of everyday life. It was hardly ever a planned power-cut, announced over the news the day before, but sporadic load-shedding occurring during late evening and lasting well up to three to four hours. I remember how mother would insist on finishing up our homework by candle-light, but then grandmother would come to the rescue by indignantly arguing that studying by the flickering candle-light can seriously harm eye-sight. If it was a clear night with no rain everyone would assemble on the rooftop where a straw mattress would be spread out to sit on. In between enjoying the cool breeze and agonizing mosquito bites, stories would be shared amidst much laughter and merry-making. But this open-air setting was more often than not limited to the grown-ups, particularly the males of the family; children were restricted within the four walls of the house or rather one particular room. Usually the excuse was

“Oh, it’s too windy outside. You will catch a cold.” Or sometimes the excuse was mosquitoes, “There are too many mosquitoes flying around. You don’t want to catch malaria now, do you?” In case of rains, it was somewhat different. Then everyone would be gathered in one room, instead of being spread out. There would be a scurry to get the kerosene lamps working, candles being lit and placed in strategic positions around the room. Some candles would also be placed near the staircases and bathrooms. In my childhood during the late eighties and early nineties, generators were a luxury and only very few households in our neighborhood owned one. But with generators too, the power supply was confined to a very limited number of lights and fans in the entire household, casting the rest of the house in absolute darkness. Also, the generators’ runtime was restricted to only one to two hours after which the battery would die on its own, leaving the house in pitch darkness.

I was returning to Calcutta after a gap of almost five years and observed that a lot had changed. For my fieldwork I desperately wanted to document and recapture the event of a power-cut exactly as I remembered it all the way back in my childhood. But I was apprehensive whether I would get a chance to re-create the scene from the past with all the details or not. First of all, it was winter time, whereas power-cuts were more frequent in summer and monsoon seasons, and load shedding nowadays occurs only once in a while as compared to bygone years. I found myself actually praying for a power-cut in the evening. I felt an artificial setting could never recreate the mood that only the natural setting of a power-cut offered. Also all the members of the family could not be forced otherwise to get together in one room sharing stories, and not just any story but those that complemented and heightened the ambience created by flickering candle lights.

Fortunately for my fieldwork, but unfortunately for the rest of the inhabitants of Calcutta, we experienced not just one but two sudden power-cuts within a span of one and half months during my stay there.

It was a normal evening and I was in my room lazing around when suddenly I found myself engulfed in complete darkness. It was a power-cut. I ran out of my room, somehow managing not to trip over or bump into the corner of the bed and ran up the flight of stairs all the way to the second floor of our house, where our grandparents' bedroom is. My parents were out and so there was no one in the huge three storey house, except for me, our domestic-help Bijali, and my grandparents. Bijali was busy lighting candles and carefully placing them at strategic corners around the living room so that the wind could not blow them out. I stood in a corner watching Bijali silently, until I heard my grandmother giving out a gasp: "What are you doing standing there in a corner like a ghost? Come and sit here on the sofa. And you should have waited in your room. I was just about to send Bijali with a candle to escort you up the staircase," Grandmother said sharply. With a sigh, I replied, "*Thakurma* [paternal grandmother], I am not a five year old and more importantly, I am **not** scared of ghosts anymore." Grandmother laughed and said, "I forget at times how time flies! I just remember when you were young and there was a power-cut, even before we would realize the lights were out, you would give out a blood-curdling scream and someone would have to run to get you. You used to be so afraid of the dark!" "Yes, that one scream was enough to send the ghosts running back to their graves! If you thought you were scared of the ghosts, let me tell you, the ghosts were more scared of your yelling," my grandfather interjected, laughing.

We all laughed and settled down to a comfortable silence, lost in our own memories for a while. All of a sudden I remembered that I had forgotten my audio recorder downstairs in my room and I would have to go walk the dark stairway all by myself to retrieve it. This stairway which connected all the three floors of the house had been always been a source of terror for me, since my childhood. Though the tall arched windows on the side, and the huge antlers of a deer decorating the wall above the stairs, would seem to be pretty under normal circumstances, in the dark they assumed a different feel. Though a few moments before I had proudly declared having mastered my fear of the dark, going down the dark staircase again unaccompanied sent shivers down my spine. The childhood demons started flowing back to my mind and I realized I had to ask Bijali to accompany me downstairs to my bedroom to retrieve my audio-recorder. After dilly-dallying a bit, I sheepishly asked Bijali to accompany me to my room with a candle. After a few moments with the audio-recorder grasped firmly in my hand, I came upstairs to find Grandmother resting in her room. As I went over to lie down next to her, Bijali entered the room and sat down on the floor. She started:

You know what happened in my village home once? —We still don't have electricity in our tiny village in Bihar. So after dark we usually light up kerosene lamps and that's the only source of light for us in the dark. Once late in the night, my husband had come back from work and he, after changing his clothes, sat down for dinner— When he came back to the room he was surprised to see his belt lying on the ground. But as soon as he bent down to pick it up, he screamed out loud in terror! —What he thought was his belt was actually a snake. A black water-snake! Thankfully it was non-poisonous—

“So did your husband kill it?” I asked with bated breath.

Ohh you would think! Killing snakes is not so easy. You have to beat it with a hardened *neem* stick and then set fire on it. And it was a male snake too— If we killed it, its female partner would come back to seek revenge. And we would then incur bad karma of killing two snakes and also draw

forth the wrath of *Ma Manash* [the Hindu folk goddess of snakes]. (Bijali, 2011).

“Then what did you do? How did you make the snake go away?” we asked curiously.

“Oh my son just threw it out of the window. It went away on its own,” she said nonchalantly.

I was shuddering in my mind hearing this anecdote, particularly in the dark under which even the everyday familial surroundings looked so surreal, when grandmother said, “*Bas* [enough] Bijali, no more stories of snakes or ghosts in the dark. You are scaring my granddaughter here. Look at her shivering. Now she will be afraid to go out of the room unescorted.” As Bijali laughed, I indignantly cried out, “That is not at all true.” Grandmother asked with a chuckle, “So after all those claims of growing up into a mature adult and not being afraid of the dark anymore, why did poor Bijali have to walk up and down all those flights of stairs with you?” As I grinned sheepishly, grandmother said, “So do you remember the story I used to tell you about a young boy called Jatil who was afraid of walking alone to school through a dark forest?” I said, “*Thakurma*, tell me the story again, please.” So she began:

**Jatil:**

There was a young boy, Jatil. He did not have anyone in his life except for his poor widowed mother whom he loved very much. Jatil’s mother was an ardent worshipper of Lord Krishna. Everyday upon waking up in the morning, she would pray in front of the idol of Lord Krishna— “Oh my Lord, please take care of us. Please see to it that my Jatil grows up to be an honest and caring person. I don’t want anything more—”

Days passed on— One day, Jatil’s mother felt that he was old enough to go to school. So she enrolled him in the village school. But this school was situated far away from their house and to reach school they had to cross a huge dark forest, on the way— Now Jatil was very scared of

the dark. The forest was very dense, full of huge tall trees, with branches stooped so low, that to poor Jatil it seemed that they were coming to grab him with long outstretched hands. The creepers also looked like snakes coiled around each other like a beautiful pattern—Jatil thought to himself, “*Ishhh*, if only I had someone with me to help me cross this dark, dense forest!” —But no one was there to give him company. His heart beating fast, Jatil tried to walk as fast as possible through the forest. At last he reached school— School was so much fun. The masters were all kind and there were many friends Jatil could play with. But as school got over, it was time to go home in the evening. Jatil started feeling restless and anxious— He was scared of walking back home through the dark forest, all alone— And now it was worse as in the evening light, the forest gave off an eerie feeling. The trees looked different and the creepers looked even more alive, swaying in the cool evening breeze. Jatil started running at breakneck speed to cross the jungle quickly. Panting he reached home and ran to his mother’s arms. Jatil’s mother alarmed, asked, “What’s wrong *khoka* [son]? Did you not like your new school?” Jatil replied, “Na Ma, I love my new school. Everyone is so nice there. But it’s the jungle, you see. It’s so dark! I am scared of passing through it, especially in the twilight. The evening light makes it so different and ghost-like.” Jatil’s mother smiled and said, “Don’t worry, in a few days you will get used to it and then it will be all right.” Jatil still was not convinced and said, “*Uhuu*, no I don’t like to go through the jungle all alone. I want someone to escort me.” — Jatil’s mother now fell in a deep thought. “Now whom can I find, who will escort *khoka* through the forest?” She closed her eyes and started meditating. After a while she opened her eyes and smiling, turned towards Jatil. “*Ohho* look at me! I had completely forgotten about your elder brother who lives in that jungle! From now on, he will walk with you the entire stretch of the forest, every day.” A surprised Jatil asked, “A brother! Why didn’t you tell me before that I have an elder brother? And why doesn’t he stay with us, here?” Jatil’s mother replied, “Well, he lives in the forest only with his herd of cows. He is a shepherd, you see. Tomorrow when you are going to school, call him. He will come and escort you all the way through the forest. You have no reason to be afraid any more.” Jatil then curiously asked, “Ma, what is his name?” His mother replied, “You can call him Madhusudan *dada* [brother].”

Next morning, Jatil was excited to go to school for the first time and eager to meet his new-found brother. Before leaving, he bowed down and respectfully touched his mother’s feet for blessings. As he reached the jungle, Jatil was not scared —today he knew he just had to call out to his Madhusudhan *dada* and he would be there to help him out. He started calling, “Madhusudhan *dada*, O’ Madhusudhan *dada*, where are you? Help me to cross this jungle now.”— No one came— Jatil grew a bit perturbed. But then he thought to himself, “Ma herself said that if I called out to him, he would definitely come. Maybe he is somewhere deep inside



the forest and cannot hear me properly.” He called out again and again. But still there was no sign of Madhusudhan. Now Jatil was getting late for school. Tears started streaming down his face. For the last time he cried out, “I don’t know where you are. But Ma said that if I call out to you, you will come to help me out.” Suddenly he heard a beautiful tune of a flute. Looking around he saw a good-looking young man with dark eyes and a glowing peacock feather attached to a crown on his forehead, coming out from behind the dense collection of trees— and it was him, playing the soothing tune from the flute. Jatil ran up to him and excitedly asked him, “Are **you** my Madhusudhan *dada*? Ma told me that if I called out to you, you will leave your cows and come to help me cross the jungle.” The young man replied, “Yes, I am the one, your mother told you about. Now that you have me by your side, you don’t need to worry about anything. Let’s go now.” They laughed, shared stories and Jatil told him everything about his life, what he did in school and in no time they had crossed the jungle. Jatil thanked Madhusudhan and said, “Madhu *dada*, you will be here right, in the evening when I come back from school? The jungle scares me so much, you know.” Madhusudhan said, “Don’t worry Jatil, I will be right here. Call me whenever you need me and I will come.” Jatil went to school. In the evening, as he called out, Madhusudhan came out from the jungle playing his flute and walked back with Jatil till they safely crossed the dense forest— Days passed on like this—

One evening, while walking through the forest, Madhusudhan noticed that Jatil was silent and lost in thoughts. So he asked, “You seem very quiet today. Did anything happen in school?” Jatil replied, “Madhu *dada*, you know tomorrow we are organizing for a feast in school and everyone has to bring at least one dish.” Madhusudhan asked, “So what dish are you going to get?” Jatil ruefully replied, “I don’t know. You see we are very poor. I don’t think we can afford to bring anything for the feast.” Hearing this Madhusudhan said, “Don’t you fret! Go home and talk to your mother. She will know what to do.” Jatil’s mother, upon hearing everything was sad. She quietly said, “*Khoka*, we don’t have much for ourselves. How will we provide a dish which will be enough to feed an entire class? If we had money we could have bought something. Anyways why don’t you ask your Madhusudhan *dada* for a solution?” Jatil answered, “Well, I did ask him and he said you would know what to do.” Jatil’s mother laughed at the reply and stated, “Well then go and tell him that I depend on him entirely for everything.” Next day when Jatil met Madhusudhan on the crossroad to the jungle, he passed on the message his mother had given, “Madhu *dada*, Ma said that she relies on you for everything.” Madhusudhan smiled and declared, “Well she said this? Then I have to help you. All right go and tell your headmaster that you will provide for all the curd needed for the feast.” Jatil thoughtfully added, “But Madhu *dada*, it has to be a lot of curd. There is a minimum of twenty students in my class.”

Next day Jatil could hardly wait to meet Madhusudhan. He came as usual playing the soothing tune on his flute. As he approached Jatil, he brought out a small earthen cup of curd. Jatil's face fell looking at the size of the cup. Noticing this, Madhusudhan said, "Don't be sad. You will see that this will be enough to feed your entire school." On the other hand the headmaster was furious to see such a small tub of curd. Angrily, he shouted, "What will we do with such a small tub of curd? Set this aside since it's not enough to feed even four students." The feast began. As it was drawing to a close, the headmaster suddenly remembered the curd. He felt that though it was an insufficient amount for all the students, surely one can't waste it! Even if it can fill the mouths of four students, they should have their fill. So he ordered the earthen container to be brought out from the corner and be distributed. Jatil ruefully started serving the curd on the plates of the students, but as he did so he was startled. He saw that the earthen container was getting filled up by itself as soon as the curd was taken out of it. The curd inside the container was just not finishing up! Realizing this Jatil ran around the entire school and served it to everyone. Even then the earthen container was full.

Watching this, the headmaster was amazed. Afterwards he called Jatil to a corner and asked, "Tell me the truth now. How did you manage this? Where did you get this earthen container which provided us with such huge amount of curd and still remained full?" Jatil told the headmaster the entire story of how his Madhusudhan *dada* had provided him with the earthen container and how nice he is etc etc." Hearing this headmaster was surprised. "I never knew that you had an elder brother who lived in the forest! I want to meet him right now. Take me to him," he declared. That day, as school ended, Jatil accompanied by the headmaster walked to the edge of the forest. Like the other days, Jatil shouted out, "Madhusudhan *dada*, O' Madhusudhan *dada*, where are you? I am here." But strangely Madhusudhan did not come. Jatil's voice got hoarse from calling him, but still there was no sign of him. The headmaster said, "Jatil, did you lie to me when you said that it was your elder brother who gave you the earthen container of curd? Because if you were telling the truth, why isn't he showing himself?" An upset Jatil indignantly said, "Headmaster, you have to believe me. Madhusudhan *dada* does exist. But I don't know why he isn't coming here tonight." Now sobbing, Jatil shouted out with all his might, "Madhusudhan *dada*, you have to show yourself and come out, otherwise Headmaster will think I am lying. Please come." Suddenly they heard a beautiful tune on a flute wafting from inside of the forest. They looked around expecting to see Madhusudhan but could not see anything. The wind then carried over a voice, "Jatil, your headmaster would not be able to see me. It is still too early for him. It was your simple belief in me that enabled you to see me. And your mother's steadfast devotion towards me is impressive. She prayed to me so hard

that I had to reveal myself to you. That's why I was with you in your troubled time when you had to cross the forest by yourself."

Jatil then realized that it was Lord Krishna himself who had come to him in Madhusudhan *dada's* avatar to help him when he was engulfed in darkness and to show him the way out. (Shanti Roy, 2011).

After the story ended, there was a momentary silence in the room. Even my grandfather sitting on the rocking chair on the other side of the room was listening quietly. Grandmother, breaking the silence, said,

So what did you learn from the story? Whenever you are afraid of any situation or even of the dark, you should chant Lord Krishna's name and all the evil forces will run away. You do know that Madhusudhan is just another name for Lord Krishna, right? He has one hundred and eight names and He will respond to any of those names. When you were young, I had told you this story so many times. There is nothing to be afraid of the dark when you take Krishna's name. He will come down to help you. And you do know that all the ghosts and evil forces are dead-scared of Him, right? (Shanti Roy, 2011).

I was curious to know where she had come across this story. "Well, you know after I got married and came to live in your grandfather's house, his widowed great-aunt Labu *pishi* [aunt] told me this story. She was also the main care-giver of our village temple dedicated to Lord Krishna, and would tell us all kinds of miraculous stories of the benevolence of Lord Krishna. As a new member of the family, I had to learn about all the family folklore and legends as well." She continued,

But I loved this story for a variety of reasons. This story is about facing your darkest fears and coming out triumphing over them. You have to remember that in life you have to cross many dark roads alone, when apparently it might seem that there is no one walking beside you. But if you take Lord Krishna's name, he will always help you and walk beside you. And he is a part of our family too, so he will never leave you alone when you are engulfed in absolute darkness. But you have to have faith in Him, otherwise it's of no use.

After a few minutes of silence she said,

Actually, this story holds a special place in my heart and that is the reason I love repeating it. It is one of the few stories I remember from the days I spent in Jessore-Khulna. It's the memories associated with this story that make it more special. I can remember the summers and autumns and the other seasons in the sun back in those days. It is full of nostalgia. (Shanti Roy, 2011).

After a pause she said suddenly,

The magic pot—don't you think it's the most wonderful thing you have ever heard of? When I was young, I always wished that if only some God or Goddess could bless me with an object like that! So many people could be fed and so many lives could be made easier. It's a blessing that we never had to undergo the suffering of starvation in our lives—But imagine the millions of people whom you see on the roads, homeless and living purely on charity. Just imagine! If only we could have such a magic pot! (Shanti Roy, 2011).

Grandmother, whom we call *thakurma* (the Bengali term for addressing paternal grandmothers), was born in 1928 in the district of Jessore, which fell under the jurisdiction of East Pakistan (which after 1971 became Bangladesh) after the partition of India in 1947. She got married to my grandfather in 1943 at the age of eighteen, in the village of Jessore. Along with her family, grandmother had migrated to Calcutta, India following the partition in 1948. She has never gone back to Jessore or Khulna again and I always noticed that even the slightest reference to that place would make her melancholic and watery-eyed.

My grandfather belonged to a family of land-owning feudal lords and it was my grandfather's ancestral family who had built the village temple dedicated to Lord Krishna. The idol of Lord Krishna with his female consort Radha had been consecrated by my grandfather's ancestors and it was his family who were the main caregivers of the temple for a long time. It was a couple of years later in 1947 that the subcontinent was divided into Hindu dominated India and Muslim majority Pakistan and the districts of

Jessore and Khulna went on to be a part of East Pakistan. During the mass exodus following partition, my grandfather's uncle, anticipating an attack by the Muslims to destroy the Hindu village temple as an aftermath of the riots, decided to uproot the idols of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha and carry them across the border to Hindu dominated Calcutta. The idols were later consecrated in a new temple in Calcutta and remain there.

Grandmother loved narrating stories and legends about Lord Krishna and she would snatch every occasion to tell such a story. Religious by nature, my grandmother would take every opportunity to instill in her grandchildren some piety and devotion. Amongst the children the girls—me and my female cousins—would not object too much to it, but it was a different story with young boys. They would absolutely refuse to hear such stories and would coax grandmother for an altogether different genre of stories. But it was during power-cuts that grandmother could tell any religious story or legend to the children, and they would actually listen without much protest.

Two weeks later I was visiting a friend's house one evening when the power went off, all of a sudden. They had a generator at their house but apparently it had run out of charge and so could not be turned on. My friend Toon lived in a huge house, built in colonial style, and it was a joint-family, comprising her grandparents, an older married uncle with a seven year old son, a younger unmarried uncle in his early thirties, and her parents. That day her grandparents were baby-sitting her elder uncle's seven year old son Aryan, as the other members of the family, including my friend's parents were out. It was a pleasantly cool night and as the lights went off my friend and I joined Aryan and the grandparents in the balcony/veranda where a straw mattress was rolled out on the

floor. Aryan was watching his favorite cartoon show when the power went off and he was not in his best mood. His grandmother tried to cheer him up by giving him some sweetmeats, but the young boy was sulking and every five minutes would run out into the dark living room and turn on the switch board to check if the power was back or not. His grandmother got antsy every time he ran out to do this, fearing that he might bump into the bed post or some furniture and hurt himself. After a few minutes she turned to her husband and said, "Why don't you do something? I just cannot control him anymore and he is not listening to me at all. Just keep him occupied somehow. Tell him a story or something." Then turning towards me she said, "You know he is a very good story-teller and usually goes on telling stories all the time, but when it comes to times like these he would go into *mouna vrata*" [complete silence; a meditative trance]. As we laughed out loud, Aryan, made curious by the noise, came running back to the veranda. The grandfather seemed to be obliged to manage the child as he was not listening to anyone and so he called out, "Aryan, come here. You know I was just telling them about the time I stunned a tiger with my bare hands back when I was a young man. Did I tell you about it?" This seemed to pique the child's interest and he silently approached his grandfather and sat down cross-legged on the mattress next to him. I silently gestured to him if it was alright if I recorded his story on my cell phone and he nodded in assent.

### **Hunting stories from aged male narrators**

You know, when we were young, we used to live in a small village near the hilly areas of Assam. I don't know if you all know, but Assam was famous for British tea-plantations and my dad was a manager at one of the most popular British tea-estates. Our village was known for growing the best quality tea, all of which would be exported to England. We used to live in a huge bungalow, built in colonial style and just behind the bungalow the forest would start disappearing all the way high up into the

Assamese hills. In that forest, there were rabbits, foxes, deer, wild elephants, wild boars, monkeys and cheetahs and a few tigers. But after coming down from the hills, these animals had to cross a river, to enter the village. It was this river which acted as a boundary line between the safe and the dangerous, both for the villagers' and the animals' perspective. Occasionally during monsoon if the river flooded, some of these animals would flock down in herds all the way from deep inside the forest and pay us a visit. But usually they did not pose any harm to us and neither did we ever mess with them. The elephants were a nuisance from time to time when they would ravage some banana orchards and had to be driven away by the beating of drums and fireworks. We would hear a sudden burst of crackers and the collective voices of the villagers in the middle of the night, followed by some heavy footsteps. That was a sign that the elephants had crossed the river and come down to destroy some orchard. We were used to such disturbances from time to time and without paying any attention to it would go back to sleep. Though my mother and sisters would get really scared and stay up for the rest of the night, but we, the men of the family would take no notice of such small things. Yes, sometimes we would hear some story of cheetahs grabbing a goat or killing hens in the night, but those were isolated events happening rarely. The domestic-helpers in our bungalow would warn us against going to the forest or near the river all alone, anytime in the day or night as cheetahs could jump on top of us and break our necks, as they loved to kill for fun. But we never heard any story of tigers approaching the village and causing any disturbance.

