

Quest, Pilgrimage and Tourism: Locating *Thakurma'r Jhuli* in the Context of the Bengali 'Grand Tour'

Kajori Patra
M.A. English
Jadavpur University

ABSTRACT

Folktales have been a dynamic part of society, in the sense that social movements and political structures have found simultaneous representation in the contemporary folktales. This paper tries to read a specific aspect of *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, one of the most prominent texts of Bengali folklore written in pre-independent India: the aspect of travel as the frame narrative of many stories. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, in spite of being one of the most well-documented collection of Bengali folktales, has very little research space to suffice for the vast and dynamic tradition of folklore that forms the spine of Bengali literary context. Arnold van Gennep's 'Rites of Passage' and contemporary concepts of Grand Tour have been used to study this text from a post-colonial perspective, in order to identify this text within the contemporary research genres of tourism, pilgrimage and travel studies.

Keywords: Bengali, Folktales, Travel Theories, Pilgrimage, Grand Tour, Post-colonial Studies

To appreciate the context of this paper, we must first re-acquaint ourselves with the basics of the theories put forth by folklorist and ethnographer, Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 book *Les rites de passage* (translated as 'Rites of Passage'). Gregory Forth translates the phenomena of rites of passage as: 'rites of passage are rituals concerned with transferring individuals or groups between social statuses and marking their incorporation into a typically higher or more valued status'. This, therefore, becomes a very broad category that includes most cycles, especially, the cycle of life and death itself, which is initiated by birth, then adulthood and eventually death. These rites, as is evident by the example mentioned, do not need a religious frame of reference and can be entirely secular. Being essentially 'transition rituals', the most important phase of these rites is the middle phase, where the individual is in a search for completion or transformation and belongs to neither an older or a newer societal class or order. These rites of passages can be further subdivided into 'rites of separation', 'rites of initiation' and finally, 'rites of incorporation'. These rites are not necessarily of physical in nature, as the primary goal is emotional development. The beginning of these rites is marked by the change of place, usually, when the person moves from their usual place to a separate place meant for the transformative journey. This might be temporary residence or a spatial dislocation. The period of transition might be brief, but at the same time, might span

for months or years. Within this context, we will try and locate the popular culture of Grand Tour.

The Grand Tour, in its own merit, refers to the 18th century paradigm of aristocratic English young men travelling through Europe, with a supposed desire to reinvigorate their education with visits to places of classical importance. Like a rite of passage, the nature of Grand Tour is more educational than exploratory. Francis Bacon, in his essay 'Of Travel' (in *The Essays, or Counsels, Civil & Moral* (1625)), gives a brief description of the nature of ideal Grand Tours, for education and for experience, by visiting various institutions, such as that of government, law and commerce; churches and other architectures that speak of a glorious past, and one of the most important aspects, which we will recall again later in this paper, is the companion who must also travel along with these young men who, by all means, are men who shall, upon their returns, become important in national and international politics. They are, essentially, men who would rule the country and hence need a fair amount of insight into the cultures and history.

Thakurma'r Jhuli alludes broadly to not just one text, a collection of short stories compiled and edited by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, but to a rather vast culture of Bengali folktales with an obscure origin date. One of the most important aspects that must be emphasised on regarding any scholarship of *Thakurma'r Jhuli* is that it is, actually, a term that transcends the space of one singular text and it has become an umbrella genre to refer to almost any number of folktales in the Bengali context. When Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder anthologised thirteen of such widely prevalent folktales in 1907, India was going through a wave of a nationalistic fervour. The proposal of the partition of Bengal was introduced in 1903 and officially declared in 1905. After these declarations, spontaneous protests broke out in different places all over Bengal, and in Calcutta Town Hall, finally the proposal for Swadeshi took its firm roots. Krishan Kumar Mitra called for boycott of foreign goods and imported British goods were targeted for destruction, in order to cripple the British industries thriving on importing cheaper factory-made goods to India.

