

# 100 years of *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag of Tales): From Oral Literature to Digital Media - Shaping Thoughts for the Young and Old

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Abstract: Storytelling has occupied an important place through time in cultures across the globe. The collection in *Thakurmar Jhuli* is classified into four distinct categories—Tales of adventures (*Dudher Sagar*), Tales of demons (*Roop Tarashi*), Animals and Humorous tales (*Chang Bang*), and Poems explaining the ritual of putting the children to sleep at the end of the stories (*Aam Sandesh*). This paper attempts to look into the aspects of transmission of these stories through the various media, the messages conveyed thereby and, the importance of the survival of oral tradition through changing media over a period of time. *Thakurmar Jhuli* is a compilation that is not limited to children alone, but over the years, has found tremendous response amongst the adults as well. This further tries to examine how these narratives serve as instruments of reinventing culture. Illustrations from the original printed publication is appended to this essay.

## Introduction

"Once upon a time there lived a ..." and thus the words frame the beginning of a magical journey full of excitement for young minds. Storytelling has occupied an important place through time in cultures across the globe and, in each, has attained an important conduit of expression of their integrated socio-cultural ethos. During the course of my field work in lateritic rural West Bengal, listening with rapt attention to a grandmother

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narrating the story of 'Kaak aar kaaker ma' (Crow and crow's mother), in an attempt to persuade her two-year-old granddaughter to sleep, I waited in eager anticipation for what would happen next. In the story, the family of crows led a very 'human' life, very closely resembling the daily happenings in the life of the little child. The baby crow went to a pre-nursery school after having a meal and a bath in the morning. It went to play in the evening and had dinner when the mother served dinner. Sometimes, the baby crow refused to go to sleep in the afternoon and fell out of the nest and badly injured a foot, because it was being too naughty and not listening to the mother. Then the mother and father crow put a bandage on the wound and scolded the baby crow to not be naughty and always listen to the advice of the parents. Quite following the lines of daily life, the story does not include facts which are redundant for a two-year-old's imagination: the gender of the baby crow, the timings of going to sleep and to school, the weather outside, and the fact that the family resides in open air without a proper covering.

The story made me wonder how it could be different from the well-remembered story, *Sheyal Pandit* (The sly fox) - from *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag of Tales) – which is about a crocodile and a sly fox, which my father often used to narrate to me when I was a small child, with inputs from my life as a child. The original story revolved around the crocodile bringing along seven of his 'children' to the 'school' of the sly fox in the forest, where a lot of 'children' of other animals also were studying. The school was a residential one, and so the crocodile had to leave all his seven 'children' with the fox, with a promise to return everyday to check on them. However, as soon as the crocodile left, finding the healthy and plump 'children' ideal for a feast, the sly fox ate one of them. He was then troubled with the thought of facing the crocodile the next day when he would come asking for his children. Being a cunning creature, he formed a plan. The next day when the crocodile came to meet his 'children', the fox made all of them come out one by one and meet their 'father'. He then, cleverly, managed to show the last 'child' twice to replace the missing one. Like this, every day, the fox would feast on a child and the next day when the crocodile came to visit, he would just increase the number of appearances of the child shown the last. This continued for a very long time, until the last 'child' was eaten and there were none left to be shown to the father crocodile. So the fox ran away into the forest. The next day, when the crocodile came to visit and called for the fox he did not get an answer. After waiting for a while, he entered the fox's den and found the bones of his children on the floor. Angry and upset, he went in search of the fox and found him near the river where he loved to hunt fish. The crocodile went and hid in the water. One day, feeling very hungry, the fox went to fish with a stick in his hand; the

crocodile caught hold of his hind leg. The sly fox immediately rebuked him saying that he made a mistake of catching his walking stick instead of his leg. The foolish crocodile let go of the leg and caught the walking stick immediately, thinking it to be the leg. The fox ran away from the forest forever - never to be seen or heard of again.

