

Smita Ghosh
Newton Collection

Past and Future: A Collection of Bengali Literature

I was introduced to Bengali literature early in life because although I was born and raised in America, my father is Bengali. My father was born in Kolkata and lived there until he was 25. (Kolkata is the new spelling of Calcutta, the capital city of the state of West Bengal in India. The language spoken there is Bengali.) He moved to America for graduate school, met my mother, a Caucasian American, and eventually settled here. He has always kept Indian literature in our house, scattered across the bookshelves the way that the scent of curry powder lingered in the crevices of our tiny New York kitchen; incidental or normal for me as a child, but also powerfully meaningful in retrospect.

I wouldn't want to make this a story about my father, though. While he introduced me to the field and has always supported my interest, I really got involved in reading Bengali literature on my own, especially when it converged with my academic program. In high school I read Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Leave it to Me. I was aware of Indian literature mostly in terms of these prototypes, I thought of Indian literature as books written in English—for English speakers—about being Indian in the Western world.

When I came to Swarthmore, I was determined to learn how to speak Bengali. I had never connected this desire to speak Bengali with the desire to read more Bengali writing. Although I was generally a voracious reader, I was only interested in learning Bengali so that I could better communicate with my family in India. As I learned Bengali at the University of Pennsylvania, however, I became more interested in the culture and writing of Bengal. I finally really understood that the Bengali language is full of rich sounds and metaphors that by nature eclipsed English translation. I began to look past the writing of Indian Americans and wonder about the Indian literary traditions that they had inherited.

After starting my study of Bengali as a language, I spoke to Professor Stephen Hopkins about setting up an independent study of Bengali literature. Professor Hopkins pointed me to Susan Schomburg, a religion professor with an interest in Indian writing. Professor Schomburg and I discussed a directed reading of Bengali writing and put together a preliminary curriculum. While my honors program this year prevented me from taking the directed reading for credit, I now had a list of important Bengali authors that I began to read on my own. I started reading famous older Bengali writers like Tagore as well as newer ones like Nasrin and Chaudhuri.

Additionally, I spent winter break in Kolkata with my family and was not only able to practice my Bengali but visited bookstores and, more importantly, the *bookshelves* of my uncles and cousins. I read books like Srikanta, The Bounty of the Goddess and The Youth, which were difficult to find in America. Additionally, I visited Santiniketan, the outdoor university that Rabindranath Tagore created. The most striking aspect of this visit was the huge crowd that surrounded the buildings of Santiniketan, eagerly removing their shoes at the entrance and waiting on hour-long lines so they could see the original copy of *Gitanjali* or touch Tagore's writing desk. I realized how important Tagore, and by extension Bengali writing in general, was to Bengali heritage.

I also understood the importance of reading books that were written in the original Bengali, rather than just books in English. My experience at Santiniketan taught me how valuable the Bengali language itself is to Bengalis. I take for granted that people speak and write in English, but for my relatives in Bengal, the fact that Tagore made Bengali literature famous to the English-speaking world—a world that for years had projected images of “savagery” or “backwardness” onto India and its people—was a huge feat.

In my collection I have tried to balance Bengali writing in translation (which I have starred in my list) and those written in English. I hope this will give the reader insight into the difference that an intended audience makes on a written work. Along those lines, I try to balance writing about Indian experiences in India as well as diasporic experiences. I also work to balance rural and urban stories and various types of literature—poetry, short stories and novels—that are representative of Bengali writing as I have experienced it.

Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra. Srikanta. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.

I started reading this book in preparation for a directed reading on Bengali literature and, to be honest, I expected to dislike it. It is a long novel about the long life of Srikanta, a hapless Bengali man who spends most of his life wandering the countryside. Of course, I ended up enjoying the story. Srikanta does indeed wander, but he meets a lot of people, particularly women, on the way. The retellings of his escapades not only satisfy my underlying hunger for gossip but end up being very reflective. We see Srikanta's opinions, especially his ideas about women and marriage, change throughout the story.*

Tagore, Rabindranath. Gitanjali. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

This book is extremely special to me because it was given to me by one of my uncles when I visited my grandmother in India. Tagore is the most well-known Bengali writers both internationally (he won the Nobel prize for this collection in 1913) and in Bengal, where children learn how to recite his poems in grade school, families hang his pictures in their living rooms and visitors flock to museums and monuments in his honor. I don't know if I can appreciate his poems as much as someone who reads them in Bengali, but I still enjoyed the translation.*

Tagore, Rabindranath. The Hungry Stones. New York: Macmillan, 1917.