In the preface to *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, Rabindranath Tagore calls the book a supreme 'ingenious' product ever produced. He writes, "He (Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar) managed to retain the characteristic diction, flavour and simplicity to a great extent which is required for narrating a Rupkatha." Tagore further says "Can there be anything more appropriately Swadeshi than *Thakurma'r Jhuli*?" (Paul, 2015) In the understanding of what an enormous impact Swadeshi and nationalism specifically had on the literature of Bengal, especially children's literature written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore etc. (Mitter, 1994), let us try to see what Julie Codell calls 'Reversing the Grand Tour'.

Almost a century later than the Europeans, the Indian aristocrats too, influenced by their British counterparts, embraced the idea of the Grand Tour. In the latter half of 19th century, a large number of Bengali aristocrats became invested in an educational tour throughout Europe, especially England, as a significant component of shaping their lives as a mimesis to their British colonizers. These travellers were mostly maharajas, students or social reformers (Codell, 2007). Indians who travelled fit the category their Western predecessors had set, the travellers were primarily male, privileged and were autonomous, but the basic difference in these two kinds of travel narratives is, the English man went to Europe with a desire for self-discovery, whereas, the Indian man went to see their colonizer's country, to

meet, first-hand, the ‘superior race’, to be able to corroborate what he has been told about Europe. This reversing of Grand Tour, therefore, is actually the reversing of the ‘gaze’, while England would desire to gaze at exotic locations, ‘unexplored’ places, a heroic claim to dominate the land no-man has ever been to; India would turn over the gaze on their spectator, the ‘West’ and visit metropolises which have been overtly visited, places on which several written works have been produced, the places which have already been claimed as the zeniths of another civilisation.

In the wake of such a cultural phenomenon, where Indian men embraced tours across Europe to be the equals of the British, Indian travel narratives focusing solely on Indian journey became necessary. The *kalapani* was so longer a force to prevent the Westernisation, and this situation called forth, what Tagore calls, ‘the best indigenous item’, our folktales and legends. Mitra himself claims to be an editor who had visited almost the whole of Bengal, collecting stories from a wide geographical range, however, the careful reader must remember that Mitra too was a staunch supporter of the Swadeshi movement. The oral narratives that he collected must have been heavily influenced by his own political and social allegiance and the presentation, hence, is certainly biased, or, in other words, the stories become a representation of not only the eternity that any folktale aims at, but also the immediate context of the editor.

This is where we begin to closely inspect some of the stories from *Thakurma'r Jhuli* which focus on the concept of a bildungsroman-like educational travel narrative as the frame tale. These kinds of tales usually can be further categorised into:

- a. Forced Travels
- b. Voluntary Travels

a. Forced Travels

The prince is unwilling to travel, either specifically lazy or is sedentary, and is forced either by the parents to be more active regarding his education and therefore, takes a trip to other countries in order to prove his worth (and gain experience), or is forced due to circumstances (a cruel step-mother or a princess who needs to be wooed) to make a travel to other countries.

Examples of this kind of travelling will include the stories ‘Lalkamal aar Neelkamal’, ‘Kalabati Rajkanya’ and ‘Sonar Kati Rupa Kati’

b. Voluntary Travels

The prince himself decides to travel either for ‘wanderlust’ or in order to gain experience so that he is suitable enough to be the next ruler.

Examples of this kind of travelling will include the stories ‘Ghumonto Puri’, ‘Dalim Kumar’ and ‘Pataalkanya Manimala’.

This is similar to what Gennep calls the ‘rites of separation’. In ‘Sonar Kati Rupa Kati’, the story opens with the prince and three friends, the son of the minister, the son of the army general and the son of the merchant, who do nothing the entire day apart from wasting away their time in idle horse-riding. The problem here is presented to us, the eligible young aristocrats who are destined to govern over a kingdom, are unproductive and unenthused in

upgrading themselves so as to deserve the important monarchic position they are expected to assume. This greatly frustrates the king, the minister, the general and the merchant, and they instruct their wives to replace the rice on the young men's lunch platters with ashes, representing their own worthlessness. This brings the four men to accept their insufficiency and they are urged, by a sense of shame and an aim to prove their self-worth, to undertake a journey abroad.