This story gradually was supplemented with data from my childhood, such as the name of the school, a school bus coming every morning to pick up the students, the teacher giving them homework every day, and the students having drawing classes in school - with bits of information that meant a lot for a child of seven years then (thirty years ago). The floating mass of folklore, being gradually supplemented with regular inputs, varying from region to region and generation to generation, finds new expression in the minds of the audience. It is not only the responsibility of the narrator to shape the imagination of the listener and convey a meaning out of whatever he/she is narrating, but it is also the responsibility of the audience/listener to make meaning out of the make-believe situation where animals speak, evil triumphs over good and one needs to be clever to get out of a 'tricky' situation. Although the previous example cited does not directly associate with the fabled stories from the collection of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, it is a pointer in the direction of the immense popularity of fantasy stories among children even in modern times - once more authenticating the esteemed recognition of the *Harry Potter* series (J.K. Rowling, born 1965), *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series (John Ronald Reuel or J.R.R. Tolkien- 1892-1973) of stories in various channels of media - be it the digitized version or the printed publication.

Folklore forms an integral part of culture across regions and time. Presenting the compilation of a floating mass of folklore into print, the efforts of Dakkhinranjan Mitra Majumdar<sup>1</sup> took shape into a book titled, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag of Tales), a collection of floating, oral folktales from West Bengal. First published in 1907, the book celebrates its centenary in 2007 and remains one of the best loved collections of children's stories with characters such as fairies, demons, princes, and princesses<sup>2</sup>. This, however, is not the only collection of folktales by Majumdar; his other three books are *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Grandfather's Bag of Tales, 1909), *Thandidir Thole* (Maternal Grandmother's Bag of Tales, 1909) and *Dadamoshayer Thole* (Maternal Grandfather's Bag of Tales, 1913). All the four are collections of fairy tales, folktales, ritual tales, and comical tales respectively. Each of these collections is also subtitled to make specific generic distinctions, for example, *Thakurmar Jhuli* is subtitled *Banglar Roopkatha* (Fairy Tales of Bengal), *Thakurdadar Jhuli* is subtitled *Banglar Kathashahitya* (Narrative Literature of Bengal), and *Dadamoshayer*

*Jhuli* is subtitled *Banglar Rasokatha* (Humorous Tales of Bengal). *Thakurmar Jhuli*, however, remains through generations, the best loved among the entire body of Majumdar's work.

A.K. Ramanujan (*Folktales from India*, 1985) classified folktales under various plots, such as chain tales, ritual tales, trickster tales, or sibling tales. Quite distinctly, yet maintaining a simple representation of facts for the young audience, the collection in *Thakurmar Jhuli* is also classified into four distinct categories: Tales of adventure (*Dudher Sagar*), Tales of demons (*Roop Tarashi*), Animal and Humorous tales (*Chang Bang*), and poems explaining the ritual of putting the children to sleep at the end of the stories (*Aam Sandesh*). From oral tradition to digitized versions of narrative tales, *Thakurmar Jhuli* has come a long way in its history of 100 years. This paper attempts to look into the aspects of transmission of these stories through the various media, the messages conveyed thereby and, the importance of the survival of oral tradition through changing media over a period of time. Thus, creating a special bond between the storyteller and the audience, the process also acts as a perpetuation of socio-cultural anxieties in the form of changes. Thus, the two most important aspects to consider regarding the collection of the hundred-year old *Thakurmar Jhuli* collection are the original narrators - mostly women, and the original listeners - mostly young children.

#### The Essence of *Thakurmar Jhuli*

The efforts of Majumdar might not seem unique today, for there are various other authors who, with the help and support of good publishing houses, in succeeding years noted down folktales and these have helped circulate the beliefs and socio-cultural ethos of a certain region all over the world in recent times. However, a hundred years back, the effort was unique and genuine in a manner that it was not a scholarly attempt for the erudite community, but an uncomplicated endeavour to retain a sense of originality from the simplicity of life that formed the basic notion of life away from the intellectual and learned urban scenario that was a century ago.