This is a collection of short stories written by Rabindranath Tagore. Some stories read like folktales, full of magic and imagination, while others—particularly the story about an adolescent boy—are striking and real. *

Tagore, Rabindranath. Choker Bali. Rupa: New Delhi, 2004.

I included three pieces from Tagore in this collection so that I could showcase his ability to write in multiple forms. This is one of Tagore's most famous novels, so it works well with Gitanjali and The Hungry Stones. It also speaks to some of the issues that came up in Srikanta, since it tells the story of women in Bengal in the early 20th century. Although the premise may sound rather dated, this story was fantastically interesting, as it details the complicated relationship between three women—a mother, a daughter-in-law and a young widow who comes to visit.*

Bose, Buddhadeva. Tagore: Portrait of a Poet. University of Bombay Press: Bombay, 1962.

I included this book because I thought it seemed fitting that after offering insight on Tagore through his work, a good collection would also provide a historical and biographical picture of him. Buddhadeva Bose is a famous Bengali writer in his own right, and he makes Tagore's story very interesting and readable. Also, his description of Tagore's life, particularly his relationship to Western culture, lends insight on later works that I included in this collection. Tagore was a prolific writer who set an early precedent

for other Indian authors to become fluent in English and strive for acclaim in the English-speaking world.*

Chaudhuri, Nirad. The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian. Macmillan: New York, 1951.

This book is a memoir about Chaudhuri's life, beginning with his childhood in Calcutta. In reality, though, Chaudhuri talks about a lot more, presenting to the reader his view of modern Indian history, especially the independence movement, and his sometimes oppositional political stance. I thought this book, which wrestles so much with the adoption of British culture, values and language by Indian nationalists, would provide a critical image of the Indian diasporic authors—who write in English, for primarily Western audiences—that I include in this collection.

Gangopadhyay, Sunil. The Youth. Rupa: New Delhi, 2003.

This book details the lives of a group of young adults in Kolkata in the 1960s. Gangopadhyay writes from the perspective of many of the individuals in the group, so that the reader is able to hear the voices of each character and contrast the ways in which they describe themselves and each other. The book reminded me of Srikanta in its narrative style and its frank and questioning characters. Many of the characters in The Youth are aspiring poets who are trying to avoid what they perceive as “normalcy.” Yet, the micro-culture in which the youth operate develops its own norms, a process that proves to be fascinating to the reader. *

Gangopadhyay, Sunil. Ranu o Bhanu: The Poet and his Muse. Shrishti: New Delhi, 2004.

This is Gangopadhyay's revisiting of Tagore's life, a central theme in Bengali literature. He tells the story of Tagore's relationship with Ranu, a young girl who writes him a letter and comes to be a close friend. Ranu becomes Tagore's ties to not only a sister-in-law but the “unending beauty” of youth.

Mukherjee, Bharati. The Tiger's Daughter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Mukherjee's first book describes the childhood of a young woman in Kolkata in the 1960's, and in this sense is a good novel to read with The Youth. It also discusses some of the same themes, particularly the self-criticism and confusion that characters in both stories face. While I ultimately prefer Mukherjee's other books to this one—this one is slow and monotonous at times—I appreciated getting a sense of life in Kolkata at a pivotal era, and liked comparing the book to The Youth.*

Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989.

This is the first book I have listed thus far that was written and published in English. It is also the first book that is set primarily outside of India, as it deals primarily with the life

of Jasmine, an immigrant who comes to America from India. Jasmine moves throughout America in search of safety and stability, constantly remaking her identity and re-remembering her homeland.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Leave it to me. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Like Jasmine, this book is set in America and was written in English. Here, Mukherjee flips the story of Jasmine and describes Debby, a half-Indian woman who was adopted by an American couple. Debby travels to San Francisco and then to India to find information about her birth parents. The most interesting part of this novel is the way that Mukherjee weaves the Indian myth of Devi into Debby's story.

Nasrin, Taslima. Shame: A Novel. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997.

This is a compelling and vivid story of a Bangladeshi family caught up in Hindu-Muslim conflict in Bangladesh. Nasrin's book is political—it's seeming indictment of the Bangladeshi government for not protecting the country's Hindu's made her the target of various threats—but also personal and moving.*

Nasrin, Taslima. Love Poems of Taslima Nasrin. New Delhi: Rupa, 2004.