In 'Lalkamal aar Neelkamal', however, first half of the story unfolds, setting the scene for the need of the two refugee siblings to embark upon a journey. Kusum, the son of the king's human queen, and Ajit, the son of the king's demon queen, are thick as thieves, even though Ajit's mother, the Rakshasi queen kills Kusum's mother and has plans on eating Kusum up as well. When Ajit refuses to give up on his brother, the Rakshasi queen devours both the princes and burp out an iron and a gold ball, and buries them in the forest. After the princes' death the Rakshasi queen takes over complete control over the kingdom, and it is destroyed within a day. From the two balls, which were actually eggs, hatch out Ajit and Kusum, now reborn as the elder brother Lalkamal (from the golden egg) and the younger half-human-half-demon, Neelkamal (from the iron egg). These two brothers now embark upon a journey, saving various kingdoms from the hands of the two kinds of folk-demons: the stronger, more destructive Rakshasas, and the less invasive, shorter Khokshasas.

Similarly, Buddhu and Bhutum, the protagonists of 'Kalabati Rajkanya' and their seven step-brothers start a journey, originally with the intention of winning Princess Kalabati as their bride, but the journey itself becomes one where character and morality of each of the princes are put to test. The princes must manoeuvre their ways out of three cannibalistic old women, the confusing 'dhol-dagar'¹ which uses magic to hide the princess and finally, must find the rare, mythical pearl-flower for the princess. All of these require bravery, intelligence and reasoning, essentially charting out a process of emotional growth for the princes through a competitive journey.

When we look at stories that feature voluntary travelling, the cartography of the narrative is quite smooth, as the story can only begin when the prince decides to go on a journey to see new kingdoms. The story would go from a point of opulent stasis to a journey meant to evoke bravado to, eventually the same state of opulent stasis that the story begins with. In 'Ghumonto Puri', the kingdom initially begins at a perfect utopic state, with a brilliant monarch and wealthy citizens, when the prince (often unnamed)² decides to go for '*desh-bhromon*'. This term, often used in many early Bengali texts, has a very interesting implication. The word 'desh' roughly translates into country, in the present state of Bengali language, but had the potential to encapsulate areas beyond and within the Indian subcontinent during its initial usage. We must keep in mind that folktales originate from a pre-cartographic era, where the boundaries and concept of nation and country were not water-tight, 'desh' becomes any place beyond the kingdom of the said prince(s). The word 'Bhromon' originates from the Sanskrit word 'Bhram' meaning 'illusion' or 'delusion' (Sen,

¹ Dhol-Dagar refer to a set of magical drums which, upon being played, is capable of calling forth a magical bazar/market and on being played twice, the dhol-dagar will vanish the

² The kings, queens, demons etc are usually archetypal characters and left unnamed. Although all the stories are independent of each other and the characters, these characters are, after all, connected through the similar narratives.

2006). The Sanskrit origin actually, hence, holds a negative connotation. Travelling becomes an act of delusion, a nomadic, purposeless movement abandoning any real activity of consequence, not to mention that this 'Bhram' was permitted only for ascetics or imbeciles, and later for the landed aristocrats who could afford to travel aimlessly without having to think of funding. This term, currently, is often used in the context of tourism. 'Desh-bhromon' has traversed the space of educational travel and has become a collective space for pilgrimage, tourism and education. The quest, therefore, is no longer just a quest, but a journey filled with curious discoveries, much like a tourist who looks at the ordinary through the kaleidoscope of adventure and exoticization. This brings us to our next stage of the rites of passage.

According to Genep, this ambiguous stage can either be brief, or last for months and years. This period makes the pilgrim/passenger potentially powerful and vulnerable. In most of these folktales (from *Thakurma'r Jhuli*), the prince is placed within the space where the ultimate possibilities are of two kinds, one of death (hence vulnerable) due to supernatural causes or victory (hence power) over the said supernatural sources.

This can be further illustrated using the story, 'Patakanya Manimala'. In this story, the prince and the minister's son decide to go for the 'Desh-bhromon', and soon after leaving the periphery of their kingdom (desh) and travelling miles through an unknown forest on horse-back, they opine to sleep on the trees. This would be the liminal space for the two young men, whose transformative journey has just begun. At night, the men are approached by a fierce anaconda who is in possession of the mythical, supremely powerful 'naagmani' or the precious stone atop its head. This puts them in a position wherein they can either avail the stone, and hence possess the power bestowed upon the owner of the stone, or they could try to obtain the stone and be killed by the snake in the process.