Transcribing of folktales has a long tradition both in India and abroad. The Grimm Brothers and their collection of folktales established transcription and typography rules that remained valid for more than a century till the time of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). Mention may also be made of the French collectors of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such as J.F. Bladé, F. Arnauding, P. Perbosc, P. Luzel, and P.Sébillot who contributed by noting down details through 'privileged tête-a-tête between the informant and the collector'. In the history of Greece, collections by one of the first Greek collectors

George Von Hahn (1864), are worth mentioning; they are the first of its kind of work. He collected and published folktales with the help of the Austrian Consul in Greece which tried to look into the typological connections between folktales and Greek mythology. However, the exact transcribing conditions of Hahn was lost as he never had the time to reveal them (Papachristophorou, 2007). Closer to the field of the present study, in West Bengal, prominent literary and scholarly figures such as Dineschandra Sen (1866-1939), Upendrakishore RoyChowdhury (1863-1915), Jasimuddin (1904-1976), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) to name a few, contributed immensely to the recovery and preservation of Bengali folk literature, especially taking shape and influencing the *Swadeshi* mind during the tumultuous period of the *Banga-Bhanga Andolan* (1905) or the Bengal Partition Movement of 1905.

Whatever the geographical boundaries are, the realm of folklore and oral narratives occupies a distinct category of importance. A generally accepted notion about folklore is that it survives within a particular society because it fulfils certain social functions which can be many and also, on the other hand, be specific to certain cultures. These can be broadly grouped into (Bhattacharya D.K., 2005) —

- Recreation or amusement
- Education
- Socialization
- Protest or propaganda
- Communication of knowledge

Also, recent researches over the past hundred years have shown that folklore is not entirely oral; on the other hand, whatever is orally transmitted is not always entirely part of folklore. A good example is when Mukherjee (1999) points out that in China, several myths, legends, and folktales have been written down, edited, and compiled by contemporary writers and were then orally transmitted and also perpetuated among the peasants. But, the Vedas and the Indian epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata are good examples to mention the importance of the written media to perpetuate the knowledge which had a history of oral transmission for centuries.

The method of transmission plays a very significant role in folklore and is often believed to be the basis through which the laws of nature, man-nature relationship, and prescriptive pattern of interpersonal behaviour within and between families, yet remaining basically within the ethnic boundary, is conveyed. In other words, the messages transmitted

often do not attempt to describe the larger unit as the nation or the state as a whole (D.K. Bhattacharya). Maranda and Maranda describe folklore communication as narratives, serving the function of information transmission where the storyteller acts as an encoder and the codes as symbols, which are constructed out of the cultural mosaic, and the listeners as the decoders. Thus, it should also be kept in mind that, the codes and symbols used in one context may not be relevant to another context. However, the elucidation and involvement of codes and symbols is an intrinsic tool for the analysis of folklore. Whether these symbols are culture specific or can transgress cultures is also another genre that needs to be analysed. On the other hand, certain symbols can be developed to act as specific discourses between cultures. As D.K. Bhattacharya rightly points out (2005), the ethnic mind rightly chooses its own positive and negative scale of references in order to constantly map the path between the 'We' and the 'They' in their cognition. Thus, the age-old story of the sly fox from *Thakurmar Jhuli* takes a new meaning for a seven-year-old child because relevant symbols of school, school bus, homework, drawing classes, and teachers are incorporated within the folds of the story in an attempt to make it more relevant for the listener.

In the realm of mass media, while speaking about the domain of performing arts, the aspect of 'suspension of reality' is expressed as the ultimate tool for the popularity of a medium—be it the stage or theatre, television, radio or films. One of the most important aspects that contributes to the popularity of the tales of *Thakurmar Jhuli* is not only the imagination and fantasy that weaves an element of wonder and surprise, but also the amplitude of 'suspension of reality'—with the maximum effect as in any modern media. This concept further aids the conveying of the folk message through various channels of modern media - whether mainstream or traditional, since the adaptation of *Thakurmar Jhuli* has found a place in films (Medium – Bengali, Story – *Saat Bhai Champa*), audio tapes and CDs (Medium – Bengali, Story – *Laalkamol aar Neelkamo*, *Buddhu Bhutum* from *Kalavati Rajkanya* and others), puppet-theatres (Medium – Bengali, Stories – *Buddhu Bhutum* from *Kalavati Rajkanya*, *Laalkamol aar Neelkamol* and others), over children's radio shows narrating the stories with the help of child artistes and finally, the compilation of the entire collection of *Thakurmar Jhuli* into the electronic media with the recent digitization of all the stories into CD-ROMs and DVDs and also their broadcast in the form of animation movies on a popular Bengali television channel (Zee Bangla) on prime time Sunday-morning schedule. The vast popularity of the show is also estimated through the subsequent running of the show, uninterrupted for three years, and still finding a preference even among urban children - many of whom may not have been exposed to the book or the stories at all.