One morning, I woke up to a commotion outside our house. As I looked out of the window, I found my father being surrounded by a lot of villagers who were clearly upset about something. On enquiring further it appeared that apparently a man-eating tiger had crossed the river and for the first time entered the village. Two men had already fallen victim to it and now the villagers were scared for their safety. They had tried all measures to capture the tiger but it seemed to be too smart and ferocious and had managed to escape each time. The villagers had come to my father as a last resort to kill the man-eater and save them from this new terror, before any more lives were lost. My father had an impressive collection of rifles and along with him, me and my brothers would go hunting game once in a while. We usually hunted deer and stags and once my brother had shot a wild boar too. But our favourite were the deer. Have any of you ever tasted deer-meat? It's **so** soft and delicious! We also had a collection of deer antlers at our bungalow back in those days. The bigger they were, the more prestigious. Sometimes, when the British owner of the estate, Mr. Cunnings came down to check on the estate, we would invite him too and go hunting together. And let me tell you, he held my father in high esteem when it came to hunting game. Anyways coming back to the story, now the villagers looked up to my father as their last resort and



wanted him to kill the man-eater by any possible means. My father now became a bit distraught. It was the first time he was given the responsibility of hunting a tiger, and that too a man-eater. He now wanted to take the best possible measures to make sure the man-eater was caught dead. The villagers were given instructions to build a *machan* for this. What it meant was that inside the forest, not far from the river, they would build a *machan* which was basically a wooden platform on a tree. These *machans* would be constructed on top of a bamboo clump or built into the fork of a tree, hidden behind the leaves and branches, invisible from the eyes of the world. A live goat or some other domestic animal would be placed as bait tied to a tree below the *machan*; the hunters would wait for the wild animals to fall for the bait and come over to devour it, thereby taking the opportunity to shoot it from the *machan* above and killing it. I was young and in good shape too and nothing could stop me from being a part of this 'mission.' So the team consisted of my father, me, my elder brother. The night we chose for the 'mission' happened to be new-moon night. We got on the *machan* with the help of ladders early in the evening and a huge goat was tied up to the base of a nearby tree. And then the wait began. Oh, did I mention that this was the first time I was sitting on a *machan*?

Outside the story, we all collectively shook our heads, as a silent no. He continued:

O.K. so the *machan* can be quite uncomfortable. And as the hours passed my patience was also going down. The droning of the mosquitoes and the tingling in my legs from sitting in the same position for such a long time without any movements weren't helping either. I had almost nodded off when my elder brother nudged us with his elbows suddenly. As I woke up with a start, I could distinctly smell something wild and unknown. Tigers have a smell of their own, you see. We quietly took positions and waited for it to show itself. The goat in the meanwhile had gone crazy and was bleating its heart out. Suddenly there was a swish and it stopped its cries. We knew that the tiger had struck it but could not see a thing to shoot at. All of a sudden before we could even think, the tiger gave out a huge roar and rammed straight into the bottom of the *machan*. You will never believe what happened next! I was sitting on the edge of the *machan* and before I realized, I slipped off and fell headlong on the top of the man-eater's head. I was shaking so hard from the fall that I forgot to use my rifle and in self defense closed my eyes and aimed for a straight punch with all my might into the nose of the tiger. I could feel the rings on my fingers hitting the bone of that animal, and within seconds it gave out a blood curdling roar and ran off. I did not dare to open my eyes till my father and brother came down and shook me to see if I am all right or not. Both of them were crying thinking that I had gone up to heaven, but I was still hale and hearty without a scratch on my body. We don't know what happened to the tiger, whether it lived or died but it never came back to



the village ever again. So you see, I literally punched the day-lights out of a tiger with bare hands! (Rabi Datta, 2011).

He then closed his right hand into a fist and showed us his gnarled knuckles and the three rings on his finger which had apparently enabled him to defeat a tiger, that too a man-eater. Aryan seemed to be very impressed by the story and went on asking questions one after the other. “What do you think happened to the tiger after he got punched on the nose?” “Do you think he died?” “Did he climb all the way back to the hilly forest to his family?” This story seemed to be a classic example of a tall tale, and I was bursting with questions to ask him. The first and foremost question on my mind, I laughingly put forward was, “So did this really happen? Or did you make it up, Rabi *dadu* [grandfather]?” He seemed to be comically offended by my remark and said,

Of course it is real. I can also give you the year and the date when it took place. It was in 1945 and the month was July. We lived in the hills of Assam for a long time, managing the British tea-estate. And at that time it was sparsely populated with humans and more populated by various birds and animals. I can go on and on narrating stories about animals and funny incidents revolving around them. Sometimes I feel sad that my grandchildren couldn’t experience nature at its best. I try to give them a feel for it when I can. (Rabi Datta, 2011).

But just as I was going to ask him more about the story and his life up in the hills of Assam, my friend’s younger uncle Shyam came along with the news that the transformer in the neighborhood had blown off and so it will take quite a while to get the power back. This news jolted Aryan back to the present world and he again started grumbling about wanting the power back so that he could return to his cartoons. Shyam seemed to know his young nephew pretty well and so he picked him up and jostling him said, “Hey, how about I tell you a ghost story? See grandmother is not in the room; she is busy making food. And your mother is also not at home. So there is no one to interrupt us

tonight!” Hearing this, I can firmly say that I felt more excited and upbeat than Aryan and could hardly wait for the story to begin. As Shyam began the story, I listened with bated breath:

### The Tale of the Ghost-Wife:

The tale that I am telling is not a fiction, but a fact that happened a long time ago, in a small village. It was an evening just like this. It was raining relentlessly: *chom chom chom*—and all the frogs were croaking: *gyangor gyang, gyangor gyang*. A man was coming back from the bazaar buying four fat *hilsa* fishes. He was carrying an umbrella in one hand and the *hilsa* fishes were in a packet in his other hand. The bazaar was far from his home and all the roads were empty. In the distance, he could see the silhouette of the coconut trees, madly swaying in the wind. As the man walked past a banyan tree, a *petni* [a female ghost] who lived there watched him, perched from the branches—waving her long thin legs. The smell of the *hilsa* fishes made her mouth water and drooling she put her long thick tongue out and licked her lips. Tempted by the fishes, the *petni* started following the man. “*Ayiii—Give me some of those fishes na!!*” The man stopped on his tracks hearing this line. It seemed to come very close from behind and there was a distinct nasal tone to it.

Outside the story Shyam mentioned, “You do know that all ghosts speak in a nasal tone, right?” No one said a word, in reply. He then continued.

Hearing that line in a nasal tone, the man was convinced that a *petni* was following him from behind. He was petrified. But then he remembered that *bhoot* and *petni* grew more powerful if they realized that they were successful in scaring humans. The only way to keep them away was to chant a mantra that his uncle had taught him once in his childhood:

*“Bhoot amar poot/  
Petni amar jhi/  
Ram-Laxman buke ache/  
Korbi amar ki”*

[Male-ghost you are my boy, Female-ghost you are my girl,  
With Gods like Ram and Laxman by my side, what harm will you do to me?]

Now as soon as the *petni* heard the man chanting this mantra, she was terrified and ran off to a distance. But her eyes kept following the man.

The man went on chanting the mantra till he reached home. As his wife opened the door for him, he quickly placed the fishes in her hand and told her, “Ufff you won’t believe what just happened. As I was passing that banyan tree a *petni* crept up from behind and tried to steal our hilsa fishes. With great difficulty I managed to get rid of it, by the grace of Ram [God]. Now without wasting time, cut those fishes and let’s have fried hilsa tonight.” The wife started cutting the raw fish into small pieces and left it to marinate in lemon juice, turmeric, salt and chili powder. All this while, the *petni* from a distance was watching everything. Now suddenly the wife realized that they have run out of water in the house. She has to walk up to the well and get some water. The well was near the banyan tree only and as soon as the wife walked past the banyan tree, the *petni* jumped on her shoulders and possessed her—After getting some water from the well, the *petni* in the guise of the wife came back to the house. Immediately her eyes fell on the raw marinating fishes and she jumped on the plate. She crunched up the raw fish until only a few pieces were left. Now the *petni* was smart. She then fried up the few remaining pieces. When her husband sat down for dinner, he was shocked to see such a small quantity of fish on the table. He asked, “I got four big hilsa fish. How did they shrink up to such a small amount?” The *petni* was smart. She immediately replied, “Oh the next door neighbor’s cat stole most of the fish when I went out to get some water. This was all I managed to save.” The husband believed her words and went on to eat his food. The husband noticed that his wife was not eating anything. On asking, she replied, “Oh I have already had my fill. You eat.” (Shyam, 2011).

Outside the story, Shyam mentioned, “You see, *bhoot* and *petni* they can’t eat food like we do. They only eat raw, uncooked food. Like raw meat and raw fish. So the *petni* could not eat anything in front of her husband, without giving away her true identity.

So a couple of days went by with the *petni* living inside the body of the poor wife. A few days later the man started noticing that something was amiss. But he could not put his finger on it. But he understood it had something to do with his wife. The way she moved, the way she spoke; something was different in her. So he started keeping a watch on her. He soon realized that she only ate when she was alone. She would not eat or even touch her food in front of others. Also her voice sounded different. As if she had a cold. The man thought to himself, “I **have** to find out what is going on.” Next day the man waited for a chance to see when his wife would eat. He waited and waited but the *petni* being smart told him that she was keeping a religious fast that day and so she would not eat. The man did not lose hope but increased his vigilance on the wife. Two days

later, the man pretended to leave for his office in the morning, but actually hid himself in the storeroom to see what his wife was up to. He heard his wife walking by and after some time with a slam the door to the kitchen closed. He slowly moved out of his hiding place and peeped through the window of the kitchen. What he saw was enough to make him faint!—He saw that his wife was cooking but instead of the wood, her own two legs were on fire providing heat under the pot and she was cooking food on top of it. He realized that his wife was possessed by a ghost and he ran till he reached the house of the village *ojha* [the village exorcist]. Upon hearing everything, the *ojha* agreed to visit the possessed wife immediately.

When the wife opened the door, the *ojha* stepped forward. As soon as she spotted the *ojha*, the possessed wife turned around and tried to run away. The *ojha* was ready for such an attempt by the *petni* and immediately cuffed her hands, tying her down with a rope. Then he dragged her out in the open courtyard. The *petni* started moaning and crying and pleaded to let her go, in an attempt to fool the *ojha*. But he was too smart to fall for such tactics. The *ojha* started to mumble some chants and slowly started increasing his voice. The *petni* could no longer keep up with the façade. It started groaning on the floor and tossed and turned. The *ojha* screamed out, “Disclose your true identity! Who are you and how did you enter this body? Tell us right now otherwise I will beat you to death!” The *petni* was scared to death and croaked out, “All right, all right! A couple of days back she was walking from under the banyan tree and she had just cut some hilsa fishes. She smelt so good, I could not resist myself. So I entered her body. But no please don’t hit me. I will go away.” The *ojha* asked, “But how will we know that you are really gone?” The *petni* replied, “You see as soon as I will leave the body I will fly to the banyan tree, where I used to live and break off the heaviest branch from the tree. That way you will know that I am really gone.” The *ojha* threatened, “But listen you must go somewhere far away. Otherwise if I spot you ever again I will kill you.” The *petni* promised to leave for a distant land. Within a few moments, a huge cracking noise came about and without any wind or anything; the heaviest branch of the banyan tree fell on the ground. The *ojha* and the man breathed a sigh of relief as they knew that the *petni* was finally gone. Now the real wife finally opened her eyes and seemed dazed. She did not remember anything and was confused to see her husband so perturbed. The man was finally happy to get his real wife back. (Shyam, 2011).

As the story came to end, I was still under the spell of it. We were sitting on the balcony of the third floor and I could see the coconut trees swaying in the distance in the breeze, their shiny leaves glistening in the pale moonlight. It sent a chill down my

spine. Even the young boy fell silent and seemed to be in deep thought. As the grandmother walked into the veranda with some refreshments consisting of cold sherbet and a spicy mix of puffed rice with cucumber and tomatoes, even she could notice a tension in the air. She picked up on it immediately and said in a warning tone, “Shyam, have you been narrating any ghost stories? How many times have I told you not to do this? It’s not you but me and poor Amna [Aryan’s mother] who have to deal with this! Aryan gets nightmares and will trouble us before falling asleep. If he throws any tantrums you will manage him this time!” Shyam frowned and asked, “What am I hearing Aryan? Is this true? If you are such a scared mouse, don’t come to me again.” We all hid a smile when the young boy nervously said, “No, no I won’t be scared at all. I promise.” Shyam winked at us and said, “Good, and even if you are afraid, always chant that mantra I told you about. Do you remember it?”

*Bhoot amar poot/ Petni amar jhi/  
Ram-Laxman buke ache/ Korbi amar ki”*

[Male-ghost you are my boy, Female-ghost you are my girl,  
With Gods like Ram and Laxman by my side, what harm will you do to me?]

Memorize it well and keep on saying it if you feel you are being followed by a *bhoot* [a male ghost] or even a *petni* [a female ghost].” The young boy nodded his head and carefully started repeating it in a whisper. His grandmother shook her head in disbelief and said, “See the males of the house; they never understand the problems of telling children such stories. Because they do not have to deal with the after effects, you see.”

To some observers it might seem that narration of scary stories to young boys could be a male conspiracy, almost mischievous, to unite men and boys together, in opposition to the feminine idea of what is fitting for young boys to hear and not. It might

also be that their mischievous telling of scary stories to young boys was a way of getting a kind of revenge on all the women in their own childhoods who tried to tell them only safe or pious stories.

As I asked Shyam, my friend Toon's uncle, what made him choose to narrate a ghost story, being fully aware that it would scare the young child Aryan, he replied,

It's not about 'wanting' intentionally to scare a child. It's more about **me** wanting to share the story in that particular setting. The real fun lies in narrating such stories in the dark, when we are all sitting in the veranda or better on the roof top. It's the ambience that makes such stories so real and fascinating. You will see that if I narrate the same story under broad daylight or in the living room with lights all around, it doesn't feel the same; it loses its main essence. And I want my nephew to feel the story and live through it, not just as a pastime; also if he doesn't get goose bumps from hearing the story, then I have failed to narrate it properly. And if I don't introduce him to such stories, who else will? Certainly not his grandmother or mother! And you see these power-cuts are actually a blessing in disguise. If it didn't happen from time to time, we don't get to spend time like this together. Either he is busy doing his homework or watching television. And under no circumstances is he going to leave his cartoon shows to listen to stories. (Shyam, 2011).

Another informant, a housewife, Moulina Pal also stated how power-cuts brought the entire family together on balmy evenings:

You know I am actually thankful for these power-cuts, particularly in the evening. This is the only time my husband and kids are forced to move from the couch and stop watching T.V and it's hot right! So they have nowhere to go but sit in the balcony, all of us together. This is actually the only time we get, like a proper family time, with no distractions when we can just sit together, relax, enjoy the evening breeze and watch the stars. Well we do have inverters as a power backup and we do activate it if the kids have homework or have exams—But they take up so much battery life and those batteries are expensive too, so we put on the inverter only when it is absolutely necessary. (Moulina Pal, 2013).

However, not all stories narrated by male performers were hunting tales or scary ghost stories. One of my informants, a thirty-five year old female professional, Reeta Gupta, told me:

Yes, I did hear stories from my grandfather a lot. Mainly in the evenings if my parents were out, he would tell me stories about martyrs who fought for India's struggle for independence from the British rule. But at that time (seventies and eighties) television was not that popular and we needed other things to distract us and keep us entertained. Nowadays, it's mostly nuclear families with busy working parents who don't even have time for themselves. Who is there to tell children such stories nowadays and more importantly with a packed schedule from 9 am to 9 pm, children these days hardly have time to go out and play, forget storytelling time. (Reeta Gupta, 2012).

Thus power-cuts often acted as a catalyst to bring the family together and where stories were performed to entertain and engage the children in an attempt to stop them from running around in the dark and hurting themselves. From what I could gather from my fieldwork, and which did not come as too much of a surprise to me, male narrators were relatively few, at least in the private domestic atmosphere, compared to female narrators. And it was mainly during the setting of a power-cut that they came on the scene and took on the role of narrator, telling stories to young children. Female narrators, mainly the household members like grandmothers, aunts, or mothers, would choose to narrate fairy tales, religious tales, fables, or animal tales which would not scare the child into having nightmares, meaning they would need to attend to them if they woke up in the middle of the night, scared of monsters under the bed. The men on the other hand, prefer to perform stories like (hunting tales or ghost stories) that go well with the setting and give rise to a heightened sense of excitement in regard to the ambience and atmosphere. But it can be usually seen that it was the younger male members of the

family who were more intent on sharing the supernatural ghostly stories with a huge dollop of gore and horror as compared to the older male members of the family. If analyzed carefully, these choices in stories say a lot about the relations between men and women within families. One might feel that there seems to be a contest going on between the males and females for influence over developing the personality of the children. There are obviously competing ideas about how children should be formed by stories, each gender seeking to form the child more in their own image—females toward religious piety, males toward a bolder, rougher and ‘manlier’ persona. So one can see that ideas about ideal ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are being fought over through the medium of stories. But as my female informants put it, they never really approved of the narration of such supernatural stories as it made their task of putting the children to sleep in the night, much more difficult. And this brings us to the third setting, when stories are narrated to lull the children to sleep, which is discussed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 4

### “Yawn” Bedtime stories

Afternoon *siestas* [rest after lunch] are a common practice in all parts of India, due to hot and humid weather; particularly during the afternoon when the scorching heat of the sun makes it impossible to venture outside. Most shops also close down for two to three hours, from around two to five in the afternoon. Young children are lulled to sleep, after coming back from school. After lunch which is usually taken anytime between 12.30pm to 1:30pm, everyone retires to their bedroom and nap time ensues for the next two to three hours till around 4pm. This is a common practice in every Indian family. While staying at my grandmother's house during my fieldwork, after having lunch we retired to the bedroom and crept into the bed, under the blankets. It was winter and soft afternoon sun pleasantly shone down on the comforter making the room bright and cozy. But the light was too bright to take a nap and so grandmother ordered me to close the blinds to make the room darker. A crow, perched on the window sill, was cackling loudly and we could hear the bell ringing as a rickshaw went by on the roads down below. We could also hear the occasional clinking of the dishes as our domestic helper, Bijali, washed the dishes in the kitchen. I was here at my grandmother's place after a gap of about four years and I was breathing in the familiar sights and sounds like never before. I deeply inhaled the scent of the blanket which smelled of naphthalene balls and fragrant roses, having been stored in a suitcase for the larger part of the year and taken out only recently. I loved every part of it as each sound, smell and sight served as a time-machine and refreshed my childhood memories all over again. I could go back to being the child,

who would be fed, lulled to sleep and could just spend time watching the clouds and the birds. But I was far away from sleep and just lay on the bed thinking about the childhood days when I would want to go to the rooftop, particularly during such pleasant afternoons, to eat homemade pickles spread out on the straw mattress to be sun-dried. Our poor nanny, Mashi, would then have to devise new plans and stories to keep me away from doing just that. Whenever I would show the slightest inclination to go to the roof alone, particularly during the afternoon, with all the household members taking rest in their rooms and no one to chaperone me, she would issue a warning: "Go there on the roof, I won't say anything, but remember *Juju buri* [an old witch] is sitting on the roof. And her favourite thing to do is push little children off from the rooftop straight into the ground. You will break a leg or two and will be barred from playing for over three months. So don't ask me again to go with you or dare to go alone. I am very scared of *Juju buri* to tell the truth." It would be followed by the question how does *Juju buri* look. Sometimes Mashi would say that no one can see her with plain eyes as she hides herself from the world and very quietly creeps up to young children when they are not looking, to push them over the railing. Sometimes she would give a detailed description. *Juju buri* had salt and pepper grey frizzy hair hanging loosely down to her waist, her eyes were crinkled and wonky, her teeth were all crooked and her face was all wrinkled. But the part that stood out was her feet. Apparently they were backwards. Her ankles came first and then the toes. That was also the main identifying mark for the *Juju buri*. We should always look at the feet of every woman around us and if they had their feet backwards that was a sure sign that she was a *Juju buri*. *Juju buri* was always a female, buri meaning

an old woman, and her attire was a dirty old white sari. I quietly chuckled to myself remembering about *Juju buri* and the description of her as given to us by Mashi.

As J.D.A. Widdowson in his book *If You Don't Be Good: Verbal Social Control in Newfoundland* suggests, in every culture there exists figures considered to be intrinsically frightening; these figures are termed 'frightening figures' or 'threatening figures.' Widdowson goes on to show how these frightening figures are deliberately employed in threats and other types of verbal usage aimed at influencing or controlling the behavior of children (Widdowson, 1977:10). Widdowson suggests that these 'frightening/threatening figures' commonly have a supernatural connotation and "personify the unknown, nameless, inexplicable fears beyond the normal range of human experience....Man deliberately creates, develops or adapts this terrifying cosmos with the express function of controlling behavior" (Widdowson, 1977:10). These figures are generally used as a threat against misbehavior or disobedience, but sometimes as Widdowson argues, they have a more specific function. "Figures such as the boo man and the boogie man are normally used for general obedience, but are also employed to deter children from going to dangerous places, to get them indoors before dark, to encourage them to go to bed or to sleep, and so on" (Widdowson, 1977:81).

I was tossing and turning in bed without much sleep and somehow managed to wake Grandmother up too. Seeing that she was awake, I wanted to steal the opportunity and make her tell me a story. "*Dida* [maternal grandmother], tell me a story please—It's been such a long time since I heard you telling me a story and lulling me to sleep." Grandmother smiled and quietly consented. So she began:

## Sarbamangala

In a village, there was a Brahmin called Devicharan. Even though he was poor, he was honest and hard-working, and an ardent devotee of Ma Durga [commonly referred to as Mother Goddess]. Every day he would chant the sacred devotional hymns and even though they had very little, they lived a simple but happy life. Devicharan lived with his wife and had a beautiful daughter called Sarbamangala—The girl was special—Not only did she have an angelic face, she was kindhearted, warm and was well-trained in all house-hold work. Soon she reached marriageable age and Devicharan got worried—“Now the time has come to seek out a handsome match for our daughter. But who will marry the daughter of such poor people? We hardly have anything to offer them.” But Devicharan was optimistic—He told his wife, “Our daughter is not only blessed with beauty and compassion but proficient in all household duties. Have faith in Ma Durga. She will take care of everything.”

A few days later a kind-hearted zamindar came to the village to collect taxes. One day, as he was taking a walk by the riverside, his eyes fell on Sarbamangala—He immediately called out to her, “Girl, who are your parents and where do they stay? I want to visit your house.” Later on the zamindar came to their house and asked for Sarbamangala’s hand in marriage for his only son. Everyone was very happy with the match and soon Sarbamangala got married and went to live with her in-laws. The Brahmin and his wife got very sad with the departure of their beloved daughter but they were happy that she had found such a good match for herself. Days went by and soon autumn came and it was time to celebrate the religious festival of worshipping Ma Durga.

The Brahmin was aware that this festival, celebrating the coming of Ma Durga involved not only worshipping an idol of the deity for a period of four days, but also implied inviting a huge number of guests and offering them food. But still he wanted to celebrate the special occasion at his small hut to offer his humble thanks for all the blessings that Ma Durga had blessed him with. So he and his wife started with all the preparations for the big celebration. But everyday they would remember their daughter and wished that she was there with them to help around the house to prepare for the big day. And so he went to ask for permission from Sarbamangala’s in-laws, to let her come home for a few days.