Bengali literature is famous for its poetry, and I wanted to be sure to include lots of poetry in this collection. The title of this collection is a bit of a misnomer, though, it actually includes many poems that reflect more on her personal and political life—such as the thrilling “exile”—as well the expected love poems.*

Jhabvala, Ruth P. Heat and Dust. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

Although Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born in Europe and is not of Indian heritage, I included her work because she works in a lot of her experience in India, particularly with her Bengali husband. This is an interesting story about an interracial (British and Indian) relationship in India. It sheds light on the colonial period in India, and in this way it is a good thing to read with later authors like Bharati Mukherjee or Nirad Chaudhuri, who shed light on the post-colonial relationship between India and its colonial past.

Ghosh, Amitav. The Hungry Tide. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

This book gives a wonderful picture of the Sundarban area of Bengal—a swampy archipelago that is famous for its dangerous and beautiful wildlife—and Piya, an Indian American researcher. Ghosh weaves Piya's story with that of Kanai Dutt, a business man who is reliving, through his uncle's diary, the story of the 1970s resistance movement of Sundarban residents.

Ghosh, Amitav. The Calcutta Chromosome. New York: Avon Books, 1995.

This book reads almost like science fiction, although, like Ghosh's other novels, it is based in history. It tells a thrilling story of a British doctor studying malaria in Calcutta at

the turn of the century through Antar, a computer programmer who travels back in time. I like the centrality of Calcutta in this novel—which makes it easy to connect with many other pieces from this collection and Bengali literature in general.

Ray, Satyajit. The Complete Adventures of Feluda. New York: Penguin, 1988.

Although I don't always like detective stories, this collection is clever and interesting. It is also an important component in a collection of Bengali literature, since Satyajit Ray's movies—especially his Feluda series—are well known and beloved in Bengal.*

Ali, Monica. Brick Lane. New York: Scribner, 2003.

This book tells the story of Nasreen, a Bangladeshi woman living in London. Nasreen is a young woman whose struggle to survive emotionally in a cold and distant environment is moving, and her children's frustrations about their parents' cultural demands are particularly interesting. Ali adds a lot to the literature about diasporic Bengalis.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Sister of My Heart. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Divakaruni tells the fascinating story of two women from one Calcutta family whose lives take entirely different trajectories—with one woman ending up in America—but who turn to one another in moments of tragedy. The family drama in this book really illuminates the importance of extended families in Bengal.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Arranged Marriage: Stories. New York: Anchor, 1996.

I wanted to ensure that this collection was not too novel-heavy, and what better way to do it than this collection of short stories? Divakaruni writes about Indian women immigrants dealing, in different ways, with the conflict between their original homeland and the places in which they live. These stories are provocative, especially when read with a book like Brick Lane.

Devi, Mahasveta. Imaginary Maps. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Devi is an important Bengali woman author whose work is often included in anthologies. Her short stories are at once magical and strikingly real and emotionally raw.*

Banerjee, Tarasankar, ed. Green and Gold: Stories and Poems from Bengal. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1959.

This book is a bit old, so the English translations may seem a bit dated. However, of all the collections of Bengali literature out there, this one is fairly easy to come by and a good introduction to the history of Bengali writing. It includes a lot of important works from authors and poets whose writing is not always translated.*

Majumdar, Gopa, ed. In the Same Boat: Golden Tales from Bengal. New Delhi: UBSPD, 1994.*

Although this collection does not include poems, it still feels like a more modern version of Green and Gold. The editor is insistent on maintaining a “Bengali flavor” in the included stories while still providing tales that people can empathize with no matter where they are from.

Ray, Lila. Modern Bengali Poems. (I have this book at home and can't find the publication information online).

Lila Ray is an American-born Bengali who is married to a famous Bengali author. She is a good translator and makes these poems readable, and does a good job choosing a variety of interesting works.

Chaudhuri, Amit. The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature. London: Picador, 2001.

Although this is intentionally a book of literature from throughout India, it is pretty Bengali-heavy, as evidenced by the sheer amount of Bengali writing. I decided to include it because it gives a good glimpse of some early Bengali writing—especially writers like Michael Dutt and Bankim Chandra—who predate Tagore and provide great background for all the later literature. This book also has some good analyses of Bengali literature in general, including one by Chaudhuri himself.

Guha, Buddhadev. The Bounty of the Goddess. New Delhi: Rupa, 2004.

This is a modern Bengali work that describes rural life rather than the multinational urban experience that many of the modern diasporic writers depict. I really appreciated the rural focus, which, for me, tied the story back to Sarat Chandra's Srikanta.

Radice, William. Teach Yourself Bengali. New York: Teach Yourself, 1999.

This is certainly not Bengali literature, but for me, struggling with the basics of Bengali language has been a project that has endured as I read Bengali literature. As I read more translations of Bengali writing, the more I want to read these books and poems in their original language. While I realize that this is a lofty goal, this book is clear, helpful and worth including.