A very significant aspect of the work of Majumdar that is often ignored is the element of symbols of close proximity of a culture, which contributes primarily to the popularity. All the works of Majumdar are titled after a grandparent, who are the fragile yet robust representatives of the bygone era and thereby, a sense of precious heritage being entrusted to a generation. All the tales are expressed in a manner that relates to a specific culture and time and thereby, woven and made into a pattern that relates to the culture of the region. Although certain obvious changes over a period of a century make some of the characters and the situations seem out of place and out-of-date, the familiarity of incidents, locations, and the problems and the problem-solving methods often relate to the modern world as well. This helps in finding easy reference to the familiar surroundings, environments and characters that directly relate to the mind, who are the listeners of the stories.

Like in most folktales, the stories narrated not only convey a message for the young mind, but is also a reflection of the minds of the grown-ups- from whom the stories originate. And thus, the stories do not only find a place of acceptance among the young, but the old as well. Likewise, *Thakurmar Jhuli* is a compilation that is not limited to children alone, but over the years, has found tremendous response among the adults also, where grandparents still narrate stories from the book, albeit, often with inputs from modern lifestyle to make the story more relevant to the listener and thereby, rejuvenating the message of the story. Similarly, when the stories are digitized, the same messages are re-invented for a more recent and younger crowd; thus, the process of acceptance comes easily.

#### Women—the narrators

Women are the main narrators of these stories. Originating from a rural surrounding over a period of time, the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli* are the biggest reflection of the thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, and feelings of the women in rural West Bengal. Thus, it is not surprising that women characters mostly occupy central positions whether it be in the form of a young and beautiful queen or a princess (*Kalavati Rajkanya*, *Ghumanto Puri*, *Kakonmala Kanchonmala*, *Saat Bhai Champa*, *Sheet Basonto*, *Patal Konya Monimala*, *Shonar Kathi Rupor Kathi*.), a man-eating demoness (*Neelkamol aar Laalkamol*, *Daalim Kumar*), a spiteful wife (*Brahmon Brahmoni*), a simple, good-natured village housewife, or an unmarried village girl (*Sukhu aar Dukhu*). This was the simplest medium through which the village women's dreams of becoming queens, princesses or to be off on adventures 'across seven seas and thirteen rivers' could literally come true; in the realm of fantasy. Likewise, these were also cautionary tales that preached submission and docility in women, though, some of them

also oppose this common-held notion and the tales reflect that in the stories of *Kironmala* and *Kakonmala Kanchonmala*. In *Kironmala*, the bold and fearless princess Kironmala goes in search of her brothers and other princes, on a mission where all men have failed and she fights all evil to win at the end. In *Kakonmala Kanchonmala*, the queen Kanchonmala looks after the kingdom and rules over it as her husband- the king is taken ill by a very mysterious disease and finally she manages to find a cure for his disease. However, the common strand that continues through all the tales is that they teach women to be passive, nevertheless, bold enough to take responsibility for their lives and act, defying words of caution, to face any situation if need be.

Close to the lives of the women and also to a culture that prominently ushers away from the nooks of an urban life, the stories also revolve around situations that resemble the everyday duties of a homemaker concerning the regular chores of a household. Thus, the defensive mechanisms a demoness adopts to trouble a 'good-natured wife' is to secretly mix a magical potion in the hair oil while massaging it into the scalp and hair of another woman, which results in a change in the physical form of the victim (*Kakonmala Kanchonmala*); failing to keep a promise to a friend, the whole body of the king is covered with needles as a punishment (*Kakonmala Kanchonmala*); to stall the journey of a prince on his way to rescue a princess, a demoness throws a magical *kantha*<sup>3</sup> at him, which she was sewing, from which innumerable soldiers emanate to capture the prince (*Kalavati Rajkanya*); the goddess *Sashti* bestows the gift of bearing a child to the wife of a Brahmin by instructing her to eat a certain cucumber (*Brahmon Brahmoni*). The simple symbols incorporated all speak of a familiar local flavour: with needles, *kantha*, and cucumber representing details from everyday life. The incorporation of aspects of nature: from trees and shrubs to various animals as a part of regular life also demonstrates to a degree, the psychological conflicts regarding humans and beasts and the relationship between man and nature in a non-urban scenario (*Kalavati Rajkanya*, *Der Anguley*, *Dalim Kumar*, *Patal Kanya Monimala*, *Saat Bhai Champa*, *Sheet Basanto*). At several instances, the beauty of a woman is eulogized as a person with "Kunch Baran Kanya Taar Megh Baran Chul" (A woman as redolent complexioned as the fruit *Kunch* (*Abrus precatorius*<sup>4</sup>) and having hair as dark as the rain clouds) (*Kalavati Rajkanya*), her complexion should be glowing like a full moon and her beauty should be like a golden lotus with golden leaves (*Ghumonto Puri*). In each of these descriptions is woven the interest of fantasy and the reality of expectations that leads the mind to frame its own mirror of reference. These references are not far from our modern times since it is still believed in our subcontinent that for a woman to be beautiful and 'a perfect bride ready for marriage', she needs to have a glowing complexion