I was hearing the story and at the same time trying to match it up to the version that we heard back in our childhood. As soon as Grandmother came to this part, I cried out, “But you missed that part where Devicharan’s wife falls sick. You didn’t mention

that part!" Grandmother, flustered for a second, replied "Oh, that is too much to remember and I have not told this story in such a long time. Now keep quiet!" And she continued,

As luck would have it, just the day before the celebrations would start, the Brahmin's wife fell sick. She fell so sick that she could not even leave the bed. The Brahmin was now in a difficult situation as he knew that he needed his wife's help to carry on with the huge preparations. His wife, also realizing the problem, started crying, "Oh God, what will happen now? Who will cook all the food for the guests? Who will help clean the house and the sacred altar? Tomorrow the celebrations will start and I can't even move from the bed. If only Sarbamangala was here!" Devicharan, trying to console his wife, told her "Do not worry. Tomorrow I will go to Sarbamangala's house and see if her in-laws will allow her to come back home for a few days to help us with the celebrations." But Sarbamangala's father-in-law said, "I am sorry, but we cannot let her go this time. We are also celebrating the festival at our house and she is so skilled at doing her work, we cannot imagine not having her around for help. Please do not mind but I am helpless in this case." Poor Devicharan, with a heavy heart he turned back and started walking back home, his mind in deep thought as how to tide over the difficult situation. He offered a sincere prayer, "Ma Durga, I want to express my gratitude to you for all the blessings you have showered me with. But given the situation, I do not know whether I will be able to worship you properly or not. My wife is sick and my daughter is not here. Please help me."

Suddenly he thought he heard Sarbamangala's voice calling out to him from behind. Looking back he saw Sarbamangala running up to him. Startled, he asked, "I know you are concerned for us, but you cannot come with me. Your father-in-law has not given me permission to take you back home. They need you." Sarbamangala laughed and said, "Please do not worry about it at all. I have spoken to them and now everything will be alright. Let's go home now." Devicharan's happiness knew no bounds and in his heart he offered a silent prayer to Ma Durga. Upon reaching home Sarbamangala told her parents, "Now that I am here, leave everything to me. I will decorate the house, clean the altar and most importantly I will adorn the idol of Ma Durga with my own hands." When evening came, Devicharan and his wife were amazed to see how beautifully Sarbamangala had made arrangements for the festival. The entire house was sparkling clean and Ma Durga's clay idol was glowing with all the flowers and garlands placed around it. Even Sarbamangala was glowing so radiantly with her long flowing hair and pale fair skin that she looked like a goddess herself.

This way the first two days of the festival went very well. On the third day, Sarbamangala came to up to her father and told him, "Now the

time has come to invite guests and offer them consecrated food. Devicharan was aghast on hearing this. "Are you crazy? We only have a few fruits and sweets to offer Ma Durga. It is barely enough for the three of us and you are talking about feeding the entire village?" Sarbamangala replied, "But the festival and the worshipping of Ma Durga will be incomplete if you do not invite people and offer them the blessed food. You have, after all, invited Ma Durga into our house. So I am now going to send invitations for the evening. See you later." Devicharan got worried by his daughter's behavior. He grumbled, "Just because she got married off to a well-off family all her considerations have changed. Does not she realize we cannot afford to feed the entire neighborhood, even if we empty out our all week's stored up food?"

As evening came, people slowly started pouring in to Devicharan's house. Embarrassed, Devicharan called up his daughter and said, "I am not going out to face public humiliation when the guests realize that there is no food for them. Since you have invited them, it is your responsibility to take care of them. I will sit here in front of the idol of Ma Durga and keep up with the praying and worshipping." After finishing his prayers, Devicharan was surprised to hear the voices of the guests from outside. And it seemed that they sounded happy too. Out of curiosity he peeped out from the prayer room and saw that all the guests were eating happily and Sarbamangala was serving them. He was amazed to see that somehow the little food available proved to be enough for the guests.

The next day was the last day of the festival and Devicharan was sad. In the evening, he would have to take the clay idol of Ma Durga and immerse it in the river. Only a few more hours were left for him to offer his prayers. So Devicharan carefully spread out a platter of cut fruits and vegetables and offered it to Ma Durga's idol and immersed himself in deep prayer closing his eyes. After a while when he opened his eyes, he was shocked to see Sarbamangala sitting in front of the idol, next to him and reaching out to eat the consecrated fruits offered to Ma Durga's idol. He screamed out and said, "Have you lost your mind? Don't you know that this is blessed food meant for God? No one is supposed to touch it until the prayers are over and until I am done with worshipping! How dare you eat it now? I have to prepare new food now and start over again with my prayers!" Saying this, Devicharan stormed out of the prayer room and asked his wife to make fresh preparations again for his prayers. This time also Sarbamangala ate up all the offerings while Devicharan was praying. Furiously Devicharan screamed out, "What is wrong with you today? You are deliberately ruining all my attempts to offer prayers to Ma Durga. This food is meant for Her and not you. Get out of here now."

Devicharan finally finishing his prayers called out to his daughter. But strangely she was nowhere to be found. His wife said, "Maybe she has



gone back to her in-laws' house by herself. We should go at once and see whether she has reached there safely or not." Upon reaching there, they saw Sarbamangala running around helping everyone in the house. Devicharan went up to her and said, "So you got angry at me and left without saying anything? We got so worried." Sarbamangala, frowning said, "I don't understand what you are saying. When did I go home? I was here all the time." Devicharan surprised, asked, "You mean you did not eat the offerings I made to Ma Durga and spoil my prayers? I scolded you for that and you left our place in a huff. That is why we are here to see if you reached safely or not." Sarbmangala replied, "But how can it be? I never left this house. Don't you remember, my father-in-law did not give you permission to take me back home?"

Devicharan realized that it was indeed Ma Durga herself who had taken the form of his daughter to come to his house and help him out. (Aparna Dutta, 2011).

As the story ended, a few minutes of silence prevailed. Only a shrill chirping of a group of sparrows could be heard. I asked something which I had never thought of before. "Where did you first hear this story, *dida*?" Before delving in folklore studies, I had never bothered with such questions. But now it seemed important. Grandmother was a bit surprised to hear the question.

Well I heard it way back in my childhood from some aunt. I don't remember her face anymore—But I heard it so frequently while growing up that it stayed with me," she replied. "I told this story to your mother and your aunt when they were growing up and then it was your turn," she said. "This story also was a good example of the goodness that follows from keeping faith in *Ma Durga* [Mother Goddess Durga is one of the major deities of the Hindu pantheon], of whom I am an ardent devotee since my childhood days. And of course I would want my family to grow up having firm religious sentiments. And this was a good way of developing it. Also I did not have to think too much while narrating it. It came in a natural flow. But see how it contains in it all the duties that daughters of the house should follow—Cleaning the house, altar, respecting parents, performing all the tasks before the *puja* [worshipping] starts. It is a very good story I feel. (Aparna Dutta, 2011).

She declared, "Actually, this story holds a special place in my heart and that is the reason I love repeating it. It is one of the few stories I remember from childhood and though I do

not really remember the face or the name of the aunt who told me this story, I can remember the summers and autumns and the other seasons in the sun back in those days— It is full of nostalgia.”

She continued after a brief pause,

Also you know right what the word ‘*Sarbamangala*’ means?” It means someone who wishes welfare for all. It is also another name for Ma Durga. In our days, we believed that the names of Gods/Goddesses have a special vibration to them and naming our children with these names would incur the blessing of that particular God. Also that way whenever one would call out to that child by her name, he/she would earn good karma just because they chanted the name of that God out loud. (Aparna Dutta, 2011).

I was listening to all of this and slowly, without being aware of it, I drifted off to sleep. My recorder was on though and that way everything got recorded. When I opened my eyes, it was already well past afternoon and the sun had begun to set. I marveled at how listening to a story can still work as the best sleeping pill and that too without any side-effects.

I observed in many different households that in the afternoon it was the grandmother or the nanny who bore the responsibility of making sure the child rested for some time so that they were not tired while doing homework in the evening. Even in my childhood, I hardly remember our mother having any time to tell stories as she was always running around, busy as a bee. It was a tacit understanding that if we wanted stories during the day, we had to go to our grandmother to hear them. My mother’s stories were more occasional and usually told at bedtime, after tucking us in bed.

My fieldwork in Bengali households supported my own experience. Young working professional mothers were not at home during the afternoon and in some households where the mothers were homemakers, they usually preferred to have some



time alone, watching television or relaxing for a bit. One of my informants, a housewife in her mid-thirties called Sulekha said,

I feel so relieved that my mother-in-law takes it upon herself to lull to sleep my son, Gublu, in the afternoon. After he finishes his lunch, my mother-in-law takes him to her bedroom where she lulls him to sleep. I get some time off and can do what I want for some time. She also tells him stories and he enjoys her company a lot too. They have a special bond. But I do get to tell him stories too and have our time together. It is usually while tucking him in bed later in the night. (Sulekha, 2012).

Though it is usually the prerogative of the grandmothers to tell folktales to the children, mothers also do tell stories. But unlike the vernacular folktales that the grandmothers tell, mothers narrate stories from the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. Unlike grandmothers, who tell stories orally in vernacular language, I observed that mothers generally read out stories from books, and it is always in English. The stories include *The Ugly Ducking*, *Cinderella*, *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*, among many others.

An example of this emerged during my fieldwork. One evening I was at the home of one of my aunts, whom we fondly call Anju *Pishi* [aunt, father's sister], and she was tucking in her four-year-old daughter, Soma, into bed. She is a working mother and rarely gets to spend time with her daughter. So once in a while she makes it a point to take some time out of her schedule to read her a bedtime story as a way of mother-daughter bonding. This night the child listened in glee as her mother read her the popular story of *Sleeping Beauty* from an illustrated children's book.

There were obvious intergenerational differences of opinion over these readings of European folktales. Grandmothers in general voiced displeasure over these English narrations by the mothers. For example, one of my informants, a sixty-five year old grandmother Munmun (name changed upon request) *dida* complained that “‘foreign’

fairy-tales are slowly replacing the age-old vernacular folktales of our own cultural tradition. If it was not for us, the children of the future generations would grow up without any knowledge of their own rich vernacular cultural heritage and miss out on a huge variety of folk-tales. Their mothers are only interested in filling up their heads with ‘foreign’ stories which have no connection with our culture” (Munmun *dida* name changed upon request, 2011).

Mothers, however, see things differently; they argue that it is important that their children to be exposed to ideas and stories from different cultures and languages. One of my informants, a housewife in her mid-thirties who had a three-year old daughter, commented that,

I prefer to read out loud fairy tales or other stories meant for young children in English, not just for new ideas and for a change from the settings that they (the children) are used to, but also so that they can acquire better language skills. They speak in Bengali all the time at home and with friends. But tomorrow when my daughter will go to school, she will have to speak in English and keep up with her peers. And as a mother it is my responsibility to teach her and make her ready to face the world. Even though her grandmothers might object to it, I have to do what I have to do in order to make my child stand up to her peers. People forget that times have changed from when we were young and so it is difficult to make them understand the pressures of today’s worlds. (Deepali, 2011).

This is not to say that mothers blindly transmit western narratives and values. For example, as I observed my aunt read to her young daughter, I noted that she followed the book only to a point. At the moment in the printed version where the prince kissed Sleeping Beauty to break the spell, my aunt departed from the text, “....*as soon as the prince sat down on the bed right next to Sleeping Beauty, she opened her eyes.*” After omitting the part about the kiss that broke the spell, she went on reading the story line by

line. Later when I asked her about it, she replied that it was a deliberate omission. She feels that fairy tales for children should be chaste and free from any kind of sexual connotation. Even accounts of kissing might send out wrong messages to the young children. Her comments reflect the dual nature of Bengali contemporary culture; at the same time that women like my aunt embrace modern and western ways, they are still deeply rooted in a conservatism that stipulates that many activities should be segregated according to sex and that talking about physical intimacy is inappropriate or disrespectful in front of elders, particularly in the presence of members of the opposite sex.

I was at another cousin's house (Papiya Das), where I overheard her mother-in-law Mithu Das, telling the following story to her seven year old grandson Karan.

### **Marriage of Lord Ganesha**

Lord Shiva, and [his wife] Parvati, both loved their two sons Ganesha and Kartik very much. When they both grew up, their parents decided to marry them off. But now both the brothers started bickering amongst themselves over who should marry first. Lord Shiva and Parvati fell in a deep dilemma. They loved both their sons equally and did not want to favour one over the other. So Lord Shiva came up with a plan to end the bickering. He told his sons that, "There will be a contest. Amongst the two of you, whoever can travel around the entire world three times and come back home the sooner, will be the winner, and will get married earlier." Kartik upon hearing it, immediately set forth to travel round the world. But Ganesh, who was heavy and pudgy, sat in his seat and kept on thinking. After a while, he went to his mother, Goddess Parvati and She was surprised to see her son, walking in a circle around her three times, while chanting sacred hymns. Now Ganesha sat both his parents down and told them, "So I have traveled around the entire world. And Kartik is not even here. Start preparing for the wedding." His surprised parents asked him, "But Son, you did not even leave the house. How can you say that you went round the world?" Clever Ganesha replied, "Was it not you who taught us that the Mother is the entire world for her son? I walked around Mother, three times in a circle, and so I went around the world three times." Thus both Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati were outwitted by

Ganesha and had no other option but go forth with the wedding preparations. (Mithu Das, 2011).

Mithu *dida* told me later on,

This folktale is a part of our Hindu mythology involving the Hindu Gods, Shiva and Parvati and their two sons, Lord Ganesha, i.e. the Elephant-God, and Kartik. I heard this folktale first from my widowed grand-aunt when I was a young girl myself. You know, girls have a special bonding with their mothers. It is a natural affinity from birth. Even after they go away to a new home with their husbands and in-laws, the mother-daughter bonding remains. No one can take it away from them. But boys are a different story. Though it is the mother who gives birth and nourishes them, boys have to be taught to respect the female gender and treat them with care. (Mithu Das, 2012).

Following Ramanujan this tale can be seen to be an example of a male-centric tale, where, “for the prince on his quest, a kingdom and a bride are the prizes he wins after his adventures and hardships—that is the initial scenario” (Ramanujan 1991: 53).

All stories carry a cultural message. Some messages may be less obvious, and perhaps some narrators are not even fully aware of the message they are sending. But one can observe that grandmothers are quite well aware of the advice contained in the stories they usually tell, and that they consider that it's their role, or responsibility to pass on this wisdom to the younger generation. And it is at times a conscious and deliberate choice which is reflected by the choice of the tales they select to narrate. Also grandmothers view themselves as upholders of cultural and traditional values, as one can observe from Eela *dida*'s comments; and they usually feel that women of younger generations lack the necessary knowledge about their own cultural heritage. And so the children of future generations need to be taught about their roots and rich cultural heritage by the elders of the family, particularly by them.

Rani Das, a seventy-five year old grandmother was putting her five year old grandson Arnab to sleep in the afternoon, after he had come back home from school and had his lunch. I knew them as distant relatives and was invited over for lunch at their place as a celebration of my homecoming. After having lunch all of us, i.e. my sister-in-law and my distant grand-aunt (her mother-in-law), along with the child, went to sit in the huge four poster colonial style bed of my grand-aunt. As we were chatting my grand-aunt was trying to put young Arnab to sleep. So I asked her if she usually told any stories to put him to sleep. At this my sister-in-law smiled and said, “Oh you don’t know. Ma has a huge collection of stories in her stomach. But she hardly tells them—Maybe once in a while to Arnab.” But then I asked her to tell us a story and we all leaned back in the huge bed with pillows supporting our back. The child was lying down and as she rhythmically patted him on his back, she started:

#### **Ghumonto Puri [Sleepy Quarters]:<sup>4</sup>**

A beautiful handsome prince was born to a king and a queen. Everyone was happy. Days passed and he grew up to be a brave and courageous young man. One day he told his father, “Father, I want to see the world.” All the people of the kingdom fell unhappy hearing the news. The queen stopped taking her meals and spent sleepless nights—But only the king said, “All right, you have my permission to go.” The king and queen started making preparations for the prince’s journey to explore the world: while the king arranged for a hundred spies and soldiers to accompany the prince, the queen gave him a caravan full of precious gems and diamonds. But the young prince refused to take any of those and just taking his steed and sword, went out to see the world. He traveled for days and months—crossed seven seas and thirteen rivers and walked through several kingdoms. Like this one day he reached a deep dense forest. The trees were so tall and thick that no sunlight could reach inside the forest. The prince also noticed that a strange silence persisted in the forest, something very unusual. No birds were chirping, no deer were grazing

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<sup>4</sup> ATU 410 Sleeping Beauty

anywhere; it was unlike any natural forest. The prince still kept walking. And then— just before him a huge gate loomed up to the entrance of a kingdom. Though the gates were locked, as soon the prince stood in front of it, it gave way and opened up. As the prince walked into the palace, he was astounded to see how clean it was. There was not even a speck of dust anywhere and everything gleamed. The prince kept walking inside the huge palace trying to find people. Then as he walked into the courtyard, the sight there made him stop in his tracks! Entire rows of elephants, horses, soldiers, guards were standing there, as still as the water in a shallow pond. No one moved or for that matter even breathed. As the prince went in close to check, he was surprised to see that all of them were turned into stone—None of them even blinked for a second—The prince then drew out his sword and quietly started walking further inside the palace. Further down as he opened the door to a new room, he squinted from the light coming from precious stones and jewels decorating the huge walls. He saw that the entire court was sitting there: the king was in his throne, his ministers sitting right next to him, soldiers, guards, everyone sitting in their places but completely unmoving and as still as a statue. He slowly left the room. Soon after leaving that room, the prince was overpowered by the beautiful soft smell of hundreds of flowers. He wondered where the smell was coming from. He then noticed a beautifully carved door at a corner of the archway and something told him that the smell was coming from there. He quietly went up to the door and as he opened it he saw that in the middle of the huge room, hundreds of lotuses bloomed although not a speck of water could be seen anywhere near. As the prince cautiously went ahead to check on the strange phenomena, he got a huge shock. In the middle of the flower garden there was a golden bed and on it was sleeping the most beautiful princess anyone had ever seen. The sleeping princess's hands, legs were all covered up with flowers and only her beautiful radiant face could be seen peeping out from between the lotuses. Her complexion was as clear as milk mixed with rose petals and her eyelashes looked as if someone had painted them with a dainty brush and pencil. The prince was mesmerized by her beauty and leaning on one side of the bed-post he stared and stared. He wouldn't blink, he wouldn't breathe. He seemed to be incapable of moving. Like this, days passed and then months—The prince kept on staring at the sleeping princess's face, wishing ardently that she would wake up, unable to look away and having no sense of time flying away.

One day suddenly the prince's eyes fell on top of the princess's forehead. He noticed something that he hadn't noticed before. There was a small golden stick, the size of a matchstick gleaming quietly. He picked it up and was surprised to see another small silver stick lying there too. He started playing with both the sticks and suddenly the golden stick fell out of his hands and touched the sleeping princess's forehead. As soon as that happened, the lotus garden started shaking, conch shells started blowing

and the princess slowly stirred and opened her eyes. All at once, birds started chirping, guards woke up to duty, the elephants and horses started stomping, swords started crackling. Everyone woke up from a deep slumber of hundreds of years. The prince was summoned to the king's chamber where the king, queen and the minister were waiting. As the prince entered the room, the king joyous said, "Who are you, O handsome prince? From which kingdom have you come forth? Today you have saved us from the curse of a demon that put a spell on us by touching a magical silver stick on the princess's forehead. As a reward we will give you the princess's hand in marriage and the entire kingdom to be ruled by you." So the prince and the princess got married and started ruling the kingdom with great justice. Years passed like this—the prince forgot all about his parents and returning back home. His parents had become old and sick worrying about the young prince. The queen cried her eyes out being separated from her son and slowly had gone blind. The old king had given up on ruling the kingdom and taken to bed too. The entire kingdom had become dark and dreary with no lights or joy anywhere.

One day early in the morning, the king woke up from sounds of elephants trumpeting and horses neighing. King called out, "Who's there, who has come to visit us old people?" Queen called out frantically, "Who's there, who has come to visit us old people?" The soldiers said, "It's the prince! He is back." The prince entered the chambers with his beautiful bride. He touched the magic golden stick to the queen's eyes and the queen's eye was healed. King seeing his son alive and married to a beautiful princess was well again and his sickness went away. After that, everybody lived together happily ever after. ( Rani Bose, 2011).

As I listened to the story I was a bit perplexed. It seemed to be *Sleeping Beauty* but from a male perspective, i.e. the prince who wakes *Sleeping Beauty* from her sleep of a hundred years by kissing her. I asked her after a while if she was actually narrating the story of *Sleeping Beauty* from a Bengali stand-point, but she replied no. This was the way she had heard it and narrating it likewise. But she could not remember who had told her the story or where she had come across it. She just said, "I like to narrate this tale to put children to sleep as this story is so very passive. There is nothing in the story to excite the child, which otherwise would take away all his sleep and render him wide awake. I think it's the drone of the voice that also helps in putting children to sleep."



Although I had mainly encountered female household members narrating stories to children, particularly when lulling them to sleep, there was one exception where I came across a father who told bedtime stories to his children. Bipul Sinha, a forty year old engineer working in a multinational company, has to travel almost every two weeks. He hardly gets any time to spend with his son Rahul who is six years old. He said, “Yes, I try my best to tuck Rahul in bed in the night and sometimes I crawl next to him in his bed to tell him stories.” The boy was sitting with us and hearing it he chuckled. I asked, “So, daddy tells you nice stories?” Rahul nodded. Bipul then said, “Tell her the story I told you last night! The story of *Khul ja Sim Sim*.” The young boy got shy and ran to hide behind his mother. So I asked Bipul to narrate the story to me.