Similarly, in 'Dalim Kumar', the eldest prince Dalim Kumar's life was stored within the seeds of a pomegranate ('Dalim' is the Bengali word for a pomegranate). After capturing his mother, the queen, a Rakshasi takes her form, fools the king and lives the life of Dalim's mother, the human queen. When Dalim and his seven half-demon brothers embark upon the journey across kingdoms, Dalim puts himself in this space that could either empower him or destroy him. It does the latter, initially. Dalim's step mother, the Rakshasi captured the particular pomegranate within a dungeon and Dalim Kumar, as a result, becomes blinded and his horse trots on taking him to a foreign kingdom where he faces a mythical snake-demon and retrieves his eye-sight back. It would be interesting to notice that Genep mentions that one of the common procedures performed during this transitional passage is scarification and mutilation, in order to make the subjects go through ordeals that would give them a social elevation.

Perhaps, the section of these journeys which exalt these from being just another quest or a transitional passage or an educational tour, is the fact that these journeys span over difficult terrain and particularly challenging landforms. From the context of pilgrimage, traditionally, early religions, such as Hinduism, was affected greatly by cosmological features. Vedic gods and goddesses represented rain, thunderstorm, or sun, for example. These natural landforms are usually the archetypes, mountains, rivers, seas, that symbolise the connection between man and heaven, the axis mundi (Sinha, 2014). 'Tirtha Darshan', the term for Hindu pilgrimage has a broad connotation of comprising of the spiritual, physical and mental connection with the act of viewing the landscape. Pilgrims, traditionally, referred

to those who took arduous journey to put their faith to a test. Pilgrimage essentially becomes a 'quest' where the pilgrims seek to be touched and challenged (Smith, 1992). Cultural geographers would refer to this as the impact of geographical stimuli on the human imagination, resulting in geopiety, a sense of wonder at the various earth-forms in all its magnanimity (Singh, 2005). In the Bengali folktales, the most important part of the journey is this element of wonder, which renders the human mind almost insignificant in front of the vastness or power, either natural or supernatural. Let us take the example of the story 'Ghumonto Puri', where the prince, upon commencing on a journey crosses 'many countries, many mountains, many rivers, beyond the kingdoms of many kings'³ to reach an enormous forest, which gives way to a gigantic city, where the massive palace reaches till the sky, the marble inside sparkles like milk, the courtyard is teeming with soldiers, elephants, horses and infantry, the weapon-house is filled with various kinds of swords and arrows in thousands, the treasury is brimming with wealth, where everything is, as the concept of geopiety, in an excess, and renders the audience, and the prince himself, incapable of feeling anything but an ominous wonder.

The question that one might ask, at this juncture is that, why, indeed, is it important that the journey has to be thronged with terrible landscapes and trials and tribulations? Pilgrimage in the Sanskrit tradition involves austerity and hardships and part of the rigour is strenuous walking to the pilgrimage sites and performing some form of ritual walk at the sacred site itself. This, actually, means that the more difficult the terrain, the better the penance of the pilgrims, the better the spiritual development. In the Vedic religions, Dharma rests on four pillars, and one of them is penance. The austerity of the 'Prayaschitta' is important for the freedom of soul from the cycle of rebirths. Similarly, walking is particularly important because of the struggle associated with it. The physical counterparts of meditation, fasting and praying as penitent believer can be seen as being manifested in the various modes the pilgrims adopt while walking: barefoot walking, rolling, walking on knees, parikrama etc. (Das, 2008). It has been studied that in spite of certain risks, pilgrims generally have not been deterred from visiting the sacred sites (Blackwell, 2007). Along with the strong religious motivation, walkability can be an added impetus to pilgrimage. When we look at the story 'Patalakanya Manimala', the prince and his friend, the minister's son, face terrible ordeals, such as the mythical anaconda, whom they defeat, leading them to an underwater kingdom. However, their difficulty does not cease here, the prince marries a princess (from the kingdom beneath the sea) who is abducted and the prince (who no longer has the magical jewel from the anaconda's head to save himself) falls into a deep slumber from the snake venom. After a battle of wit and disguise, the minister's son rescues both the prince, princess Manimala and finds a bride for himself in the process as well.