with flowing long, black, and dark hair - something in close resemblance to what all modern advertisements of fairness creams, jewellery, clothes and sarees, beauty parlours and even fitness centres and gyms can safely vouch for over the media.

### Children—the Listeners

Quite like the narrators, for the most popular listeners of these stories—the children—decoding the messages is also important. The level of understanding might vary among children and also with the effects of changing times and socio-cultural circumstances, yet they inform us about a very basic strain of life that continues unabated in India, over decades. The tales might be retold and revised with the characters being cast in new light. However, the essence of the messages remains the same. Thus, evil characters might appear dominating and active, whereas good ones might appear static to arouse our sympathy. The interpretation of myths and symbols in folktales also help witness the undiminished spirit of human existence, where often the oppressed or the 'lower classes' struggle bravely for survival. The messages that subtly elucidate duties towards one's family and friends also finds an important note of mention. Thus, *Neelkamol aar Laalkamol* and *Dalim Kumar* speaks about supporting the good against the evil and acting in unison with your siblings and near ones in times of danger; *Kironmala* talks about the bravery needed to defend and save one's loved ones; *Kalavati Rajkanya* speaks about allegiance towards one's parents; *Kakonmala Kanchonmala* shows how one should be true to his promise made to friends; *Sheyal Pandit* articulates the need to be clever enough to survive in a world of shrewd tricksters. Interestingly, some of the stories even advocate the message of living in peace and harmony with one's step-brothers and step-sisters (*Dalim Kumar*, *Neelkamol aar Laalkamol*, *Kalavati Rajkanya*, *Saat Bhai Champa*), in spite of the tremendous dislike of their mothers to share the same household under one roof. Polygamy, being a prevalent norm for a long time in Bengal in certain strata of the society, these stories reflect the anxiety, apprehension, and concern of women sharing the same household with a common husband.

It is also important to understand on behalf of the children, who are being mostly fed by the virtual monopoly of Western children's books, that the Indian version of popular European children's stories can be a way to express that 'there are both multiple versions of reality as well as multiple versions of fantasy.' (Hussain, Zakir, 1967). Thus, the aspect of culture-specific adaptation is also an important element in *Thakurmar Jhuli* and the story of *Sleeping Beauty* finds expression in *Ghumonto Puri*, and *Der Anguley* in *Thumbelina*. For the local audience of West Bengal, several decades back, the process of imparting a local flavour to a global story

might have resulted in their immense popularity. This process also goes to explain how certain symbols are adopted and woven within different cultures and adapted to shape to their own identities.

It needs also to be understood that fantasy is about the fantastic. To all children, it comes as an instinctive understanding that the characters and their performing acts are not real, and thus the immense popularity of fantasy literature. Transformation from the world of speech to written literature, to the digitized versions in New Media—the realm of fantasy world expands considerably lending its own flavour with each transformation. Therefore, it is not wrong to assume that the recent fame of the *Harry Potter* series over the last decade follows a trend of popularity, initiated hundreds of years ago from the pens of the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Anderson, Enid Blyton and of course Dhakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, just to name a few amidst the hard work in various countries by enthusiastic scholars towards preserving and conserving various oral traditions.