#### **Alibaba and the Forty Thieves:<sup>5</sup>**

There were two brothers, the elder brother called Kaseem and the younger brother called Alibaba. When their father died, Kaseem being a greedy brother took all their father’s property and riches and drove Alibaba out of the house. Alibaba along with his wife lived in a small house and cut wood from the nearby forest to sell in the local bazaar. One day, Alibaba cutting the wood in the forest, suddenly heard the gallop of many horses from a distance—Being scared, Alibaba climbed the tree nearest to him and hid behind the dense leaves of the tree. Through the gap between the leaves, Alibaba saw a large group of men dismount from their horses and walk up to a nearby rock. They all stood in a line and Alibaba counted—one, two, three, four—there were forty of them. The leader stood in front of the line and shouted out three words—“*Khul Ja Sim Sim*” [Open *Sim Sim*]. Suddenly the plain old rock in front of which they were standing split open into two parts, making an entryway. The men, each carrying a huge bag went inside the pathway the rock had opened up and as soon as the last one went in, the door closed on its own. Alibaba realized that these were bandits who looted and plundered and even killed people when needed. He decided to hide in the tree till the bandits came

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<sup>5</sup> ATU 954 The Forty Thieves



out and left the place. He waited for the bandits to come out from the portal but there was no sign of them anywhere—Waiting, Alibaba fell asleep—Suddenly he woke up by the sound of footsteps. He saw that the leader of the bandits coming out of the portal with his men behind him. He counted them slowly coming out and as soon as the last man came out, the leader shouted out, “*Bandh ho ja Sim Sim*” [Close *Sim Sim*]. Then they all mounted their horses and rode off. Alibaba sighed a huge sigh of relief and slowly came down from the tree. He was curious to see what was inside the cave. He thought to himself, “Let me see if those magic words work for me too.” So he went up to the rock and called out, “*Khul ja Sim Sim.*” As soon as he had uttered those words, the rock parted and Ali Baba walked in. Immediately he had to shield his eyes because it was gleaming with light coming out from precious gold and jewels, rubies, emeralds and *mohurs* [bullion], loads and loads of them, piled upon each other and overflowing from each side. Suddenly there was a small noise and Ali Baba noticed that the portal door closed off on its own. But he was not afraid. He remembered the magic words in his mind and called out loudly, “*Khul ja Sim Sim.*” The door opened up again and Ali Baba ran out to get his bag from under the tree. He filled up his bag and his pockets with as much gold coins as he could and afterwards said out loud, “*Bandh ho ja Sim Sim.*” The door closed off and Ali Baba came back to his house. When he reached home and showed his wife all the coins, his wife screamed out thinking that he had robbed some innocent person and started crying. But then Alibaba asked her to keep quiet and told her the entire story of “*Khul ja Sim Sim.*” His wife happily started counting the coins but they were so many in number that she lost track of it. She decided to run to Kaseem’s house [Alibaba’s elder brother] and borrow weights from his wife to measure the total amount of the gold coins. But Alibaba warned her not to tell the secret of the gold coins. So as she went to Kaseem’s house, his wife opened the door. Alibaba’s wife asked her if she could borrow the scales for a while. Kaseem’s wife was suspicious—She wanted to find out why Alibaba suddenly needed scales at this time of the night and why Alibaba’s wife looked so excited. Secretly what she did was smear some wax at the bottom of the scale so that whatever would be measured would stick to the wax and this way she could find out what they were up to. Alibaba’s wife did not suspect anything—She came back with the scales and after measuring all the gold coins, they buried the treasure in a corner of the house, so that no one could know what they had with them—Next day she returned the scales to Kaseem’s wife. But there was one gold coin that was stuck on the wax at the bottom of the scales and Kaseem’s wife saw it. Crying, she went to Kaseem, “See your brother is now richer than you are and in his house he has so many gold coins that he needs a scale to measure all of them! And what are you doing? Just sitting at home, doing nothing.” Kaseem was also flustered as how Alibaba came to possess such riches. That night, he tossed and turned in his bed and had nightmares and could not sleep out of envy and jealousy.

Next morning before dawn Kaseem could not stop himself anymore and went over to Alibaba's house. Without waiting for a second, Kaseem barged in and shouted out, "So you think you can loot and plunder people and get gold and nobody would know about it? Tell me the truth. From where did you get the gold?" Now Alibaba saw it was **his own elder brother—how could** he not tell him everything? And so he told him everything. Kaseem now could not wait to go to that rock and see whether it was all true or not. But Alibaba warned Kaseem about the robbers and that it was very dangerous, but Kaseem was stubborn. He readied ten donkeys and another twenty bags and set out to find the portal. As he reached the rock, he shouted out, "*Khul ja Sim Sim.*" The door opened hearing the magic words and Kaseem ran inside—the door closed behind him. Seeing the treasure, Kaseem was very happy. He laughed and dived into the gold and silver and started playing with them. Time passed like this and suddenly Kaseem realized it was time to go home. But in the midst of all this, Kaseem had forgotten all about the magic words which would open the door—"Khul ja" but the door did not open. He then tried, "*Ja Khul*" but still the door remained closed. Now Kaseem got worried. He tried all the words he knew but no avail—Door just would not open. Tired and scared, Kaseem sat down in a corner and went to sleep. Now it is getting dark and the robbers are coming back to the rock. The leader was surprised to see ten donkeys standing right in front of the rock with no master to be spotted nearby. Suspicious, the robbers slowly uttered the magic words, "*Khul ja Sim Sim.*" As the door opened and they went in, they saw Kaseem, sleeping in a corner. Giving a bloodcurdling howl, the leader of the bandits took out his sword from the scabbard and in a clean sweep chopped off the head of Kaseem—But the leader of the bandits was puzzled: "How did this man manage to enter the portal? Surely no one else knows about this magic entrance. But then how did **he** know about it?"—These questions kept troubling him, but he did not say it out loud to anyone.

Now it is nighttime and Kaseem's wife is growing restless—Kaseem has gone out so early in the morning and it is over eighteen hours and still there is no sign of him.

As the clock struck midnight, she could bear it no longer and ran to Alibaba for help. Alibaba also felt anxious hearing the news—but what can he do—he then promised that if Kaseem didn't return by next morning he would go and check on him. Next morning came and still there was no sign of Kaseem. Alibaba now started making arrangements to venture out to the forest immediately. He could not see Kaseem's donkeys or anything outside the rock and he was even more scared now. As he said out loud the magic words and the door to the portal opened, he went in and screamed out loud—Kaseem's body lying on one side and his head on the other side.

With a heavy heart, Alibaba now put Kaseem's body in a huge bag that he was carrying with him and put some more gold and jewels in another bag and closing the door behind him, went back home. It was night when he reached home. He gave the bag full of gold coins to his wife and the other bag, he carried over to Kaseem's house. Now Kaseem had a loyal slave called Morgana. When Alibaba rang the doorbell, it was Morgana who opened the door. Alibaba quickly told her everything. He did not want Kaseem's wife to see the mutilated body and asked Morgana to help him. Morgana was very intelligent and sharp-witted girl. Upon hearing everything she asked Alibaba to go home and rest and she will take care of everything. As Alibaba went back home, Morgana in the middle of the night went out all alone in search of the best tailor in town. Now Baba Mustafa was an old tailor who lived in a small alley in a poor part of the city. Even though it was the middle of the night, his shop was open. "Baba Mustafa, I need your help regarding a certain matter. If you help us out, you will be paid very handsome fees. But there is one condition, you cannot ask any questions and you will be taken to that place where you will work, completely blindfolded. So will you help us?"—Baba Mustafa hearing upon a good reward agreed. Morgana immediately pulled out a heavy handkerchief and tied it around Mustafa's eyes making sure that he couldn't see a single thing. She then led him to their house and bringing before him Kaseem's dead body and head, told him, "Baba Musatafa, this is the body of a doll that I unintentionally broke. My master is very fond of it. Can you please sew it together?" Mustafa immediately got to work and before sunrise his work was done. Morgana paid him the fees she had promised him and led him back to his house, blindfolded. Then she went to a chemist's shop and started wailing, "Oh dear lord, my master is so sick! I need some medicine so that he may live one more night! Looks like his days are numbered." This way the news spread that Kaseem was sick and was about to breathe his last any moment. When she came back home, she was joined by Alibaba and together they gave the sad news about how the robbers had killed Kaseem last night when he tried to steal the gold. Kaseem's wife gave out a loud scream and slowly the news spread that Kaseem was dead and funeral arrangements were made. But nobody knew the real cause of his death that he had died in the hands of bandits!

But the robbers coming back to their den and seeing that Kaseem's body was not there, realized that someone else now knew about their secret cave. The leader of the robbers was now determined to find the culprit and gave orders to his men to find out which person it could be from the nearby town. The next day early morning, one of the men from the group went around town to see if anything could be found. For two days he went around the entire town but could not find or see anything that gave any hint on who could it have been who knows about the secret cave. On the third day, it was the wee hours of the morning, it was not yet light when he sat down for rest in front of a shop. As he looked inside, he saw

an old man bending down and sewing a cloth. There was hardly enough light to see anything but he seemed unperturbed. Curious the man called out, "Baba [a respectful term for a man], there is hardly any light here. Can you see what you are sewing?" The tailor said, "Oh of course, I have very sharp eyes, you see. So sharp that I can sew together a dead man's body, blindfolded." It was Baba Mustafa. And as soon as the bandit heard this he grew alert. Immediately he said, "Let's see how sharp his eyesight and memory is. I will blindfold you and if you can lead me to the house where you performed this feat, I will believe you." Mustafa agreed and the bandit blindfolding him took him out by his hand. As they reached Kaseem's house and Mustafa pointed out the exact door, the bandit put a small cross beside the doorknob and left the place. He went back to his leader and gave him the good news that he had been successful in identifying the house of the culprit who knew about the secret of the cave.

Now in the morning, Morgana was going to the market to run some errand when suddenly her eyes fell on the chalk mark on the doorknob. Being smart and intelligent, she knew that there was some deeper meaning attached to it and so what she did was mark all the neighboring houses' doors with the same cross mark. After she finished, all the houses had the same cross mark on their doorknobs and it was impossible to mark out one house from the other.

In the meanwhile, the leader of the bandits, happy that they had identified the culprit wanted to see for himself whose house it was and so came with his henchman in disguise to check it out, himself. But when they reached there, they were confused to see all the houses having the same cross mark. The leader was very angry with his henchman and when they assembled together in the cave later in the night, he chopped off the head of the man as he had failed to perform his duties properly. The leader then chose another person from the group and gave him the duty of finding the culprit's house. Like the first man, this bandit also showed up at the shop of Baba Mustafa and blindfolded him to take him to Kaseem's house. This time, the bandit marked the door with a red chalk next to the white cross and left. But as fate would have it, Morgana again spotted the red cross and marked all the houses with the same red cross. Later in the night, when the bandits came to hunt down the culprit, they again got confused by all the red marks on every house in the neighbourhood and went back empty handed. The bandit leader was even more frustrated this time and beheaded the man who failed to complete the job. He now took it upon himself to find out the house. He went up to Mustafa's house and for the third time Mustafa led the bandits to Kaseem's house. But this time the leader did not mark the house but memorized it in his head.

That night, when the bandits all assembled in their secret cave, the leader came up with a plan to capture the culprit. Now what happened was that after Kaseem's death, Alibaba was living in his house as there was no

one else to take care of Kaseem's wife. So the eyes of the bandits naturally fell upon Alibaba now. So the leader decided to capture Alibaba by forming an elaborate plan. He first asked his henchmen to buy nineteen donkeys together with one huge jar of mustard oil and thirty-seven huge empty clean jars. The plan was that the bandit leader would disguise himself as a wealthy oil merchant in need of a place to spend the night and would request Alibaba for some resting space in his house. And while there will be mustard oil in only one vessel, the rest of the thirty seven containers will be the hiding place for the rest of the bandits, one robber in each vessel. In the middle of the night when everyone will be sleeping, they will come out of their hiding places and kill Alibaba and thus take revenge.

The next night as planned the leader in full disguise along with his nineteen donkeys and thirty eight vessels showed up on the door of Alibaba and said "Oh good man, I am an oil merchant and have been traveling for three months now. Tonight I am passing from your town and I need a place to stay. See my nineteen donkeys carrying thirty-eight vessels. All of them are full of mustard oil." Saying this he opened the lid of the only vessel containing the mustard oil and showed it to Alibaba to gain his trust. Alibaba suspecting nothing, showed the bandit leader into his house and made him welcome. They dined together and Alibaba then showed the bandit leader his resting quarter. He also instructed Morgana to feed the donkeys and place them in the stable at the back of the house. The bandit leader feigning tiredness asked permission to retire to his resting chamber. Now what happened as Morgana went to the stables to feed the donkeys, hearing her footsteps and mistaking it to be that of their leader, one of the robbers hiding in the vessels stationed in the same room, whispered out, "So has the time come to come out and attack?" Morgana hearing this trembled and slowly realized what was happening. But being quick witted she imitating the leader's voice said, "No. Wait for the time being. I will let you know when the time is right." She then hurried out of the stable and straight to the kitchen where in a huge cauldron she started boiling gallons and gallons of mustard oil. When the oil was boiling and sputtering, she put it in a large can and carried it back to the stable. Then she opened the lid of each vessel where the robbers were hiding and started pouring the hot oil on their heads and closed the lid shut. The robbers were unable to escape from the vessels and was scalded by the hot oil and died instantly. Like this Morgana killed all the thirty seven robbers quietly without anyone knowing and went back to the kitchen. Now she had to come up with a plan to kill the leader of the bandits. So she got some sleeping pills that Kaseem's wife used to take for sleep and mixed them in some tea that she was brewing. Then she put it in a teacup and slowly walked over to the bandit leader's resting chamber. She quietly knocked on the door and waited. The bandit leader was not sleeping and being awake he opened the door. Morgana very sweetly told him that this



was a special tea that she had made for him and she would be very happy if he drank it. The leader loved drinking tea and without any hesitation immediately drank it all. And within ten minutes he was snoring like a pig. Morgana then went back to the kitchen and got the sharpest butcher knife that they had and coming back to the leader's room straight plunged it into his heart. The bandit leader did not even have time to react and died.

Morgana then woke up Alibaba and the entire household and told them everything that had happened. Alibaba was so pleased and grateful for what Morgana did that he asked for Morgana's hand in marriage with his son and then they lived happily ever after. (Bipul Sinha, 2012).

As the story ended, Bipul's wife cut in and said, "Just see what a violent story it is—Rahul is still young and Bipul has to introduce him to killing and murders from such an early age. I didn't even know till now that he has been narrating such stories of murder and killing to Rahul on the pretext of making him sleep." Bipul immediately said, "But he is a boy and he enjoys listening to stories of bandits and robbers. You can tell him all those wishy-washy unreal girly fairy tales, but I cannot. Also he is a man so he has to be rough and tough. What do you say, my boy?" Which of the stories do you like better, *Cinderella* or *Khul ja Sim Sim*? Tell Mamma! And how did I show you the bandits cut off Kaseem's head? Show us!" The boy with his thumb made a horizontal movement against his neck. Though it was endearing to watch the child do so, the mother was not too impressed it seemed.

I asked Bipul, "So when did you hear this story first and from whom?" Bipul answered,

Ohh, this is one of my most favourite stories from childhood, you know. I heard it first from my aunt, my mother's sister. She used to teach in a residential school in Darjeeling [hill-station in North Bengal] and we used to visit her every year during the summer vacations. It was she who first told us this story. I still remember the time. It used to be so different and easy. Every afternoon she would throw me and my two brothers in bed for our afternoon nap and tell us all kinds of different stories—There were so

many stories to be heard—But sadly I hardly remember any of them nowadays. But Alibaba’s story was my favourite, you see. (Bipul Sinha, 2012).

He added laughing,

Maybe I liked it so much because of the sibling rivalry I shared with my elder brother. You know how it is when you are in young—I would imagine my elder brother to be Kaseem and me as Ali Baba. So it was more fun! But I loved the story more because, after I heard the story, my aunt got the book for me to read from her school library. It was an illustrated book written in English. I fell in love with the pictures. I think I remember the story so well because of the pictures. I want to buy one like it, Alibaba’s story with illustrations—for Rahul. (Bipul Sinha, 2012).

When I asked if he had read the story in any other language, Bipul replied,

Yes, I have read the story of Alibaba in Bengali too. But that was not an illustrated one. I don’t remember if it was a different version from the one I read in English—But no, I don’t think it was any different. The storyline was the same. But **nothing** can measure up to that illustrated book that I read in my childhood. I really wish I could buy the exact same edition of the book for Rahul too. But let’s see where I can get it. It was a hard-bound book with *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* written in gold emblem. (Bipul Sinha, 2012).

Bipul’s wife spoke out, “Nowadays they also show a cartoon on TV based on the entire *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* book. Last day they were showing the story of *Alladin and the Magic Carpet*. Wait for a few days, they will show *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* too. Then both of you, father and son, can sit together and watch the episode.”

It can be seen that people from different age-groups and genders have different choices in genres of folktales. Young mothers prefer to read out stories from the Brothers Grimm like *Cinderella* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in English, and sometimes stories by Enid Blyton, the English children’s author of stories like *The Magic Faraway Tree* (1943) or *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937), to introduce the child to a

different culture and ideas, not to mention the English language. Grandmothers, on the other hand, prefer to tell stories in vernacular Bengali and much closer to home, which they feel nostalgic about. But the question that arises is what will happen when these young mothers of today's generation grow old and become grandparents. It will be interesting to see whether they will experience a change in ideas and will wish to protect the culture and heritage of the country, and thus will start re-telling stories in the vernacular, which is now the prerogative of older generations. Or will these folktales die a natural oral death along with their guardian generation of old narrators?

In some households children are lulled to sleep through lullabies—consisting of traditional Bengali folk songs and rhymes, and sometimes with English nursery rhymes as well. I remember in my childhood hearing quite a few Bengali rhymes and lullabies which are usually hummed accompanied by a rhythmic patting on the child's back to lull them to sleep. But I did not come across any informant who still practices the custom of humming Bengali lullabies or rhymes to put young children to sleep.

I came across a family friend's daughter (Isha Roy), a four year old child, reciting the nursery rhyme of *Wee Willy Winkie*. We were at a family dinner and at around 9 o'clock a hassled nanny came up to our host (Neha) complaining that Isha her daughter was creating a fuss on going to bed and was insisting on watching a cartoon on television. Neha promptly went upstairs to the living room and I followed her closely. Entering the room she told Isha, "Listen it's already 9 o'clock. If you don't go to bed immediately you do know who will come to get you, right? I won't be able to stop him from getting you. He is on his way now." I was curious as to whom Neha was referring to as 'he.' And Isha also seemed to be a bit alert and slowly got off her chair in front of the television. I asked



curiously, 'Is anybody coming here now? It's pretty late!' Neha looked at Isha and said, 'Seems like she doesn't know what happens to young children who don't go to bed on time. Should we tell her?' Isha replied excitedly, 'Don't you know about *Wee Willy Winkie*? He comes every night to check on us. He wears a dark pajama and *ganji* [vest] and has a long stick in his hand. And you know he knocks on the window too.' She pointed at a window to show where *Wee Willy Winkie* apparently taps with his stick. "And you know he has a sack on his back. But if you go to bed on time he gives you nice stuff in the morning! So he is not so bad, you see!" Neha turned to her daughter and said, "Isha, tell her the rhyme about *Wee Willy Winkie*." Isha started reciting,

Wee Willy Winkie runs through the town,  
Upstairs and downstairs in his night-gown,  
There he met an old man who wouldn't say his prayers,  
So he took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs. (Isha Ghosh, 2011).

Hearing this, Neha shook her head and said, "No you haven't said it properly. You have mixed it up with *Goosey Goosey Gander*. Recite it again properly." But Isha did not seem to be too willing to recite the rhyme again and after turning off the television, the nanny met with no further resistance in putting Isha to bed. Then Neha explained that sometimes she recites the rhyme of *Wee Willy Winkie* and that does the trick of making Isha go to bed immediately. I asked Neha if she narrates a story to Isha when she tucks her in bed or prefers to perform nursery rhymes. She answered,

See, most of the times I am so tired at the end of the day after a full day of work in the office that even if I want to read out stories to her, I am unable to do so. And you know with her, if she starts hearing a story during bedtime, she gets so excited that it's hard to make her fall asleep after that. So I prefer reading out some short nursery rhyme when I get time. Also this way you see, she doesn't make too much of a fuss in going to bed on time as she is scared that *Wee Willy Winkie* will otherwise come to get

her—Actually my husband and I have to go on tours frequently for office work and that time Isha is left in the care of my mother along with our domestic help. And sometimes she gets really difficult to manage. Then all these characters come alive to help us. And yes, sometimes she would get too scared. My husband gets a bit annoyed as he feels that Isha would grow up with too much fear in the ghosts and all—So I told her that *Wee Willy Winkie* will give you nice gifts if you listen to him! What else can I do! (Neha Ghosh, 2012).

I was curious to know from where she had heard these rhymes herself. Actually it was not so surprising, as I myself had heard these rhymes a lot and read them too in illustrated books in my childhood. Neha replied,

Oh, you know these are all rhymes from our childhood. I mean when I was young, I had read them in those children's nursery rhyme books. I am sure you have read them or heard them somewhere. They were really popular when we were young. In fact it is nowadays that it is slowly getting out of fashion. Also you see I studied in a residential convent all girls' school. The sisters there used to tell these rhymes to the young girls. So I know all these English or rather Scottish rhymes so very well. (Neha Ghosh, 2012).

Thus it seemed that reciting nursery rhymes like these served the purpose of scaring the children into obedience as well as disciplining them. This is exactly like the way the 'boo man' is used as a threat to get a child to bed in Newfoundland (Widdowson, 1977:71). As Widdowson suggests, 'the external figure is thus only a potential punisher in some threats, whereas in others his actual presence is implied and, perhaps most terrifying of all, he is said to come to take the child away' (Widdowson, 1977: 72).

Apart from being used as a means of social control, folktales are also used as an agent of socialization. Now, we can turn our attention to how some stories are used as socializing tools for children and how cultural and moral values are passed down from one generation to the next through the narration of such tales.

## Chapter 5

### A Cross-Cultural Perspective of a Bengali Folktale

As I went about my fieldwork in and around Calcutta in the winter of 2011, I chanced upon seventy year old grandmother, Kabita *dida*, narrating a very popular folktale called *Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu*. It was a lazy Sunday morning and I was visiting my friend Payel when we heard her grandmother, Kabita *dida*, calling out to her ten-year old granddaughter Nupur (Payel's sister), in an attempt to brush, comb and braid Nupur's knee-length long hair. "You see, the beauty of a young girl lies not only in her face, but in her hair. So sit quietly and let me massage your head and then take care of your hair," saying this, Kabita *dida* made Nupur sit crossed-legged in front of her, while she took a similar position on the floor behind her. The girl wanted to go out and play with her friends and was constantly fidgeting. To pacify her, Kabita *dida* said, "Aahh, can't you sit still for a moment? Now only if you stop fidgeting and let me do your hair, I will tell you the story of *Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu*." This seemed to draw the girl's interest and she sat still for a moment. I listened with rapt attention and was transported to the world of *Sukhu* and *Dukhu* for a while.

#### ***Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu*:**

A man had two wives; an elder wife and a younger wife. The elder wife and her daughter were the neglected ones while all the love and affection was showered on the younger wife and her daughter. The elder wife's daughter was called 'Dukhu' [which means 'the sad one'] while the younger wife's daughter was called 'Sukhu' [meaning 'the one in comfort']. One day the tailor falls ill and after suffering for a while he passed away. As soon as he died, the younger wife and her daughter threw Dukhu and her mother out of the house and enjoyed all the riches the tailor had left behind. Poor Dukhu and her mother, where will they go, finally took shelter in a small rundown hut in the outskirts of the village. Since

they were poor and did not have any money to buy food, Dukhu started spinning cotton and selling in the market to make ends meet.