The minister's son is an archetypal character often associated with the European Grand Tour. In 'Of Travel', Bacon says, 'That young men travel under some tutor, or grave servant, I allow well; so that he be such a one that hath the language, and hath been in the country before; whereby he may be able to tell them what things are worthy to be seen, in the country where they go; what acquaintances they are to seek; what exercises, or discipline, the place yieldeth'. The minister's son occupies the ambiguous position tailored to suit the prince as both an attendant and a companion. Due to his high rank amongst the nobility, he is only inferior in rank to the prince himself, and can be treated like a servant, but being higher in

³ All translations from the Bengali text are by the author.

rank than all other young men in the kingdom, he is also the closest to an equal the prince can get. He is bound to protect the prince, to entertain him and to accompany him on his journeys. These journeys were often perilous and dangerous and the prince (or the hero) would often need a friend (or sidekick). In 'Sonar Kati Rupa Kati', the prince is accompanied by three such companions, or men of increasingly lower rank than himself (yet three men of the highest rank right after the monarch), and even though they try to help the prince, it is the prince who, in the end, has to save his friends from the stomach of a violent Rakshasa. This character(s) therefore becomes both the prince's protector (such as in 'Patalakanya Manimala') and the prince's comrade (who needs to be saved during crisis such as in 'Sonar Kati Rupa Kati').

The final phase of Gennep's rites of passage is the rite of reincorporation, where the subject, having passed through transformation, is again placed within the society, changed but yet very much the part of the society. In many societies, marriages usually conclude with such a period of incorporation where a certain period must be given to ease the brides into the process of cohabitation with her 'new' family. The stories from *Thakurma'r Jhuli* that we have discussed about over the course of this paper eventually meet a similar Gennepian fate. After either defeating the Rakshasi or winning over the bride, the prince usually is reinstated back within his original kingdom almost immediately and without further trouble. The alternation, apart from being developmental, is definitely on the marital front, which would ensure the smooth transition of the unmarried, young prince to a more matured, married king. Sometimes these stories also end in a revelation, when the prince finally arrives and identifies the Rakshasi step-mother as the cannibalistic demoness and ensures her death, as in the story 'Sonar Kati Rupa Kati' and 'Lalkamal aar Neelkamal'. This process of complete reintegration is usually left to imagination, save for only one story, 'Kalabati Rajkanya', where, after winning the princesses' hands in marriages, the two brothers, Buddhu and Bhutum continue to exist as a monkey and an owl, respectively, until princess Kalabati and Heerabati discover that their spouses are actually humans with the supernatural power to dress as animals, and burn their animal-hides, thus freeing them from the burden of their power.

The early 20th century, was a tremendously tumultuous period for the Indian intellectuals. On one hand, the previous century saw a rush of Indian, particularly Bengali, aristocrats visiting Europe, enticed by London, the dream of visiting the 'most remarkable city on the face of the globe' (Codell, 2007), on the other hand, both the British government and the Swadeshi reformers wanted to popularize the concept of a pan-Indian tourism; the British government was invested in the Indian documentation of the development and technological advancement that British reign had brought all over India (Codell, 2007), and the Swadeshi reformist view was to grasp the Indian value, the Indian heritage and the Indian education closer to every Indian. As the self-proclaimed editor of *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, Majumdar tries to arrange the stories to create a panorama of Indian values and codes of conduct, the travelling is methodised as a frame tale to convey the actual story within it. He aligns bits and pieces of oral information to give a sense of a historical background, a reference of a pan-Indian tourism that, according to these stories, was very much prevalent before the British voyagers introduced it to us. These travels give a sense of the time that has lapsed between the present and the past and perhaps even so much as connects the shadowy past retold through tales and myths to a future that India might hold for its citizens. The act of

travelling across India, becomes a liberating activity, escaping from the colonizer's gaze and turning it around.

The travels in *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, hence, become a mesh of events, connecting Bengali folklores to various contemporary political, religious and social structures. They become warehouses of nationalistic tropes, frame narratives to reclaim the nation's lost glory, and mimicking both the qualities of pilgrimage and rites of passage, still manage to remain quests, the explorations into the unknown.

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