Hussain rightly pointed out that stories derived from oral traditions lend themselves to being changed as they move through changing times. This is a significant aspect in modern times, especially in urban nuclear families. The original tales of legends, rites, rituals, and myths were mostly narrated by the grandparents to provide moral and religious instructions to the young minds. In the modern scenario, with the grandparents not being around most of the time and the process of fast-changing lifestyle resulting in the parents hardly finding time to fulfil the role of the grandparents themselves, the written and digital recordings of these fables seem to be the only recourse for children.

The written and subsequent digitization of popular narratives from oral traditions such as *Thakurmar Jhuli*, helps to preserve these stories for children to guide young minds. The immense popularity of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, based on legends and mythological stories from various parts of India is a good pointer in the direction for fascination of contemporary fantasy stories among modern children. However, it is unfortunate that similar other instances of popular children's stories do not find a channel of encouragement from various publishers or media channels. Even the review of children's books appears rarely on print media. On the other hand, shoddily produced literary versions by big publishing houses over the past several decades, call for an immediate need to understand the importance of the human experience and truth at the earthly level that has always formed the basis for children's literature - something that is also present in the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Hopefully, the attempts and subsequent popularity of the digitization of the stories would lead to a preservation of this fast-losing flavour of folk literature.

The elucidation and involvement of codes and symbols being an intrinsic tool for the analysis of folklore, is also important to look into the familiarity of several poems of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, where these poems are woven into each story for conveying a message. This closely follows the path of the age-old oral tradition of *Chhara*<sup>5</sup> (unwritten poems). Poems come to aid in the narration of important incidents, events, and happenings that matter the most within a story where the plot attempts to inform, instruct, and edify the audiences. Although all the stories follow the pattern, it is important to look at the example of the story of *Brahmon* and *Brahmoni*- where the stupid, yet learned, *Brahmon* (a Brahmin pandit) with the help of his clever wife, saves himself from the wrath of the king's punishment as he correctly helps to locate a thief in the palace. A story of immense value that conveys the message of proper use of the powers of the mind in time of need - the *Chhara* inside the story, like the rest in the collection- written in simple, local, expressive language helps to weave a certain flavour of caution to aid in the process of the correct message being conveyed. Later, though the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli* have been adopted by comparatively recent channels of mass media such as puppet shows or digitized versions in the form of films, radio shows, CD-ROMs and DVDs- the stories remain the same and the incorporated *Chharas* are often put to music, resulting in songs. Although several versions of the same story might have different versions of the music of the same *Chhara*, because the music is not fixed and permanent as maybe, in Rabindrasangeet (songs written, composed, and put to music by Rabindranath Tagore), simply because these songs were not composed by a single person and the music used to be a spontaneous response to add to the ambience of the story.

Several attempts at finalizing these lyrics and the more recent addition of the music, also brings to mind another aspect- the process of the transcription of oral tradition materials, constituting an inherent part in the history of ethnographic research. The societies that have been considered as 'primitive' transmitted information with speech and conserved it by means of memory. It is obvious that the connection between orality and literacy has a prominent role in the passage from one kind of narration to the other. Narration, however, is one of the most important ways of human expression and characterizes most acts, from art to science, because human experience is textualized to be transmitted. It is important to quote *Papachristophorou* here, about the same as she explains, "The rules dominating oral speech are different from the ones dictating written speech and it can be presumed that transcription in illiterate societies that produced many narratives, is in fact a kind of adaptation of the products of an oral culture into the needs and ways of a literate culture. The obvious aims of this adaptation are conservation (beyond the limits of geographical borders and human time) and the study of the oral culture