One day as Dukhu is spinning cotton in the green meadows, just outside her hut, a gust of wind comes by and blows away all her cotton. Seeing all her cotton being blown away, Dukhu started crying—Seeing Dukhu crying, the wind said, “Don’t you cry, girl—Come and follow me and I will take you to the palace of Mother of Moon.”

Hearing this, Dukhu wiped her tears and started to follow the wind. After walking for a while, Dukhu heard a cow calling out to her, “O Dukhu—where are you going? Can you help me? See, this shed is covered with dung—Can you clean it up for me?” Dukhu cleaned up the shed, gave the cow some hay and water and again started walking. After walking a few miles, suddenly Dukhu heard a plaintain tree, “O Dukhu—where are you going? Can you help me? See these creepers are pulling me down—can you cut them for me?” Dukhu did as she was asked and tore down all the creepers. She started walking again, following the wind. Again after some time, Dukhu came across a horse. The horse said, “O Dukhu—where are you going? Can you help me? I am hungry and I need some water and grass.” Dukhu went to a pond, got some water and some grass and fed the horse. After this she walked for a long time with nothing in sight—Then suddenly she saw a huge palace, out of nowhere—The wind said, “Dukhu, see this is the palace of Mother of Moon. Now in you go.” Dukhu with a palpitating heartbeat slowly entered the palace. It was full of beautiful ornaments and decorations, but strangely not a single person could be seen or heard. Suddenly she came across a locked door and a soft noise could be heard from inside. She knocked softly on the door and waited. A voice came from inside, “Come in.” Dukhu slowly opened the door and saw a beautiful old lady with hair sparkling silver like the moon sitting in a corner and spinning a huge amount of cotton on a wheel. Dukhu bowed down, reverently touched her feet and said, “O Mother of Moon, see the wind has blown away all my cotton and if I don’t spin, me and my mother will starve to death. Can you please give me some cotton?” Mother of Moon said, “Yes, of course my girl, I will give you back all your cotton and much more—but only if you are deserving. Now see that first door, get some clothes from there—from the second door get a towel and in the third there is some oil—Take whatever you want and then see the pond outside, go there and take two dips there. Then I will give you back all your cotton.” So Dukhu went on to open the first door, and as soon as she opened it, she saw it was full of beautiful dresses—so beautiful that she had never dreamed of in her entire life. But she went past all of them and picked out the most ordinary one that she could find. Then she went on to the next room and there also she found the softest of all towels. But she chose the simplest one and went out. The third door opened up to luxurious oils and perfumes of the best

kind. But then again she ignored all of them and chose to put on a small amount of neem oil on her hair and body and went to the pond. As she was stepping down into the pond, she remembered what Mother of Moon had asked her to do. Two dips. Not more than that. So she took the first dip. As she rose above the water, she was transformed into a beautiful girl, with skin as fair as milk and hair as black as the monsoon clouds. But of course she was unaware of all this. Then she took a second dip. This time as she rose above the water, she found herself covered with precious jewels and gold from her hair to her feet. She then slowly got out of the pond, wiped herself with the rough towel she had got and dressed in the ordinary clothes instead of the expensive threaded ones. Mother of Moon was happy to see her following the orders so perfectly and offered her some food. Dukhu being the simple girl that she was, politely had a simple meal of rice and lentil soup. As she finished her food, Mother of Moon beckoned her to come with her. She took her to a new room now and Dukhu was surprised to see it full of huge beautifully wrapped boxes. As Mother of Moon asked Dukhu to choose any box she liked, Dukhu found the smallest box in the room and chose to keep it. Mother of Moon then fondly bade her goodbye and Dukhu again bowed down to touch her feet with respect and then she went on her way back home. As she walked back home, the horse gave her a beautiful *pakshiraj* colt<sup>6</sup> which could fly. Further down the road, the plantain tree gave her a pot full of gold coins called *mohurs* and then the cow gave a beautiful milky white calf, whose udders would never dry out of milk. Dukhu at last reached home with all her gifts.

Her mother worried to death is very happy to get Dukhu back—and seeing the huge amount of gifts she had got from everyone, she is shocked.

Dukhu then told her mother all that had happened. Suddenly she remembered the small box that Mother of Moon had given her in the end. She took it out of her pocket and as soon as she opened it, a handsome prince stepped out of it in front of her and asked her to marry him. Soon afterwards, an auspicious date was fixed and Dukhu got married with the handsome prince.

Now on the other hand, Sukhu and her mother are very curious about the sudden change in fortune that Dukhu seemed to have gained. Now Sukhu and her mother being the greedy women that they are, want to have the same riches as Dukhu had achieved.

Sukhu's mother ordered her to spin cotton on the same meadow where Dukhu had been and when the wind came, to follow it. As Sukhu was spinning the cotton, the wind came and blew her cotton away.

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<sup>6</sup> Interesting point to note is that the flying horse called the *Pakshiraj* can be compared to the Greek mythical horse, Pegasus

Without saying a word and secretly pleased, Sukhu started running after the wind. Some way down she met the cow who asked, "O Sukhu where are you going? Can you help me? See this shed is covered with dung—Can you clean it up for me?" Sukhu yelled, "Ewww that's cow dung—What have you taken me to be? I will never touch it." As she walked further down, the plantain tree asked her, "O Sukhu where are you going? Can you help me? See these creepers are pulling me down—can you cut them for me?" Sukhu ignored it completely and kept on walking. Next she came across the horse, who said, "O Sukhu where are you going? Can you help me? I am hungry and I need some water and grass." Sukhu now angry, yelled out, "All of you—do you want me to be late for Mother of Moon? Now don't cross my path and leave me alone." As she continued walking after some time she came across the palace of Mother of Moon. As soon as she saw the palace, she ran inside and started searching for Mother of Moon. Without asking for permission or even knocking, Sukhu straight opened up the door and said, "I have come a long way and I want all the things that you have given Dukhu. Now tell me where they are and I will go away quietly." Mother of Moon was shocked to see such rude behaviour from such a young girl. Not raising her voice, she quietly said, "Yes, of course my girl, I will give you back all your cotton and much more—but only if you are deserving. Now see that first door, get some clothes from there—from the second door get a towel and in the third there is some oil. Take whatever you want and then see the pond outside, go there and take two dips there. Then I will give you back all your cotton." So Sukhu went on to open the first door to the room full of beautiful dresses—Her eyes shining with greed, she picked out as many dresses as she could hold in her arms. Then she went on to the next room and there also she chose the softest one and went out. The third door opened up to luxurious oils and perfumes of the best kind. Here also she put on many different kinds of expensive and exotic creams. As she was stepping down into the pond, she remembered what Mother of Moon had asked her to do. Two dips. Not more than that. So she took the first dip. As she rose above the water, she was transformed into a beautiful girl, with skin as fair as milk and hair as black as the monsoon clouds. But of course she was aware of all this. Then she took a second dip. This time as she rose above the water, she found herself covered with precious jewels and gold from her hair to her feet. Laughing greedily and wanting more, she took a third dip. And lo behold, as soon as her head came up above the water surface, she found that her face and body were covered in warts and moles and her hair dirty, matted and in dreadlocks—In shock Sukhu screamed out loud. Crying hysterically, Sukhu ran to Mother of Moon. Looking at her in pity, Mother of Moon said, "See I had told you to take **only** two dips—now nothing can be done. But come with me and have something to eat." She then served her steamed rice with lentil soup, fish curry, potatoes and shrimp curry, and chicken roast and for dessert, some

rice pudding. Sukhu thought to herself, “Well at least let me eat to my heart’s content now—that will give me some solace at least.”

As she finished her food, Mother of Moon beckoned her to come with her. She took her to a new room now and Sukhu’s eyes gleamed in joy to see it full of huge beautifully wrapped boxes. As Mother of Moon asked Sukhu to choose any box she liked, she picked up the biggest one and without even saying thanks walked out of the door. Now while on the way back, foxes got startled and people fainted looking at Sukhu’s appearance. As she approached the horse, who had asked for help, it gave her a huge kick on the back and she yelled out, “Ayiii help, help!” Next when she came across the plantain tree it broke off a heavy branch of bananas on Sukhu’s shoulders—Sukhu cried out, “Awww I am dying—help meeee!” Then somehow she managed to limp forward and slowly approached the cow. The cow remembering her, bared its horns and chased her away. Sukhu ran for her life and panting reached her house. Her mother, not recognizing her, came out with a broom to chase her away from their house. Sukhu cried out to her mother that it’s her. Crying bitterly they went inside the house and locked the door. Suddenly Sukhu remembered the huge box she had brought from Mother of Moon. Excited and hoping that a prince would come out, they opened the box. But as soon as they opened it, instead of a prince, a hungry python leaped out and gobbled up both Sukhu and her mother. (Kabita *dida*, 2011).<sup>7</sup>

I had heard this story from my grandmother while growing up. And this time while listening to it, I kept trying to match it with the version I had heard my grandmother narrating. Though this version of the story was very close to the version I heard from my grandmother, it was no doubt one of the most brilliant renditions of the tale. Kabita *dida* brought into the story her own personal touch with intonations in the dialogues and wove a different magic with her simple but powerful words. While listening to the story I felt that I was hearing the tale for the first time ever. But I was surprised to notice that in the version that my grandmother narrated, the rewards and the punishment awarded to both the girls were described differently. For example, in my grandmother’s version of the story, after taking two dips in the pond Dukhu would turn exceedingly fair and whenever she would speak gold and silver would fall from her

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<sup>7</sup> Tale type ATU 480D\* Tales of Kind and Unkind Girls.



mouth while Sukhu was punished by her face being covered in warts and boils and whenever she spoke toads and snakes would come out of her mouth. Almost always after the story was over, there would be an interjection exclaiming, 'See this is what happens to children if they are disobedient and rude!' I still remember how, as a child, hearing the story would conjure up a strong visual image of snakes and toads leaping out of the mouth if you were disrespectful towards anyone and the fright of it alone would be enough to make me adhere to the strict boundaries of discipline. So functionally analyzed it can be said that the story had a high moral value and the main reason for its narration was to imbue the basic social and cultural values in the child from a very early age.

When I asked Kabita *dida* why she chose to tell this story, she said, "This tale perfectly showcases how a girl should behave around elders. It also talks about greed and wanting too much. Also it is useful in teaching children to be nice to animals and plants—just because they cannot speak does not mean that they don't feel—If we as elders don't teach the children to be kind and compassionate, then who will? Hearing such stories will condition their minds from an early age to be thoughtful of others and be more humane." Hearing this, I remembered how my grandmother, during the narration of the story, would stress from time to time how Dukhu interacted with the donor-figures: when the cow, the tree and the horse would thank Dukhu for her help, she would be modest and say politely that she was glad to help them all and likewise when they all gave her rewards for her help and kindness, she would be very grateful and thank them all graciously. It is through these messages that elders try to instill in the children the social graces which are highly important for day to day interactions with members of the community.



The tale of '*Sukhu aar [and] Dukhu*' can be said to be important for the purpose of imparting social education to children. It mainly functions as an educative tale as the messages conveyed through it act as a guideline to teach children the consequences of good and bad actions. The basic moral value of being kind to animals and plants is an important message that is conveyed through this tale as well. When the cow asks Dukhu to help her clean her shed which is dirty with cow-dung, Dukhu readily obliges. In India, in rural areas, cow-dung is an essential daily commodity as it is used in agriculture as manure and dried cow-dung is also sometimes used for fuel. Also the cow is considered a sacred animal by the Hindu community. So Dukhu by agreeing to help the cow clean its shed, was actually conforming to socially accepted patterns of behavior. Many young girls might turn up their noses and refuse to touch the cow-dung, and so through this tale the message can be conveyed that even in the most menial of all jobs a huge reward might be hidden. The man-nature relationship is another important topic that the story deals with. To be kind towards animals is one basic quality that each individual should cultivate within them and this is ingrained in the child from a very early age by the family members. But the most important point in the tale deals with the fact that girls should be obedient, docile and most importantly, respectful towards elders.

The story of '*Sukhu aar [and] Dukhu*' becomes all the more interesting if we try to observe how it aids in socialization of children. If carefully heard, the story has a lot of small cultural references and nuances hidden within it. For example when Dukhu goes to meet the Mother of Moon, it is lightly mentioned that she first respectfully touches Her feet and addresses Her respectfully. Now touching of the feet is a sign of respect and is used as a form of greeting by young children whenever they meet an elderly person

socially. But Sukhu being disrespectful doesn't even bother to follow the social decorum and in the end she doesn't fare too well in the journey of life. Greed is another sin that is a punishable offence in the tale. When the old lady asks Dukhu to take two dips in the water and not three, she obeys her command and in turn is transformed into a beautiful maiden, covered with gold and precious jewels. She is content with what she gets and also being modest when given the option of choosing between caskets, chooses the smallest casket and ultimately wins a handsome man who asks for her hand in marriage. On the other hand, Sukhu after transforming into a beautiful girl, bedecked with jewels, is greedy for more and it is this insatiable desire for more beauty and wealth that leads to her downfall. Though she is given a second chance to redeem herself and is presented with a room full of caskets to choose from, Sukhu again commits the same sin of greed by opting for the largest box and ultimately meets a bad end by getting gobbled up by a python.

Another important point that comes out from this tale is the absence of the role of the father and how it contributes to the persecution of the elder wife and daughter by the younger wife. Also one of the notable features of this story is that it is not the younger child who emerges as the main winner in the story but the elder child who is the main hero and this actually goes against the general norm of European folktales where it is always the younger child who ultimately stands up as the true hero in the stories. Another thing that stands out is that this story revolves around women and girls. The husband is the only male mentioned (except for the prince at the end), but only briefly in the beginning, and he dies quickly and it is only after his death that the main story starts. As it is in a male dominated, patriarchal society, women are not given much space or

freedom. Here it can be said that the polygamous father sets up the problem by dying at the start of the tale and then the conflict between the daughters and the wives emerges within the story. The prince appears only at the end of the tale for a moment. So the tale is bordered by men, as if they set the terms of existence of the women. Within the space the men have left to the women, the women fight each other. The main protagonists are female and even the donor figures (the animals and the tree) can be said to be female too if we consider the cow and the horse giving their calf and colt as a reward to Dukhu. Now as Maitra points out, women were the main narrators of these folktales in Bengal. Originating from rural surroundings these stories reflected the most basic thoughts, fantasies, beliefs and feelings of the women in rural Bengal and so it is not surprising that most of the time the main characters in the stories were women married or unmarried. This was the simplest medium through which the village woman's dream of becoming queen, a beautiful princess or to be off on adventures across 'seven seas and thirteen rivers' could come true in the realm of fantasy. The tales may also have been a way for women to contemplate their difficult position in a system which allowed polygamy.

In India the Mughal and Mohammedan rulers exerted their domination for over nine hundred years, until the British took over, and so their influence and laws had penetrated almost all strata of the society. Under Islamic law Muslims could take a maximum of four wives at the same time. Though the urban-educated Hindu population generally refrained from such practices, it was not uncommon among Hindu villagers to take more than one wife. Then, as was often the case, there ensued a competition between the wives to win the affection of the husband and more often than not it was the new and younger wife who won in monopolizing the attention and affection of the husband, thus

banishing the elder one to the periphery. So many Indian folktales show the injustice and the cruelty meted out to the elder wife at the hands of the new young wife and thus, through many such tales, young unmarried girls were warned of the consequences of the husband going astray and procuring a second wife. Maybe this is one of the main reasons why the elder daughter actually emerges as the winner and not the younger one. It also arouses sympathy for the elder wife and daughter and a sense of ill-will towards the younger wife. Lopamudra Maitra also states that, 'polygamy being a prevalent norm for a long time in Bengal, in a certain strata of the society, these stories reflect the anxiety, apprehension and concern of women sharing the same household with a common man'(Maitra 2007: 85). In the European versions the husband has generally taken a second wife after the death of his first wife. Though there is no competition between the two wives to win the affection of the husband, there is animosity towards the daughter from the step-mother and her daughter; so the essential conflict among these women remains in this tale type whether it is told in monogamous or polygamous societies.

The story opens up a perfect place outside the real world, a world where the animals can speak and cry out for help and maybe it brought forth a deep hidden desire in the child's mind to understand the language of the animals. When I used to hear the story of *Sukhu aar [and] Dukhu*, the most entertaining part for me was the part where the girls would get rewarded and punished for their good and bad deeds respectively. The transformation of Dukhu into a beautiful maiden would always be followed by the question, 'How beautiful?' and then a long and detailed description of the beauty of Dukhu would be given, like how milky white her skin became, how long and lustrous her hair grew past the knees, and how she was transformed from an ungainly village maiden

to a beautiful girl. Perhaps this also indicates growing up and transforming the body from girlhood to maturity. Equally amusing to hear was the punishment of Sukhu, the unkind and disobedient girl. The mere thought of snakes and toads falling from her mouth and her entire body being covered in huge black warts and boils, brought forth peals of laughter but at the same time a shudder would also run through the listeners as it seemed the worst kind of punishment possible. It can be said that in our subcontinent the concept of traditional beauty entails milky white skin and a glowing complexion and long dark hair and it is essential for a girl of a marriageable age to meet the conventional standards of beauty. Dundes also points out that this Aarne-Thompson tale type 480 concerns preparation for marriage rather than marriage itself. Accordingly, it can serve as an appropriate introduction for other tales, for example, Cinderella (AT 510A), which do end with marriage (Roberts 1994: xii). In this context it can be mentioned that an important aspect of Indian society is reflected in this folktale, i.e. the perception of beauty in the culture and how important it is, especially for unmarried girls, to be fair and have a complexion as bright and glowing as the full moon. Lopamudra Maitra also alludes to this search for perfect beauty when she states how “in each of these descriptions (in folktales) is woven the interest of fantasy and the reality of expectations that leads the mind to frame its own mirror of reference” (Maitra 2007:84). In the Indian subcontinent, where the complexion of the general population is of the colour of biscuits, fair complexion is considered to be an asset and girls especially, from a very young age, are instructed on how to use various natural ingredients like herbs of certain kinds mixed with milk, honey and turmeric to brighten the skin and achieve the perfect ‘snow-white complexion’ which will in the long run help them to easily find a match.

When Dukhu ignores all the exotic creams and bathing oils, and opts for *neem* oil to apply on her body, it has a special significance. Neem oil is an extract from the leaves of the neem tree in India which is used as an antiseptic and is often used as an essential ingredient in many cosmetics. But it has a strong smell to it and that is the reason why people, particularly girls, do not like to use it in its natural state. But in many households mothers and grandmothers would force young girls to rub neem oil on their bodies and hair before taking a bath in order to improve their skin tones and have healthy skin.

As Warren E. Roberts, in his book *The Tale of the Kind and Unkind Girls*, has pointed out, this tale listed as Type 480 in Aarne-Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, has been given three titles by folklorists. It has been called “*Old Mother Frost*” after the version printed by the Grimm Brothers in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812). Sometimes it’s called ‘*The Spinning Women by the Spring*’ as in Aarne-Thompson’s *The Types of the Folktale* and the tale is also known as ‘*Toads and Diamonds*’ after the version included in Perrault’s *Contes de ma Mere L’Oye*. But Roberts feels a less specific title such as ‘*The Tale of the Kind and Unkind Girls*’ adequately describes the tale as a whole (Roberts 1994: 3). Similarly, Uther has identified the tale as Tale type ATU 480D\* Tales of Kind and Unkind Girls.

According to Stith Thompson this is one of the most popular of oral tales found in almost all parts of the world. Anna Birgitta Rooth in her book *The Cinderella Cycle* has also used some versions of Type 480 in her study of the ‘Cinderella’ cycle of tales. She also suggests that this tale type has played an important part in the development of the ‘Cinderella’ cycle. Again as Roberts points out, AT 480 takes a strikingly large number of different forms. Although apparently it might seem that the main message of the story

is pretty much the same, that modest choices are the best, a deeper analysis might help us see how social messages differ in different cultural contexts. Robert Darnton (1984) observes that narrators from specific cultures and historical periods tell the same stories differently because their worldviews change over time and space (Taggart 1990: 10).

One can get some glimpse into the cultural beliefs of India if one observes how Axel Olrik's Law of Repetition doesn't seem to work in the cultural context of this folktale. As Olrik had shown in his essay 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative,' repetition of an act is almost always tied to the number three. But as one can see in this tale, the Mother of Moon asks the girls to take two dips in the pond and cautions them against taking three, which will lead to their doom. As Olrik mentioned in his essay, there are collections of oral tales in India in which the number three is completely avoided in an attempt to reflect the authentic fullness of life (Dundes 1999: 90). This is true in the sense that in the Indian belief system, number three is not considered to be very auspicious. In my observation, this is mostly reflected while serving any dish; as the guests will be permitted to have either two or four helpings of a dish; and the third helping has to be followed by a fourth or restricted to only two helpings.

Ralph Trogner in his book, *A Comparative Study of a Bengal Folktale: Underworld Beliefs and Underworld Helpers*, has observed the role of water in the context of Indian culture. As he observed, in this tale, water causes beauty and ornaments as well as ugliness and wounds. Thus magical water plays an important role in the action. The boundary-function of the water expressed in Brahmanical, Jain and Buddhist theology speaks of annular oceans and continents, which surround the circular continent, on which human life is found. It is also water which actually separates the human domain

from the lower world or the other realm of life (Troger 1966: 37). In the religious life of Indians, water plays a significant role as it is seen as a purifier, which washes away all sins. River Ganges is considered to be the most sacred of all rivers and the religious belief is that to bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges will free one from the cycle of birth and death as all negative karmas will be washed away. Also before sitting down for the morning and evening prayers, people bathe, or else, it is said, the Gods will refuse to accept their prayers. So in the folktale, the transformation of the girls after taking a dip in the pond may be linked to this ancient folk belief of water being sacred and the importance of maintaining healthy hygiene for both physical and spiritual health.

Another area worth exploration is how far Propp's functions of *dramatis personae* are applicable to this folktale from a different cultural context. Folklorists before Propp—Aarne, for one—certainly understood that a tale type can manifest itself in a wide variety of versions and variants, but their understanding occurred only at the individual tale type level. Propp's breakthrough was that he realized for the first time that entirely different tale types shared the same basic structure (Dundes 1999: 122). Propp explained in detail how he came about this conclusion:

I noted an interesting fact: in "Morozko" [Frost] (No. 95 in Soviet editions), the stepmother sends her daughter into the woods to Morozko. He tries to freeze her to death, but she speaks to him so sweetly and so humbly that he spares her, gives her a reward, and lets her go. The old woman's daughter, however, fails the test and perishes. In another tale the stepdaughter encounters not Morozko but a *lesij* [a wood goblin], in still another, a bear. But surely it is the same tale! Morozko, the *lesij*, and the bear test the stepdaughter and reward her each in his own way, but the plot does not change....It is obvious that Morozko, the *lesij*, and the bear performed the same action. To Afanas'ev these were different tales because of different characters in them. To me they were identical because the actions of the characters were the same....I devised a very simple method of analyzing wondertales in accordance with the characters'



actions—regardless of their concrete form. To designate these actions I adopted the term “functions” (Propp 1984: 69).

But as Dundes points out, one needs to see the illustrations of each function and read Propp’s interpretations of various series of functions, for example, his distinction between tales that have “seekers” who rescue “victims” and the tales in which the victims save themselves. This is significant for feminist theory insofar as heroines in fairy tales in oral versions are frequently victims who are perfectly capable of saving themselves, as opposed to the depiction of heroines in written versions (mostly written by males) in which male seekers are required to rescue hapless female victims (Dundes 1999: 123-124).

In the Grimms’ version of tale type AT 480D, *Old Mother Frost*, we can see a similar pattern, but with certain variations. In this story there is no mention of the husband and the widow lives with her step-daughter and her own daughter. Unlike the Bengali version, there is no mention as to who is the elder or younger of the two daughters. But similar to the story of ‘*Sukhu aar [and] Dukhu*’ the step-daughter, who is beautiful and industrious, is mistreated by the widow who forces her to sit by a well and spin till blood flows out of her hands. One day the spindle slips from the girl’s hands and falls into the well and in order to retrieve it the girl jumps into the well. She ends up in a beautiful meadow and on her journey encounters an oven and an apple tree and ultimately reaches the house of Mother Frost. Here, after providing satisfactory service to Mother Frost, the girl is rewarded by being covered in gold but there is no mention that the donor figures whom she helped reward her with gifts for her service. But there is mention of a cock signaling the arrivals of the girls at home. The real daughter tries to imitate the

fortunes of the other girl but she is lazy and unkind and in the end she is punished by being showered with a tubful of pitch, instead of gold. The tale ends by saying that, 'the pitch stuck to her, and as long as she lived would never come off again.'

If we follow the Proppian functions, we can see that in both versions the story starts with a lack; here [in the version narrated by Kabita *dida*], it is the elder wife and her daughter who lack the social prestige and attention of the husband/father (VIII A). While in the Grimms' version the step-daughter lacks the love and respect she should receive from her step-mother and step-sister. Next we find that the lack is made known, for example when the wad of cotton/ the spindle is lost and the hero has to go in search of it (Proppian Function IX). Propp states that if the young boy or girl is driven out and the thread of the narrative is linked to his/her fate, and not to those who get left behind, then the hero of the tale is the banished boy/girl. Then there are no seekers. Heroes of this variety may be called 'victimized heroes' (Propp 1968: 36). In the Bengali version, the elder daughter herself takes the initiative for departure (B3, IX) while in the Grimms' version the step-daughter is dispatched directly, when the step-mother forces her to go and retrieve the spindle (B2, IX). And so the hero leaves home (Departure, XI). One can observe here the first of the three thematic oppositions that define the three categories of crises and conflicts appearing in fairy tales that can be seen to be at play in this context: The young in their parental home and their subsequent desire to gain independence and find their place in the world. This particular tale can also be seen as a story which talks about the creation of an independent identity for the daughter, separate from that of the mother.

Then the journeying hero meets certain donor figures and is tested by them. Propp mentions seven different kinds of tests or requests here. In this particular tale type one can find the last type called 'other requests' (D7) where the hero is asked to help the donor figures in different ways; the hero reacts positively to the actions of the future donor (XIII) by providing some assistance and finally he/she is transferred, delivered or led to the whereabouts of an object of search (XV). The hero is next given a new appearance ( XXIX). This major transformation is the climax of the Bengali version of the folktale but is absent from the Grimms' version altogether. And it is after this transformation that the Bengali tale tells of the hero getting married.

In the tale of Mother Frost, however, there is no mention of the hero getting a new beautiful appearance and likewise no mention of the hero getting married. Another point worth mentioning is the fact that while in the Bengali version both the girls meet three donor figures who in turn specifically reward the hero for her help, in the Grimms' version, the hero only meets the figures twice and also it is not specified whether they reward her in the end or not. However, both versions end similarly with the villain getting punished (XXX), though the modes of punishment meted out to them are different. In the Bengali version the disrespectful and unkind girl is transformed into a hideous being and is later gobbled up by a snake, and in the Grimms' version the unkind and lazy girl is showered with pitch which sticks to her forever. So one can agree with Dundes in stating that this tale type actually deals with preparation before marriage, taking into consideration how the hero is liberated from the domination of the mother, is successful in gaining beauty (a pre-requisite in obtaining successful marriage partners), and also

acquires riches thus gaining prominent social status, all of which are considered to be important before beginning a new life with a marriage partner.

As Dundes suggests, "If this version of the tale was construed as a metaphorical or symbolic account of how a young pubescent girl learns how to come to terms with the evolution of her own body, much of the content of the tale becomes meaningful....[Also] the fact that this tale does *not* end with a marriage—which is the norm in Indo-European fairy tales (Propp 1968: 63-68)—accounts for why this tale is so often combined with other tale types" (Roberts 1994: xii).

According to Bengt Holbek in "The Language of Fairy Tales," the symbolic elements of fairy tales convey emotional expressions of beings, phenomena and events in the real world, organized in the form of fictional narrative sequences, which allow the narrator to speak of the problems, hopes and ideals of the community (Holbek, 1989: 56). These emotional impressions are metamorphosed into symbolic expressions by a principle that may be specified in the form of a number of rules, for example, the Split: Holbek argues that tale roles can be reduced to the young couple and their respective parents and all other characters in the tale are aspects of these roles/people. So following this argument, one can say that the step-mother and Mother Frost can be the split personae of the natural mother, who in the eyes of the protagonist appears as critical and harsh favouring the other sibling, and as a benevolent fairy god-mother who grants special wishes. It can be said that this story might be used to reflect a case of sibling-rivalry as well. As Holbek states, the paradigmatic model of the fairy tale is based on contrasting extremes. Olrik's Law of Contrast can also be said to be in operation here. The Law of Contrast shows how the tale is polarized into two opposing forces, on one

side we have the obedient, kind girl while on the other side, there is the disobedient, disrespectful and unkind girl.

But a completely different perspective was put forward by a Canadian friend of mine when I was discussing this story with her. As she heard the story, my friend commented,

But I don't see anything wrong in what Sukhu did; she was a go-getter. Sukhu knew what she wanted and she exactly went for that—well, it was a different thing that she was rude. But apart from that she thought of herself and she did what she thought was best for her! Like in case of choosing the dresses, towels or oils in the house of Mother of Moon, when you have the choice of selecting the very best, why would you choose something ordinary? You should go for the best—Sukhu cannot be condemned for putting herself first. In fact Dukhu, I feel was more of a door-mat, who could not stand up for her rights! (Emily, 2012).

Another Canadian informant of mine after listening to the story seemed disappointed with the ending and remarked, “But Sukhu’s character was so strong, compared to that of Dukhu who seemed to be too compliant and subservient! That girl had more ‘spunk’ than Dukhu did. Also she was ambitious as compared to Dukhu. Now ambition is not really a bad thing.” (Ellora, name changed upon request, 2012). However, a third informant who was also Canadian was disturbed by Sukhu’s behaviour and remarked, “Such arrogance and greed for more should be punished. Sukhu deserved what she got in the end!” (Katy, name changed upon request, 2012).

I had never thought of the story from such a perspective. In the eastern part of the world, we are taught from a very early age to put others first. This is even more strongly upheld when it comes to girls or women of the family. Right from the day a girl is born, she is asked to sacrifice for her brother, her father, her cousins and later on her husband. South-Asian women are also very dependent on family. But in the western part of the

world, it is different. Women are more independent and much more vocal about their own needs and wants. So it can be seen that the aspect changes depending on the culture of the audience and the context.

One of my informants from Calcutta, Satyabrata Ghosh, while discussing this story mentioned, “Actually you see, self-interest is not given that much importance as a value in our Indian society; but generosity and altruistic behavior is considered to be of a higher ideal. It has both negative and positive aspects to it. I personally feel that at times folktales and stories impart contradictory messages to their audiences of whatever age or gender; for example self-interest is important but at the same time think of others first.” (Satyabrata Ghosh, 2011).

Another twenty-seven year old informant, Rupa, said

I heard this story a long time ago from an old maid who used to work for us. I was really young at that time—maybe six or seven years old. I still remember the mental image that I drew forth in my mind, upon hearing the story—an old wrinkled woman spinning yards and yards of cotton sitting on the moon. I remember staring at the moon for hours if only I could catch a glimpse of the *huri* [old woman]. In my mind I knew that if I came across her I would be so nice to her that she would have no other choice but to grant me all the wishes she gave Dukhu. I also asked our maid [who narrated the story] where could I find her, and she was very smart, you know—she said ‘Oh you never know, sometimes she goes around in disguise. So you have to be very careful and be nice to any old person you come across—You see I had a dark complexion when I was young and I prayed and prayed to be fair. I was fascinated by the whole idea of how Dukhu takes a bath and is transformed into a beautiful fair girl, and all this just because she was nice and well-behaved! It seemed a small price to pay for the gifts! (Rupa Sen, 2011).

Deepa Roy, a fifty year old female informant pointed out the irony contained in the title and the names of the protagonists. She commented,

Don’t you find it fascinating, the irony in the names and the consequent fates of the protagonists? ‘*Sukhu*’ is derived from the word ‘*sukh*’ having Sanskrit origins meaning ‘in comfort’ or ‘in luxury.’ It describes a state of

being in opulence and abundance but not necessarily happiness. On the other hand, '*Dukhu*' derived from the word '*dukh*' means, 'someone who is unhappy' or 'in a state of sadness.' In the first part of the story though the characters live in a state as the meaning of their name suggests, but in the second part of the story, it is completely reversed. '*Dukhu*' or the 'unhappy one' gets all the blessings and her fortune changes completely, while '*Sukhu*' the 'one in comfort' perishes. (Deepa Roy, 2011).

Thus as Maitra points out, Bengali folktales act as an important body of coded messages about pious, chaste, virtuous femininity and complete devotion to the family on one hand, and also as a set of symbols for the right and wrong methods of existence, and the good virtues of life, on the other hand. However, for a better understanding of culture-specific symbols, one needs to analyze and explore each story on its own, placing it within its broad cultural context. Only then can one get a clearer insight into the cultural beliefs and attitudes of its tellers and audiences.

All stories contain in them some messages which at times can be very apparent and clear to the audiences and the listeners. But on a closer inspection the same tales can reveal a layer of subtexts and covert meanings hidden under a cloak. Similarly, some common themes and patterns can be identified in all the folktales discussed so far. This thread is explored in the next chapter where the major themes and patterns occurring in different folktales are brought together under the same umbrella for a deeper and better understanding of the tales.

## Chapter 6

### Themes, Patterns and Connections: Stories within a Story

While reading through the folktales I had collected over the course of my fieldwork, I could not help but notice how the tales had some definite patterns, or themes, etched out in them; they were camouflaged well within the stories, and easy to overlook too, but their appearance was more than coincidental. These themes can be divided into three main strands: 1) how socialization of children takes place overtly and/or covertly through the narration of folktales; where boys from a very young age are conditioned to be fearless and aggressive and girls are expected to be acquiescent, docile and submissive. There were instances of prominent coded messages of masculinity that were seemingly passed on from father to son and from uncle to nephew. 2) How the tales narrated by elderly women often contain in them themes of abandonment and neglect, often as a metaphor, poised as an indirect attack against their son and daughter-in-law. Conflicts between the two generations can also be seen over certain issues of modernizing elements found in present day society, which the older generation finds difficult to accept and this gives rise to the third strand: 3) tensions arising as a result of modernization of society (starting from colonial times) and how it affects relationships and power dynamics within families.



### **Socialization of children**

One interesting fact I observed was that female narrators in general seemed to be conscious of the message they were sending out by narrating a folktale. They were aware of how the tale upheld the general cultural construct of how one should behave or should strive to be like. Almost all the stories that I have discussed, with some exceptions, could be seen to be strung in a similar thread of cultural message. Starting from the beginning, if we look at the stories one by one, we can find a strong cultural message in it, though there might be a hidden subtext to it. In “The Story of Tuntuni [Tailor Bird] and the Tiger,” Eela *dida* makes sure that, through the story, her granddaughter is memorizing the traditional family recipe of rice-pudding. If the story is read carefully it can be seen that it is the tailor bird’s wife who knows the recipe and the ingredients and is expected to make the perfect rice-pudding, while the tailor bird searches for the right ingredients. The stereotyping of the gender roles where the female stays at home and cooks, while the male goes out to gather the food, can be clearly seen and slowly seeped into the young minds from an early age through folktales. In the story of “Jatil,” we can see the religious piety and how, by keeping faith in God, one can overcome all difficulties in life. In this story, one can observe the tiny details of the protagonist’s life: how upon waking up every morning, he will first pray and one can observe the choice of words for the prayer, where he is praying not for material wealth even though he comes from a humble background, but instead wishes to be an honest man. Another tiny detail, but not to be overlooked is how the narrator mentions the protagonist, Jatil, bowing down to touch the feet of his mother out of respect. This is a very traditional gesture but in today’s world not widely practiced. Similar points can be noticed in the tale of “Sarbamangala,” where

faith in a Goddess produced miraculous results in a simple man's life. One interesting observation is how both the stories of "Jatil" and "Sarbamangala" have a similar motif of a magical provision of unending food for all the guests, saving the protagonists from social embarrassment. In a land where poverty and scarcity of food is rampant, perhaps stories like these provided a wish fulfillment in a realm of fantasy, where one could imagine achieving sufficiency and social respect by appeasing the Gods and Goddesses. The story of "Sukhu *aar* Dukhu" can be said to be tied on similar strings where one is rewarded handsomely for following the social conventions of being respectful and submissive. This tale also emphasizes the good luck bestowed on the girl for following the social conventions of bowing down to touch the feet of elderly persons. Again, in the tale of "Marriage of Lord Ganesha"—narrated by a grandmother to her seven year old grandson, where the young Hindu God Ganesha walks around his own mother and thus wins the race to travel around the world the fastest, the message of respecting parents is explored. Also according to the Hindu Holy Scriptures, a mother is equivalent to the entire world. Later, the narrator Mithu Das, had commented,

You see, it is important to teach the child especially a boy to respect his mother, first and foremost. And at this age it is easy to condition them rather than when they grow up and start thinking they know the best. After all it is them boys who are going to take care of us old women when they grow up and start earning. Girls belong to their in-laws after their marriage. So it is the boys who we are left with. If they discard us, then where will we go? So you see, you need to teach them to believe that mothers are important. (Mithu Das, 2012).

But a closer reading of the tale can expose the multiple layers to it. It can be seen to be a victory of clever thinking and wit over physical prowess. A message that appears in this tale could be that words can be deceptive, and that it's better to be aware of the power of

words than to be impulsive, and physically strong. This story can be used as an example of how quick thinking on one's feet can help one win over tough situations even if the opponent is mightier or stronger. A subtle layer in this story could be said to be of sibling rivalry, where the brothers fight for the parents' affection.

### **Ideas of Masculinity**

I was passing by our next door neighbour's house when I saw their four year old son, Chinki, standing and gripping the iron railings on the balcony veranda, tears streaming down his face staring at the empty parking lot. I was coming back with groceries from the morning bazaar and had a chocolate bar in my bag. For a few days I had heard crying noises coming from our neighbor's house, and I wondered why every morning at around the same time this crying would start. This morning, on spotting Chinki crying on the veranda, I went in to hand Chinki the chocolate bar and enquire what the problem was. Their housemaid/nanny Sita came out to open the door and seeing me exclaimed, "*Didi* [elder sister], just see everyday as soon as *dada* [elder brother] and *boudi* [sister-in-law] leaves for office, this boy starts crying and would stand for hours in the veranda, without moving an inch. It's all right when his Montessori is open, but now that winter vacation is on, the crying has started again." She tried to disentangle his fingers from the railing and draw him inside, but then again he resisted and would not let go of his grip on the grille. Looking at me suddenly, Sita winked and said,

*Achha* [alright], *didi* you know something? There is a grown up boy, you know, who was four years old. Now his parents are smart, hard-working people, who have to go to office to earn money. But everyday as soon as the boy's parents opened the main door to go out of the house, he would run to his mother and cling on to her and would not let her go—and then would start crying *bwah bwah bwah* [crying noise]. Tears would run down

his cheeks like a waterfall and snot would come out of his nose. But still he would not stop and everyday it was the same story over and over again. Now you tell me [looking at me], if his parents stop going to office, how will the money come? And who will pay for all the chocolates and toys and the numerous other things the boy wanted? And you know what? He always cries like a baby girl. Even his younger sister did not cry the way he did! Now do you know that boy? (Sita, 2011).

I was listening to Sita and smiling, but suddenly I cringed as soon as she uttered the last line: “he always cries like a baby girl.” The feminist in me suddenly sprung out and I felt a bit disturbed as to why Sita herself being a woman would send out such a message to a young boy that girls are weak emotionally or physically. This made me think about cultural nuances and how children from a very young age are socialized to act in certain ways as prescribed by society and cultural norms. For example, boys are not supposed to cry, and to show any weak emotion is a ‘girly’ trait. South Asia in general is a patriarchal society and men are conditioned from a very young age to be dominant and assertive, physically and emotionally, while girls are taught to be more docile and submissive.

In Chapter Three, while discussing *The Tale of the Ghost-Wife*, I briefly discussed a very interesting interaction between the narrator Shyam, and his young nephew who was the intended audience of the story. It is another classic example of how young boys are conditioned to be unafraid of any threatening figure, be it an imaginary supernatural being or any wild animal like a tiger or lion, by the elder male members of the family. This fact is emphasized more when Shyam in a mocking fashion informs his young nephew Aryan, “If you are such a scared mouse, don’t come to me again.” By stating this there is a tacit understanding, through coded messages between the two males of different ages, that showing emotions like fear and vulnerability is a sign of weakness, which is totally unacceptable if one wants to be a part of the larger male group, whose identity is

distinctly separate from the females. The same thread can be seen again in the story of “Alibaba and the Forty Thieves,” where the father (Bipul Sinha) feels that stories involving robbers, or dacoits, along with some amount of violence, are more realistic and will prepare the young boy to be “rough and tough, who will not faint at the sight of blood” (Bipul Sinha, 2011).

Rosalind O’Hanlon comments, “a proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too: at what psychic and social investments sustain their sense of themselves as men, at what networks and commonalities bring men together on the basis of shared gender identity, and what hierarchies and exclusions set them apart” (O’Hanlon 1997: 1).

Sanjay Srivastava, in his essay “Masculinity and Its Role in Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces,” contends that masculinity refers to the *socially produced but embodied ways of being male*. Its manifestations include manners of speech, behaviour, gestures, social interaction, a division of tasks ‘proper’ to men and women (‘men work in offices, women do housework’), and an overall narrative that positions it as superior to its perceived antithesis, femininity (Srivastava 2010: 1). But it is essential to distinguish between the two interconnected concepts of ‘patriarchy’ and ‘masculinity.’ Srivastava points out that “patriarchy refers to a *system* of social organization which is fundamentally organized around the idea of men’s superiority to women” (Srivastava 2010: 2). Thus while patriarchy encompasses the relationship of power dynamics between men and women, masculinity refers to both inter- and intra-gender relationships. “Patriarchy ‘makes’ men superior, whereas masculinity is the process of producing superior men” (Srivastava 2010: 2). It is important to discuss the ideas of ‘making’ and

‘producing’ while studying gender identities, for they point to their historical and social nature. Srivastava argues that this idea of a ‘proper’ masculine behavior is not a naturally endowed characteristic but a social construct, developed and produced through social interactions.

The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced—‘if you buy this motor-cycle you’ll be a real man’—says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender identities; they *must* continually be reinforced. Following from this, we might also say that masculinity is *enacted* rather than expressed. For, when we say that something is ‘expressed’, we subscribe to the idea that it ‘already exists’, and gender identities in particular do not *already* exist (say, biologically). They involve an entire task of building and rebuilding, consolidation, representation and enforcement; in other words we must think of gender identities as works in progress. (Srivastava 2010: 2).

This idea of the social construction of gender identities is seen to be reflected throughout the interviews that I conducted and also in certain folktales. It seemed that a person had to exhibit certain socially approved qualities and characteristics to be respectfully considered as a ‘proper man.’

Qualities like aggression and physical strength are positive characteristics which every boy must inculcate within themselves if they ever want to be treated as a proper ‘man’ with respect. And I can tell you with guarantee that no mother or grandmother can or will be able to make a ‘man’ out of a boy through their stories or their disciplinary formulas. All they know is how to molly-cuddle their sons and grandsons and if they can they would like to hide them under the *anchal* [long flowing flaring end of the sari] of their saaris, to protect them from the ‘evils’ of the world. (Alok Das, 2013).

This response came from one of my informants, a sixty-five year old man called Alok Das. He continued that, “Boys should be encouraged to play outdoor games like football and cricket. Only then will their physical strength increase. I don’t understand how boys can gain anything from listening to those romantic ‘girly’ fantasy stories.” Another, a

twenty-six year old male informant, Somnath Banerjee, said, “Yes, I did hear stories and folktales, both English and Bengali ones while growing up. Though I don’t remember all of them, I remember I liked the ones where the hero had to fight a dragon or maybe kill a djinn. I had no special interest in the feminine fairy tales though.” I was curious and asked him immediately what he meant by the ‘feminine fairy tales.’ His reply was,

Well you know, stories like *Cinderella*, or *Sleeping Beauty* or even some of those *baangla* [Bengali] folktales; where girls doesn’t do much except get married to the prince in the end. But I think I liked the story of *Aladdin* the best. I have forgotten most of the stories but still I remember *Aladdin*. And I remember after I heard the story, I would search out oil-lamps everywhere and rub it till my hands got raw. I guess I was searching for a genie which never really showed up. (Somnath Banerjee, 2012).

I asked him if he ever really liked, even if remotely, any of the ‘feminine fairy tales’ as he called them. He could not remember any story and asked me to name a few to help him recollect. As I mentioned a couple of fairytales like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Hansel and Gretel* and a couple of others, he exclaimed, “Yes, I liked *Hansel and Gretel* a lot. My mother used to read it out to me a lot and I absolutely loved the description of the chocolate house covered with marshmallows and candies. I also like *Snow White and Rose Red* of all the feminine fairy tales, because of the huge black bear that comes to live in their house. Other than that *Goldilocks* was alright too but I don’t think it was a personal favourite.” After a pause he suddenly said out loud, “*Sinbad the Sailor*. I remember now. *The Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor*. That was a story that I loved the most apart from *Aladdin*. Because you know there was so much of action. Something was always happening. There was an adrenaline rush. But unfortunately only my paternal grandmother was the only one who knew the stories of Sinbad. No one else knew it as well she did.” I asked him if he knew from where exactly his grandmother had come

across the story of Sinbad. He had no idea of the source of the story but he felt that probably she had read it somewhere. “She was always reading you know. Till her last days, her books were with her on her bedside. That’s why I think she had read those tales from a book or something.” *The Adventures of Sinbad* is a tale featured in the *Arabian Nights*, originally written in Arabic but translated in different languages, even in Bengali and English. In fact popular editions of Bengali versions of *The Arabian Nights* have been easily available in Bengal for a long time. I have myself come across a few local publications of Bengali translations of *The Arabian Nights*. Later on, in a follow-up interview, I asked Somnath specifically if he remembered his grandmother reading out the tales of Sinbad or other folktales from a book. He replied, “No, even if she had read it from a book she never read the stories out to me like that. She narrated the stories from her memory.”

Bengt Holbek observed that in Danish and other European folktales the gender of the tale was related to the gender of the storyteller. “Male and female repertoires differ. There is a distinct tendency for men to prefer masculine fairy tales, whereas women’s repertoires are more evenly distributed between the two genders of fairy tales” (Holbek 1987, 405-406). Holbek suggested that since men usually travel more away from home and are usually in the company of other men, they are more likely to tell male tales to these audiences. Women, on the other hand are more home-bound, narrating stories within the comfort of their own domestic sphere and thus, they frequently have mixed gender audiences and mixed-age audiences, and this results in more ‘egalitarian’ tales (Ragan, 2009). While conducting my fieldwork, I found Holbek’s idea to hold true even in the case of Bengal, when I came across male storytellers telling stories like *Alibaba*



*and the Forty Thieves*, or a ghost story where a man's wife is possessed by a ghost and how he gets her exorcized to gain his wife back. In the few stories I collected from male narrators, the central character was always the male protagonist though he was aided by female characters from time to time, though in the narrations by the female performers, the gender of the protagonist was more evenly distributed.

Margaret R. Yocom's analysis of American storytellers examined place, audience, and type of information conferred. The man occupied a public sphere, therefore his stories were more overtly performance-centred and conveyed a different message from the more intimate and contextual choice of stories of the woman storyteller. In other words, the difference in ratios of gendered tales told by men and by women may not reflect a gender or sex difference, but rather a difference in selective pressures that males face and females face. For these aspects to be studied, however, collectors will have to note the audience gender composition and the context of the telling of the tale (Ragan, 2009). James Taggart, in his book *Enchanted Maidens* also demonstrates the fact that even when male and female narrators tell the "same" stories, they will inadvertently change them in subtle but clear ways according to their male and female points of view.

### **Older women and their narratives: Hidden messages**

While reading the narratives I had collected from the older women, I was struck by how almost all of them had a recurrent theme appearing in them (albeit in a metaphor that could be easily flipped aside)—of being abandoned by their children after they grow up. It can be observed in Chapter Two, in the story of *The Ghostly Village and the Lemon Tree*, when the son leaves his family, his old parents and wife, and by the time he returns they are all dead. He is consumed by an enormous guilt and then he leaves his home village never to come back. Again, in Chapter Four, while discussing the story of *Ghumonto Puri* [Sleepy Quarters] this theme comes up again, where the son goes away for a long journey, gets married and forgets all about his parents. Then after a long time, he ultimately comes back to them, in their old age—and it is stressed in the story how weak and feeble the protagonist's parents had grown as a result of the long separation from their only child. The narrators of both the stories are women (Latika, now forty-five, who had left her parents when she was very young and moved to the city, and Rani Bose, seventy, who was living happily with her son and his family) but the protagonists in their stories are male. Both narrators are happy in their own lives and apparently have no concerns about being shunned by their own family. However, a quiet sense of vulnerability can be sensed in their narratives, which is surprising. As Sarah Lamb in her essay "Beggared Mother," has observed, the voices and perspectives of older women have largely been ignored in the exploration of South Asian women's expressive traditions. "Where older women do appear, they are most often characters (such as mothers or mothers-in-law) in narratives told from the view-point of a younger woman (a daughter, daughter-in-law, or young wife), not the central protagonists of the tales

themselves” (Lamb 1997: 54). I managed to record a story on similar lines, a story told from a younger woman’s perspective, voicing the wretched conditions the older women of the family are subjected to in their old age, shunned by the family members.

I came across this interesting narrative from my maternal grand-aunt Ira (name changed upon request) *dida*, when I was visiting her one afternoon. I had gone to Ira *dida*’s house for a customary social visit as I had not met her in a long while. Ira *dida* is a married woman in her early seventies and she lives with her husband (my mother’s uncle), in their own flat in the heart of Calcutta. Her only son Deb, is married with a son. A few years back he got transferred to Delhi for work and now he lives there with his wife and son. As we got talking, somehow the discussion turned towards me and my plans of marriage. She suddenly said, “You know, when you get married and go to your in-laws’ house, please make sure you respect the elders of the family. Don’t go and cut our noses, by any of your behavior. It’s the duty of the bride to listen to their mother-in-law and more importantly to the grandmother-in-law, even if they at times are not courteous.” Then, through the telling of a folktale, she instructed her grandniece on the cultural expectations women face after marriage.

#### **A Story of a daughter-in-law:<sup>8</sup>**

A young girl got married and went to stay with her in-laws, as per tradition. So as she entered the house, which would be her new home from now on, her mother-in-law introduced her to all the members in the family. The new bride after meeting everyone in the family was a bit surprised by the absence of the grandmother: the bride’s grandmother-in-law, especially when she stayed at the same house. When she asked her mother-in-law about grandmother, she flippantly answered, “Oh don’t you worry about her. She is old and frail and can’t move at all. So it’s best to leave her alone in her quarter.” The young bride had a very good sense of her responsibilities, said, “But Ma, as a new member of the family, I think

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<sup>8</sup> ATU 980 The Ungrateful Son

it's my responsibility to touch her feet and ask for her blessings. After all I am about to start a new life." Hearing this, the mother-in-law answered, "Very well, do that if it gives you peace of mind, but remember one thing—I run this household and **not** her. So before you do anything you must consult me and never her." Now the girl suddenly remembered what her parents have always taught her—she should always listen to the eldest members of the family, even if others disregard them. So she mentally made up her mind to listen to the grandmother-in-law, in spite of her mother-in-law's instruction. But as the days passed, the young bride saw the mother-in-law treat the grandmother with great disdain and a very careless attitude. She was given old rags to wear; she was served food in an earthen plate while everyone else used beautiful silverware—she was served tea in a cracked cup, and her bed was also in a very poor condition—old, ragged and neglected. The young bride got very concerned seeing all this and approached her mother-in-law in an attempt to make things better for the grandmother. But the mother-in-law replied, "*Bouma* [daughter-in-law], you do not need to concern yourself with all these things. And if you must, let me tell you, grandmother is old and she never leaves her quarter of the house. So what will she do with new clothes? She is old and her hand wavers when she holds her plate and cup while eating and drinking. So if we give her expensive silverware, she will break them all. So why bother? And she makes a mess of her bed everyday. So it's better to leave things as they are." Two days later, the mother-in-law was surprised to see a pile of old torn clothes, a pile of earthen ware and worn out bed-sheets in a corner of their house and called for the young bride. The bride explained, "Ma, I am from now onwards saving up for your old age. When you will be stuck in the four corners of your room and would not be able to move, you won't need any new dresses, right? So these clothes will come handy then. The clay pots, you see, will be useful as they are inexpensive and when your hand will waver you might break them, then you won't feel guilty. And the worn out bed sheets cannot be too soiled even if you make a mess of your bed in your old age." The mother-in-law got very angry and shouted, "How dare you say that you will treat me like this in my old age? It is your duty as my daughter-in-law to take care and look after me when I am old." The girl then calmly replied, "Then Ma, isn't it your duty too to look after your mother-in-law in her old age? Just because of old age is it fair to condemn her to a corner of a house and treat her like she is a burden to the family?" The mother-in-law now realized her fault and asked the bride to go to the market immediately and get the new materials for the grandmother. Thus the clever bride without any direct confrontation with the mother-in-law or without straining their relationship taught her an important lesson. (Ira Dutta, 2012).

On asking from where she had picked up the story, Ira *dida* replied,

Oh, it's an old folktale that we have all heard some time in our lives from some well-meaning old aunt or grandmother. I like to tell this story personally because it is so relevant in today's world. Take a look at how the new generation daughter-in-laws treat their elderly mother-in-laws. In our generation, we did not have guts to say a word in front of our *shashuri* [mother-in-law] or for that matter even our *nanad* [husband's sister]. My *shashuri* was a very dominating woman and I could never speak out to her with my eyes leveled with hers—I always looked down while speaking to her. But look at today's generation. They are a whole new breed. Take a look at my own daughter-in-law, your *boudi* [sister-in-law] —Happy and carefree without a single responsibility on her shoulders—But you girls should not be like this. Who knows how it will go down with your mother-in-law? Sometimes it is important to remind you girls of such stories so that you learn to be kind and considerate towards your elders. Not just towards your in-laws but towards your parents and grandparents as well. You see, one day you will also grow old. Then if someone treats you like an unwelcome burden how would you feel? (Ira Dutta, 2012).

Though Ira *dida* contended that she was giving me, her grand-niece, a moralistic lesson on how to maintain peace and happiness after marriage and the essentiality of a harmonious relationship with the in-laws, underlying the discussions one could feel a palpitating unhappiness and hurt arising out of feelings of rejection and indifference by her own daughter-in-law. I personally feel that these stories perform a dual function in society. On one hand, they help the narrator express her dissatisfaction and negative emotions regarding some part of her personal family life; while at the same time by narrating the stories she feels she is contributing to society by informing and educating other females on family values and on how to avoid conflict with a strong personality mother-in-law. Taggart contends that family structure is bound to affect storytelling because narrators who tell the tales of courtship and marriage express values and models of conjugal relations learned in their families of origin (Taggart 1990: 12).

I recorded another narrative from Mrs. Shanta Datta, a sixty five year old informant, on similar lines, i.e. conflict between mother-in law and daughter-in-law:

### Who is the good one?

In a neighbourhood, all the residents would hear a mother-in-law shouting and screaming at the top of her voice at her daughter-in-law day and night, while not a single word could be ever heard from the daughter-in-law. Everyone in the locality thought to themselves. “*Ishh*, the *shashuri* is so cruel and dominating—all the time screaming at the poor daughter-in-law. And look at the daughter-in-law—goes on tolerating her *shashuri*’s *atyachar* [abuse] without a word in her mouth. One day, a *bhadralok* [gentleman] who lived next door, decided to see what happens in that house and why the *shashuri* goes on screaming without any reason. He climbed up the partition between the two houses and peeped in—what he saw made him freeze in his tracks—the *shashuri* was going on screaming and shouting and the daughter-in-law was standing in front of her, showing a raised broomstick. (Shanta Datta, 2012).

At the end of the tale, all of us burst out laughing. Laughing too, my Shanta said,

See, it is not always the mother-in-law who is at fault all the time. If a ‘dangerous’ daughter-in-law happens to enter the premises of a household, then not even God can save you. The entire household will be ruined and ravaged to ashes. It is so important to test a girl and make sure she can fit in the household and adjust accordingly before making her a daughter-in-law. And our times are gone now. Nowadays all girls are like these only—Will go on arguing and think whatever they are doing is right! (Shanta Datta, 2012).

According to power hierarchies, historically there have been two female participants in the household: the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. After marriage, the bride is expected to move in with her husband’s family and share a home with his parents. If he has brothers, they usually live in the same household too, along with their families. Historically, a young immature bride was inducted into a strange household where she was expected to be docile and subservient in her demeanor and to obey her mother-in-law, who also continued to wield authority over her son. The bride became the most subordinate member of the household’s female hierarchy. Very gradually she earned a new status by assuming more and more of the household responsibilities and by

bearing a number of children. In most cases, it can be seen that the mother-in-law is slowly and steadily relegated to the background of the household, over the years, and the bride takes over her previous role as a decision-maker within the female domain of the household, which includes food preparation, food distribution, and childrearing. As a consequence, the older women of the family are slowly relegated to the periphery of the family power dynamics.

Sarah Lamb has analyzed the less heard voices of older South Asian women by looking at the stories they tell. As she observed, stories told by older women in West Bengal, from a mother's perspective, tend not to focus on the power of the mothers and mother-in-law, but on their powerlessness; not on the revered mother, but on the beggared and displaced one (Lamb 1997: 55). She also states that many women come to believe, as they grow up and listen to the more dominant oral traditions and much of everyday talk, that becoming a mother-in-law and a mother of a grown son will lead to unparalleled freedoms, unquestioned authority, and devoted affection; but they encounter instead plaguing disappointments and troubling ambiguities. But the women I interviewed and recorded were living healthy and prosperous lifestyles and were in no way threatened in any respect by their daughter-in-law or relegated to a position of complete subordination. Yet, their narratives contained a theme of rejection. It is maybe because as Sarah Lamb suggests, "Even if not literally beggared, these women narrate circumstances in their own lives that make them, in significant respects, like beggars. The theme of the mother as beggar works here, I suggest, as a polyvalent metaphor conveying a loss of love, a vulnerability to poverty, and the ephemeral character of a woman's identity over the life course" (Lamb 1997: 68). She also observes that in the stories that

older women tell, there is always a breakdown in the mother-child reciprocity. Speaking in the metaphorical language of a story also allows them to express deep feelings through the safety of fantasy (Taggart 1990: 9). Thus a recurrent theme in the narratives of older women is that of mothers who have given everything they have to their sons—but ultimately receive nothing in return. One thing to observe here is that all the stories contain a general theme of respecting family and upholding cultural values like respecting the elders. About overcoming family problems, girls are taught to avoid power struggles with their mother-in-law and so they are advised to take over the family responsibilities slowly.

Until now most of my informants were grandmothers who lived with their sons in a joint family and willingly or unwillingly had to contribute in some way to the household work, even if it meant babysitting their grandchildren. Now I was curious to explore what happened to those elderly people who had daughters and no sons. Following Indian tradition, after a girl is married she goes off to live in with her in-laws' house along with her husband, leaving her parents behind.

A mother of a married daughter, Jhimli Das, said,

When Rumna [her daughter] used to stay with us, it was a normal mother-daughter relationship—as a girl you know what I mean right? Fighting at one moment and then after a while everything is back to normal—but you know, since the day she left after getting married, I feel the love has grown stronger—all the time there is a constant thought in my mind—who knows what is happening to her now, are they giving her to eat enough or not—can she manage running an entire household on her own? Was I successful in inculcating her with all the values and morals necessary to make correct judgments and decisions in this new phase of life? Sometimes when she comes to visit, I carefully inspect her face and especially her eyes to see if she is alright in the new household or not—I know my girl, she will never open her mouth, come what may and mention any problem she might be facing. (Jhimli Das, 2013).



In another neighboring household, a mother-in-law who lived with her son and daughter-in-law lamented,

My daughter-in-law?! Oh she is like a piece of a diamond. She is always shining and always combing her hair and going out, enjoying her life. And of course she will look beautiful. Does she have to take a single tension on her mind like what food to serve my son when he comes home from work? Nor does she have to do any housework, just sitting and ordering maids around. Her only tension in life is to decide which dress to wear for which party. We never saw any daughter-in-law behave like this in our times! (Moyna Roy, name changed upon request, 2012).

Here again one can see that the underlying emotion of the grandmother's complaint is regarding the attitude of her daughter-in-law and at her shrugging off her responsibilities. She feels that her daughter-in-law is not sufficiently frugal: she spends too much on clothes and appearances. The mother-in-law is also worried that the girl is spending much of her son's money without any caution.

A forty year old informant, Tulsi Banerjee, a homemaker, offered her insight on this matter:

Nowadays whenever I meet an elderly person, the most common and recurring complaint they have—how their grown up sons are not taking care of them properly, how their daughter-in-law has no sense of responsibility (if the daughter-in-law is working, they do not take care of the family and is too involved with their work and even if the daughter-in-law is a homemaker, she is unable to manage the house in a satisfactory manner) and their grandchildren are losing touch with their own culture and values! I wonder if **my** grandmother had to face the same challenges or not with my great grandmother! I am sure there are bound to be skirmishes between different family members especially if you live in a joint family—but I feel in the recent era this [skirmishes] has risen in insurmountable proportions—I guess this is a result of the economic independence as well. You see, before [in previous generations] we [women] especially in backgrounds like ours [upper middle-class] did not have the choice of entering a professional career where we could earn our own money. Being financially independent gives women a huge power. You do not need to lay your hands in front of your husband to ask for money. And naturally you develop your own personality and will not give in to any out-of-the-blue demand of your in-laws or husband. In turn the

value systems change too, along with priorities. I feel the older generation who were brought up in a different time with a different value system find it hard to accept these changes and move along with time—” (Tulsi Banerjee, 2013).

All these point towards the tensions of changing family responsibilities; about modernity versus tradition. As women become economically independent and became engaged in professional fields outside the four walls of the house, it led to a new environment within the household and to new power dynamics within the family in relation to the female of the house. What (if any) advice do the narratives impart to women regarding overcoming problems, including family problems?

As M.C. Goldstein discusses in the essay “Social and Economic Forces Affecting Intergenerational Relations in Extended Families in a Third World country: A Cautionary Tale from South Asia,” while talking about the post-colonial familial relationships in the Hindu families of India and Nepal:

Education not only liberates sons from their parents' economic control, it also fosters new sets of values and attitudes that are detrimental to the status of elderly parents because they contravene the traditional values of obedience, respect, and deference. Individualism, independence, secularism, and democracy, for example, and the shift from patrilinealism to conjugalism (i.e., the primacy of the husband-wife dyad over the parent offspring dyad) all derive, by and large, from Western- like values and norms inherent in the modern educational, political, and economic systems emerging in countries like Nepal...these elderly parents have come to accept that their sons' primary loyalty is now oriented toward their own nuclear family rather than that of the extended family and their parents (Goldstein 1983:720).

As Bal Ram Singh observes in his book *Indian Family System: The Concept, Practices and Current Relevance* (2011), the most significant change in the joint-family system in the postcolonial period was the radical transformation of the role and status of

female members in a traditional joint-family system. He observes that it was only after the economic liberalization and its accelerated growth [post-colonial era, 1950s onwards] that provided women in domestic spheres with a genuine opportunity to break age-old barriers of limited and lesser roles in the society. This helped a large number of women to progressively find employment in various professions. Women, who were earlier dependent for financial security upon their husbands and the male members of the household, were now financially independent and subsequently claimed a more assertive role in decision making within the family.

It can be assumed that by narrating such tales, women can voice what they cannot say directly. Instead of getting into direct confrontation, women can indirectly talk about difficult relationships and seek to unburden themselves through such narrations. It is not always advice on how to deal with difficult relationships within the family that they seek, but to have their voices heard. As James Taggart states, elders use storytelling as one of the ways of guiding their children and grandchildren, and the stories in their dialogue are metaphorical expressions of personal and collective experience that teach how to make compromises and accommodations in marriage and family life. Though it was in relation to Spanish rural society, Taggart observed that “the generations do not always understand each other completely, particularly in times of rapid social and cultural change, but I found that younger men and women, despite their modern values, were very interested in and valued what their grandparents said when telling a tale”(Taggart 1990: 9).

After talking to several informants and observing the family dynamics in different households, one common thing that was reflected in each relationship—be it mother-son, mother-daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or even relationships between

grandchildren and their grandparents—was that of a cultural expectation and its fulfillment. A son is expected to take care of his parents in their old age, a daughter-in-law is expected to take care of her in-laws and treat them like her own parents, grandchildren or younger members of the family are expected to treat elders politely and with respect. A girl after marriage becomes a member of another household and so her in-laws' cultural expectations regarding the daughter-in-law's duties towards them differ from those of her own parents. So what is most desired is that the son, the daughter-in-law and other members of the family adhere to their culturally approved social roles of interaction and this seems to be the key to harmony within a household. And to achieve this, the older generation feels that a deep inculcation of values and morals is important and children should be encouraged to develop such cultural notions from a very young age. Thus through their conscious and deliberate choices of narratives, grandmothers like Ira *dida* and numerous others present themselves as upholders of traditional cultural values. They rely on narratives to pass on knowledge that they feel is lacking among the younger generations, like duties and responsibility that they might be shrugging off. And so grandmothers turn to tales to teach the children of future generations about their roots and rich cultural heritage.

**Tensions arising out of modernizing elements in the society (in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras respectively)**

Another major theme that could be identified within the folktales discussed in the previous chapters was that of clashes between tradition and modernity. In Chapter Two, in the story of “The Ghostly Village and the Lemon Tree,” one point that emerged was the tussle between modernity and tradition: when people break away from a traditional way of life, their family life is compromised. By tradition, I mean adhering to the age old customs, generation after generation, conforming to the village life and using primitive methods of agriculture, shunning all new industrial methods or ways of life. In this tale, the man moves out of his ancestral home in the village and goes to the city in search of new prospects. After a gap of a few years, he finally returns to the village via the new railway system, only to find that almost the entire population of the village has been wiped out following a malaria epidemic. One of my informants, Parimal Sen, had commented that this folktale probably came into circulation in the aftermath of the introduction of the railway system by the British in India. I followed up on this point and came across quite a few analyses on how the introduction of modernity in India by the British raised opposition. Following such responses, this folktale can be given an anti-colonialist or anti-progress reading, in a subtle manner. Modernity, broadly conceived, refers to the social, cultural, political and economic changes that took place in Western Europe from the mid-sixteenth century onwards (Bhambra 2007: 2). Across a range of theoretical positions then, modernity can be seen as resting on a basic distinction between the social formations of ‘the West’ and ‘traditional’ or pre-modern societies (Bhambra 2007: 3). There is no doubt that the seeds of modernity were planted by the British in

India during colonial rule. However, such attempts at introducing modernization in a traditional culture that was so heavily populated could not be brought about without social disruption.

Ira Klein in her article "Death in India, 1871-1921" has shown how the embankments caused by the railways led to the spread of malaria epidemics across the country:

The railway builders moved hundreds of millions of feet of earth, and made thousands of miles of embankments. In a country in which annual monsoon flooding took place, embankments had to be raised high above flood heights, and in Bengal, for example, they loomed "12 to 16 feet" above ordinary ground. Frequently they interfered with natural drainage, and sometimes embankments and bridges "acted as a dam", creating "new lakes." In the 1860s when fierce malaria epidemics, unparalleled in any British records, were raging in Hooghly and Burdwan in Eastern India, a government inquiry emphasized that the disaster had been caused by "embankments....including raised roads and railways," and by "silting"—the process by which "many streams and rivers of the Delta" were "filling up and becoming dry"<sup>9</sup> (Klein 1973: 645-646).

Another major area where the British tried to incorporate modernizing elements was in the education system with the introduction of Western education in India. However, the main purpose behind it was to create a group of civil servants who could serve the interests of the British. As R.C. Majumder points out, "Though there was a lot of mistrust and opposition to the western modeled schools and English language, no one could argue that it was the "only passport to higher appointments available to Indians, and hence its popularity and rapid progress were equally assured (Majumder 1946: 818).

Syed A. Rahim, in his article "Language as Power Apparatus," comments,

Thus during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, English and Western education became a powerful agent of change at the initiative of the Bengali middle-class in Calcutta, who found it essential in gaining

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted from *Indian Medical Proceedings*, 1873-75, pp. 507-08, India Office Library

advantage in their unequal power relationship with the British. To deal with the British power it was necessary for the Bengali bourgeoisie in most contact with it to know its language. To the progressive elements of the Bengali middle-class, English language and literature and Western education became the most important signifiers of their position in the unfolding matrix of the new power relationship in contemporary Indian society (Rahim, 1986: 235-236).

If we look closely, we can see the same distrust and suspicion regarding British schools and education appearing in the story of “The Sly Fox and the Seven Crocodile Babies” as discussed in Chapter Two. Here the crocodile mother puts her children in a residential school for a good education, only to lose them to the school teacher, a sly fox who eats up the crocodile babies one by one. So one reading of the tale can be that it espouses a subtle hidden message signaling a certain wariness regarding Western schools as compared to the traditional *pathshalas* [Indian traditional vernacular schools].

But another reading of the tale can be that of subversion of authority; where the crocodile being more powerful and strong than the fox, is outwitted by sheer wit and presence of mind. The same theme can be observed in the tale of “The Tailor Bird and the Tiger” where the tiger, in spite of being more powerful and ferocious, is outsmarted by a common tailor bird, as discussed in Chapter Two.

But another interesting phenomenon that I observed in the course of my fieldwork was that young mothers would narrate stories to the children by reading from a book in English, while grandmothers would narrate folktales orally, in the vernacular language. Thus a clash between tradition and modernity can be seen here as well. Some of the interviews I conducted reconfirmed the same idea. One of my informants, Priya Sen, a thirty-two year old professional working in a multinational company, and the mother of a three year old, said,

Yes, if I narrate stories, which I do after I tuck in my son to bed, I usually prefer to read out loud some bedtime story. Right now his favourite story is that of *Chicken Little*. I have to read that out loud every day as a bedtime story. I prefer reading out stories which are written in English. That way I feel he will learn the language faster. And also he gets his fill of listening to stories in Bengali all the time from his grandmother and other members of the family. But my husband and I make it a point to converse with him in English and particularly read out stories in English. (Priya Sen, 2012).

Another informant, Rohini Das, a twenty-seven year old housewife and a mother of a four year old, mentioned,

If I narrate a story orally it is usually in Bengali, but most of the times, I prefer reading out stories in English to my son. It is important to make our children comfortable with English from a very early age as they can mimic very well at this age and will pick up the language fast. Also as you know, nowadays, for interviews in schools, everything is conducted in English. If he cannot follow the questions or the instructions in English, then it might pose a big problem for us! He might not even get admission in the school—And we are trying for a convent school too—So the interview questions will be definitely in English and he must be able to follow them and reply properly. (Rohini Das, 2012).

Again, Rumela Sen, a homemaker and a mother of a ten year old, commented,

It's also about exposing them to a new culture, you see. When I read out a story in English, it makes the child see a different world and be open to new ideas. And if I don't do it, who else will? My mother-in-law is not so fluent in English and she is more interested in telling her grand-daughter other traditional stories. I don't really mind it, and am actually glad she does that as I don't know those stories at all. I have forgotten most of them, even if I had heard some of them in my childhood from somewhere. (Rumela Sen, 2012).

In this context, it is important to mention that English is the official language of India and the language that unites all the different regions. Hindi is the second official language following English. All official work, starting with job interviews and everything is conducted in English. So a good grasp of the English language is considered to be an



important asset for job prospects and climbing the socio-economic ladder. In the Indian context one can appreciate the force of Burchfield's observation: "English has also become a *lingua franca* to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruelest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance" (Burchfield 1985: 160-161).

Dilip Sen, a fifty five year old professional, commented on this topic,

You see, when the British left India, they left for good, yes—but they left something behind—their shoe-polishing servants. These 'boot-lickers' worshipped and idolized their Masters so much that even though they left, these boot-lickers tried to emulate them and in the process neither they fit into their own nor could or would be ever accepted by those people, and the society, they idolize so much. And we still go on suffering from the 'colonial hangover.' (Dilip Sen, 2012).

English functions as a Pan-Indian language, particularly among the elite groups, despite the impressive spread of Hindi since Independence in many parts of the country and in spite of the consolidation of dominant languages in each state (Phillipson 1992: 29). It should be mentioned that most of the people in rural India can barely follow English and it remains an entirely foreign language to them. In contrast, English is an everyday language in urban areas. However, there has always been some resistance and opposition to this idea of English as the dominant language, and to the influence of Western culture on Indian society, starting from the colonial times, and continuing to this day. Certain groups feel that with English being the dominant language as a medium of instruction in schools, in conducting official or bureaucratic work, and also the influence it exerts via

the media, slowly native people are forgetting their own cultural heritage and are trying to emulate something alien and foreign.

Jhuma Sen, a fifty year old homemaker commented,

Nowadays if you cannot speak English fluently, you are looked down upon with sheer arrogance and termed as 'ignorant'—doesn't matter how well you can speak your own native language. And such attitude is consolidating itself each passing day—We might live in our own country, but when it comes to speaking, we have to speak in a 'foreign' language! Last day my twenty year old daughter was complaining how I embarrassed her in front of her friends as I could not speak English well enough. She only speaks in English with her friends—Now what can I do, I went to a public government school and learnt English only for three years. I always felt bad as I could not speak English as fluently as I would like to, and so I enrolled my daughter in a private all girls' convent school. But see what was the result! Yes, she does speak English very well, but she turns up her nose at her own culture and language. She doesn't want to read any Bengali books and wants to shun everything her own country has to offer her. It saddens me so much, what do I tell you. (Jhuma Sen, 2012).

Another mother also complained how her teenage son rejects everything vernacular and would 'read only English books and listen to English songs all day long.' One of my informants Dipak Das commented, "I feel sorry for today's young generation. They are a product of a hybrid culture. Neither do they know English well enough, nor do they know their own language and culture well enough. I feel they are caught in-between. And it's a sad state of affairs for the entire country."

One cannot surmise that the older, traditional tales in vernacular language promulgate ideas that are more profound than the ideas as found in western stories in English language storybooks. They are different in that the culture and the values reflected in the Indian vernacular tales are very different from those in the English language tales. Though the essential core ideas may be the same—being respectful and kind to people and animals—the cultural nuances are different, and that is not surprising.

Taggart has quoted Robert Darnton's (1984) observation that narrators from specific cultures and historical periods tell the same stories differently because their worldviews change over time and space (Taggart 1990: 10). This can be seen in the case of the tales of *Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu* and *The Spinning Women by the Spring* (as discussed in Chapter Five) which is the same tale being narrated under different names in distinct versions in different parts of the world. Though the moral message is unchanging, it is the cultural context that provides tellers, listeners and readers with specific meanings and interpretations.

Thus it can be observed that folktales offer important clues in not only understanding the social dynamics and relationships within families and the society at large, but also provide codes of conduct necessary for individuals to fit in gender specific groups. Also these tales act as a socializing agent where boys are taught to subscribe to the values considered masculine like being fearless, less emotive and more practical, while girls are encouraged to be respectful towards elders, submissive and docile, which will ultimately help them to adjust better when they start their married life. Language also seems to play a crucial role in the narration of the tales, creating a sharp division between the older and the younger generation; where one generation feels that it is important to preserve tales in the vernacular language as a part of the rich cultural heritage, in which they take pride, the other generation feels that success in modern society lies only in adopting Western languages and changing their value systems as well. However, the answer to true progress and development lies not in alienating one and blindly following the other, but in finding a true balance between them and adopting the best from both worlds.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Having reached the very end of my writing, after numerous listenings to the recorded tales for purposes of transcription and translation, having gone through the field notes from my interviews and considering the different insights offered by my informants regarding the tales, I felt oddly bereft. It seemed to finally mark the end of a long journey, literally, as I travelled all the way back to India to Calcutta for my fieldwork twice; and metaphorically too as I got to revisit my childhood in its course. Though in this thesis I had used a total of thirteen stories along with one poetry recitation (Wee Willy Winkie), there were still twenty more folktales and short stories sitting in my bag of folktales. I had recorded over sixteen narrators (thirteen females and three males) narrating a total of thirty-three stories in all. In this research I have tried to use at least one story from every narrator. Along the course of my fieldwork and even after, people would ask me about the stories that I came across and also the innumerable Bengali nursery rhymes that our oral tradition is said to be flooded with. Strangely enough, I did not come across a single Bengali nursery rhyme or poem in the course of my fieldwork. Even thinking about my early childhood days, I remember having read Bengali nursery rhymes out of books but there was no one who recited them to me orally. Sometimes when my grandmother was babysitting me, she would read out those rhymes in a rhythmic manner and make me recite them after her loudly and memorize them (later on to make me recite them in front of other family members); but apart from that I have no recollection of anyone ever enacting them to me even as a lullaby. Though some of my informants mentioned having

known a couple of rhymes, they could not remember them properly for a recording. However, it would be too much of a generalization to state that no one recites these folk rhymes anymore and that they are slowly being obliterated from people's memories. Perhaps one of the reasons why I did not come across any Bengali nursery rhymes may be that these rhymes are recited in a rhythm to very young children, to help them fall asleep. And most of my informant's children were above the age of five. Also during my fieldwork I had not asked for any specific tales or poems, but followed the settings of family storytellings and documented the elements that naturally showed up in those circumstances.

It was interesting to see how some of the most interesting stories emerged out of plain conversations, where previously the same informant had great difficulty in performing the stories when asked to narrate a tale without any preamble. I went through these narratives again and again trying to see if I could fit them in somewhere, but it would have been impossible to discuss all their themes within this thesis. There were so many emotions and memories attached to these stories, some of which evoked childhood memories, while the rest strengthened old bonds and created beautiful new relationships. As Kirin Narayan has pointed out, oral stories arise out of emotional relationships. While conducting my fieldwork, I came to the same conclusion. Indeed, stories come alive in all their facets while they are performed, forming a deep connection between the listener and the narrator. Years later a person might forget the tale he had heard as a young child, but could remember clearly the emotions the tale had stirred in his heart and mind.

When I reached Calcutta I was full of folkloristic ardor to start my fieldwork—to record interviews, document folktales being performed in natural settings, and capture

different aspects of oral traditions. In hindsight it seems that in my mind I had almost presumed the outcome of the fieldwork and subsequent research; and at the same time it was the preconceived notions about my own people, culture and society that were driving me, in the beginning. But somehow things changed somewhere during the course of my fieldwork or rather during the long interactions with my informants. I saw them for the first time as individuals with real needs and emotions, while previously they had just been an acquaintance or even a taken-for-granted family member. It seemed that everyone, even the person who seemed to have the most mundane life, had so many interesting tales, stories or anecdotes to share. I had made a long list of the most interesting people I knew—people who had traveled far and wide, were extroverted and witty and have had some fascinating life experiences—and wanted to stick to them or other similar-natured persons who I *felt* would have the most engaging stories to share. But I was shocked to discover that sometimes the most captivating and heart touching stories could also come from people who in our eyes lived the most mundane lives. It seemed that many times a beautiful story is kept locked up in the heart because no one cared enough to ask, “What happened?” Now at the very end of the entire journey I discovered new personalities within old characters whom I thought I knew for an entire lifetime and in the process rediscovered not only them but also myself. I learnt to empathize and not just sympathize with my informants; but the most important discovery was how little we know of the people who surround us for our entire life. Before taking up this research I had never bothered to ask even my own family members, for example my grandmother, some basic questions about her own life—not because I was not interested in her but simply because I never felt the need or the urgency to enquire and

find out. After a particularly interesting conversation, where she recounted how her grandmother used to narrate stories to her siblings and her under low voltage flickering yellow lights which were so unreliable that the candles and kerosene lamps had to be readied up to be lit up as soon as the lights went out I remember feeling a tinge of anger and sadness. I asked her, “Why didn’t you ever tell us stories about these times?” She simply replied, “I thought you would find them boring.”

After interviewing different narrators, one point that resurfaced time after time was how narrating some stories gave the performers a sense of peace and comfort. Retelling the story transported the narrator back to another time and place when they had first come across the story. It seemed that when a narrator performed a story, it helped them relive those memories when they first heard the story or the memories that they had associated with the story in the past. But this tendency was a subtle emotion hidden behind innocuous conversation and was only conveyed through a faraway look or a stare at a world which I could feel but not see. Whenever my grandmother narrated a story it was always accompanied by some musings about how different life was back in the *olden days*—life was easier, people especially children knew how to bond with nature and had a proper childhood, not rushed by the demands of a hectic daily schedule replete with tuitions, extra-curricular activities and homework. But while conducting my fieldwork, I became slowly aware that my grandmother was not the only person who would muse about the bygone days, but almost every aged narrator I interviewed seemed to have a similar drift. However, narrating a story may fulfill more than just submerging the performer in a sense of quiet nostalgia.

Narrating stories gives the performers a voice, and subsequently a chance to express themselves, especially when in old age they feel themselves to be relegated to the periphery of the family's everyday hustle and bustle. Many of the storytellers whom I interviewed were aged females who in spite of living in a joint-family household would show signs of loneliness and isolation. With their children and subsequent grandchildren all grown up, there is no longer any call for them to narrate stories. But in the context of telling stories to me, for this research, it filled them up with a sense of purpose. Performing a story made them feel needed again and of some use to a society which had discarded and pushed them to the background. Though the texts and the stories are an integral part of this research, it is the narrators who put the heart in the thesis. I have put the narrators in the forefront and focused on the meanings that they, as narrators and performers of tales, find in them. Whenever I visited any elderly informant either for a story or for some *adda* [idle chat], the sessions would last for hours, long after the stories had been performed and their comments recorded. It was mostly talks about the bygone era, the past, how glorious it was compared to the present. As I would leave after a long session with any elderly woman, without fail each time I would be asked the same question, "Tomorrow come again, alright? Then we can chat some more." It did not matter if they had any folktale or any opinion regarding any tale they wanted to share with me. It was plain conversations about life and its daily happenings that they enjoyed. Lives of widowed old women were lonelier compared to married elderly women as they still had their husbands to attend to and thus were a bit more involved in family life. But again it seemed to depend more on the personality of the woman than her status. Though historically Hindu widows were compelled to follow strict and rigid rites and rituals,



starting with a simple vegetarian diet and seclusion from all celebratory events of the society as well as the family, in the present age such rules have been long discarded and are looked down upon as regressive and anti-modern. So feelings of isolation or being neglected do not inevitably arise out of socio-religious conventions in the present day, as they had in the past (precolonial, colonial period), for widowed old women. Perhaps this isolation is a result of a breakdown in joint-families, with nuclear families being on the rise.

As an informant, a housewife in her mid-thirties commented,

Well, I try to give as much time to my mother-in-law as possible, especially after the death of my father-in-law two years back—But it is not always possible to listen to her never ending talks all the time—like how the maid did not properly wash her clothes or misbehaved or some story of her life in the past! I have to run for errands and take care of the entire household too! But she will not try to see my problems and will complain that I am not paying enough attention to her and neglecting her! It's not as if I am sitting the entire day in my room, doing nothing. And I do check on her at frequent intervals by going to her room and ask if she needs water or something—But still she will go on complaining, “You don't have time for me!” But these days people are short pressed for time also they do not have the inclination to sit back and listen to stories anymore! (Rumana Bose, 2012).

This theme of abandonment, that kept showing its face in small glances from nooks and corners, was not only reflected by the elderly people but at some level also seemed to affect the young. It seemed that young narrators felt guilty at some level for abandoning their family and old parents while older narrators showed a hidden fear of abandonment, topics which surfaced through the stories they chose to narrate, respectively. But even when elderly narrators lived with their own son and daughter-in-law they displayed insecurity about their lives centering on their own family. M.C. Goldstein has observed, “The attitudes and feelings of these elderly people regarding

sons and old age also demonstrated their clear understanding that co-residence with a married son in the 'ideal' family setting did not imply either a secure or a satisfying existence" (Goldstein 1983: 718). Perhaps it is this aspect of the underlying insecurity or fear that seems to be reflected in the oral tales they choose to narrate.

One conclusion that seems inevitable, when considering Indian family life from a Western perspective, is that children in India lead a regulated life and seem to be under constant supervision by their elders. Perhaps this is where the difference lies between the eastern and western cultures. In the South Asian subcontinent, children are much more dependent on their parents and this dependency continues for a much longer period, compared to what happens in the western world. Also it might appear that these children grow up in a cocoon of protectiveness, having to be coaxed to eat, to sleep, as most often than not they are always the centre of attention for mothers and grandmothers.

### **Future scope:**

Indian society, in its bid to make progress, has adopted all western notions of 'development'; but in this quest for modernity, has shunned everything indigenous. And that includes the age old vernacular oral traditions. India is still a young country; it is only in its 65<sup>th</sup> year as a nation. The generation I grew up with, and have examined in this study, is that generation who saw the country raise its flag of independence with the end of colonial rule on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947. Many of the elderly men and women, i.e. the grandparents (including my own), whom I interviewed were in their seventies and eighties, and had witnessed a British-ruled undivided India. Their nationalist fervor was thus found to be different and stronger than in those born in the years after India gained

her independence and established itself as a free developing country. This is also strongly reflected in the folktales that the two generations tell. The generation who grew up in the 1930's and 1940's, and witnessed the partition of India in 1947, chooses to tell their children and grandchildren indigenous folktales in the vernacular language, like those of *Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu* or *Jatil*, along with other stories of the freedom fighters/martyrs who fought against the British for an independent India. Elderly male narrators seemed to be most inclined to narrate such stories of the freedom fighters as compared to younger male narrators or even aged female narrators; while the younger generation prefers to read out folktales and stories in English like those of Brothers Grimm versions of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty" as well as those of Hans Christian Andersen—which are available in every local bookstore across India. Along with this a marked shift in value systems between the older generations and the new younger generations can also be observed. The older generation could be seen to have a more conservative and patriarchal value system as compared to the younger generations. Indian society had always placed a high value on collectivism and tended to look down upon individualistic ideals. But slowly a shift in the value systems can be observed with the younger generations choosing to be more individualistic in their decision-making, marking a decrease in the prevalent collective ideals of the society.

So now the question that arises is what does the future hold? In the next few generations will the vernacular folktales die a natural death when their indigenous cultural upholders and oral narrators are no longer there to preserve them for posterity through the age-old tradition of oral narration? Or will the next generation be able to comprehend the tales' actual worth and make an effort to learn them and pass them down

the line? In some joint-families, or families where at least one member exists who knows some vernacular folktales and narrates them, the rest of the family members do not bother to repeat them and thus perhaps choose to perform folktales of a different culture and language, in order to give the child exposure to a different world view and ideas. Also with the steady decline in the joint-family system, together with the saturating effect of the audio-visual media in almost every aspect of the society, it can hardly be denied that the performance of oral traditions is losing much of its value, with every passing day.

One important point that remains to be seen is what the present day (born in late post-colonial period) mothers will do when they grow old and become grandmothers themselves. Will they go back to their roots and perform the old indigenous vernacular tales that they heard from their grandmothers like *Sukhu aar* [and] *Dukhu* or will they prefer to narrate the Western stories like Cinderella, or Snow-White? If so, what will happen to the old vernacular folktales? This is for the future to show. It would be presumptuous, however, to predict that this age old tradition of oral narratives will simply die out completely in the coming years.

## Illustrations

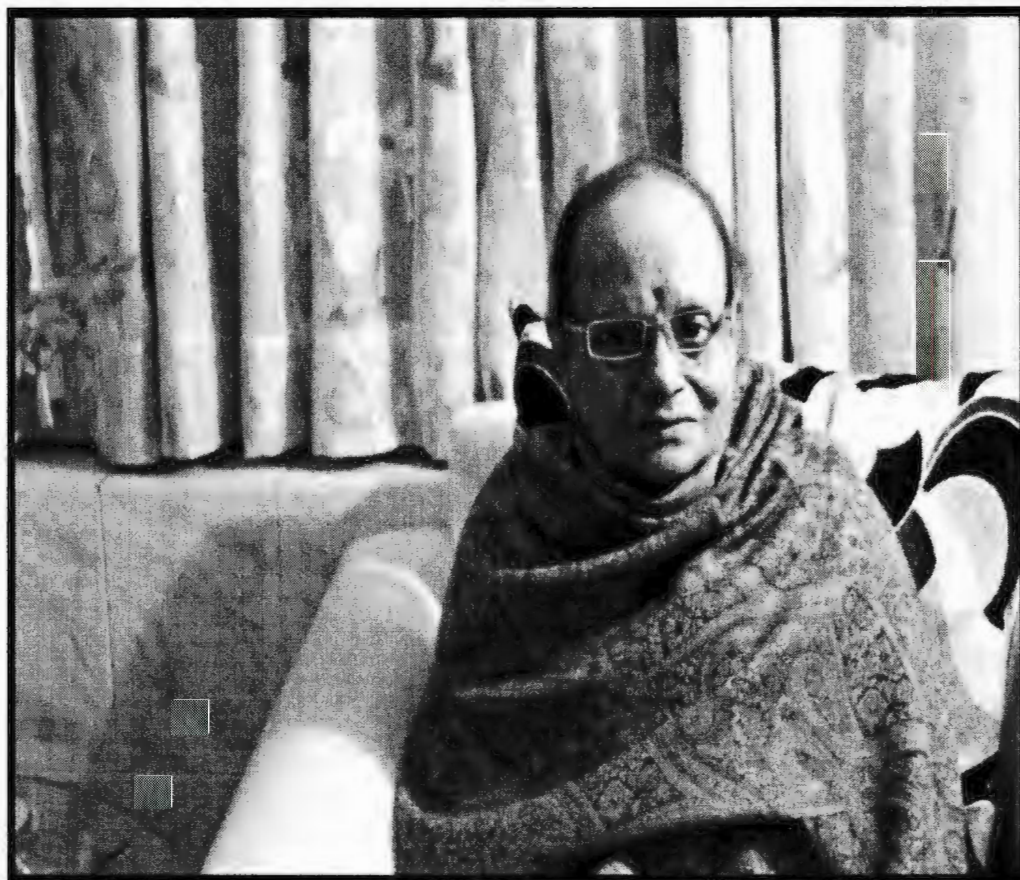


Fig.1. Aparna Dutta (my grandmother)



Fig.2. Latika, sitting in the rooftop on a cement bench





Fig.3. Mrs. Eela Datta (Eela *dida*)



Fig.4. Bijali, a family member for us





Fig.5. An image of Mother Goddess (Ma Durga) referred to in the story of "Sarvamangala" pp.79



Fig.6. An image of Lord Ganesha (the Elephant God) as referred to in the Story "Marriage of Lord Ganesha" pp. 86.



Fig.7. An image of the river Ganga, on the banks of which Calcutta is situated

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