by the literate one. (2005)". Narration is extracted from the narrator's memory, where it was first textualized, and then is passed on from a 'mental' text to a 'written' text. Papachristophorou also mentions that the narration extracted from spontaneous narrations in real conditions, concerning contemporary fieldwork research or isolated archived variant, is rather rare, because mostly the narratives transcribed were previously 'ordered' and produced during an interview, or following a questionnaire, or answering to the collector's demand. In this respect, the collection of *Thakurmar Jhuli* offers a rare example - being a recording of sporadic tales. Not compelled by questionnaires for modern anthropological studies, these stories concern contemporary isolated fieldwork collections. Although the exact method of Majumdar's story collection still remains to be identified, it can be safely concluded that originating at a time that was infused with the excitement of the 1905 *Banga-Bhanga Andolan* (The 1905 Partition of Bengal Movement), and Majumdar himself, being greatly influenced by the great scholar Dineshchandra Sen who had made considerable contribution to the recovery of contemporary Bengali folk literature, the main motive behind the collection remains to conserve and preserve a fraction of the large extent of floating oral literature concerning ritual, fairy, demons, tricksters, humorous and such other tales, which faced the threat of extinction even a hundred years back and nevertheless reflects the very essence of contemporary societies. A right pointer to this anxious thought is reflected in the very words of Rabindranath Tagore, in the introduction of the first volume (1907) - "*Is there anything more Swadeshi than Thakurmar Jhuli, The Grandmother's Bag? But alas, in recent times, even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairytales from the West have become almost the sole recourse of our boys. The Grandmother Companies from our own country are bankrupt. If one rattles their bags, perhaps a copy of Martin's Ethics or Burke's notebooks on the French Revolution might pop out - but where are our princesses, our magic birds- Byangoma and Byangomi or the gem of seven kings that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen oceans?*" The same thought - of an attempt to preserve the oral tradition is also reflected through the carefully drawn sketches by Majumdar himself that was subsequently copied by publishers in later years. The original sketches were drawn with a fat paint brush and printed using a wooden block by Majumdar. Now, even though all claims to the copyright of the matter printed in *Thakurmar Jhuli* is outside legal peripheries, yet, publishers maintain the original drawings, however inappropriate it might seem to the global child of modern days in the age of *Harry Potter*. This lacunae, it seems, is terminated by the subsequent digital media.

But there is also more to digitization of the same collection of stories from *Thakurmar Jhuli*, which also aids in the process of perpetuation of the anxiety expressed by Tagore a hundred years back. The process

of digitization cannot be expressed as part of the introduction of new technologies that help in archiving and permits apparently, more neutral data analyses, for example, the key words, as they are not re-creating or adding to the already existing information but merely referring to the main collection of stories that is available in *Thakurmar Jhuli*. However, in the process of transcribing and also producing the stories through more recent additions of digital technology for a young audience in modern times, the transcriber is doing the work of an oral narrator, producing messages, reminding the 'oral originals' (Papachristophorou), and at the same time, continuously acting as perpetrators of the age-old anxiety plaguing most oral traditions, folktales, legends, anecdotes, mythological stories, and rites and ritual messages and stories in recent times to be left forgotten in the process of socio-cultural changes.

### Conclusion

Quite like the resemblances of *Ghumonto Puri* with *Sleeping Beauty* and *Der Anguley* with *Thumbelina*, which speaks of local flavours of global folktales, *The Magic Key* collection of stories of Dr. Zakir Hussain with six stories for children written in Urdu is a good example to show the importance of the survival of folktales across geographical boundaries. Mention may be made here of the story *Poori Jo Kadhai Mein Se Nikal Ke Bhagi*, which is a retold version of European fables such as *The Gingerbread Man*. The localized flavour and language were their fresh appeal. Another aspect of *The Magic Key* series of stories is also the fact that these were woven around small towns and village India, written and thus reflecting a time and socio-cultural circumstance away from modern life. Often some of these realities may not be directly relevant to the children of urbanized modern India, yet they remain to be a prominent part of our lives. These stories, thereby, can act to familiarize these circumstances in a casual manner. Also, some of the ideas reflected through the stories are more universal: a desire for freedom, fulfilling of a promise, pride and its proverbial fall. Thus, the messages find a way into the minds of modern children for its simple diversity and plurality that needs to be acknowledged in today's world (Hussain, Zakir, 1967).

*Thakurmar Jhuli* acts as an important body of code of messages for the *punjabati* (pious), chaste, virtuous femininity with complete devotion to the family on one hand, and also as set of symbols for the correct and wrong methods of existence and the good virtues of life on the other hand. Rightfully, culture-specific embedded codes and symbols are constructed out of the cultural mosaic and represents man-nature relationships and more often than not- the laws of nature. However, for a better understanding of culture-specific symbols, one needs to analyse and explore each story; the present paper is merely a small ray of positive

beacon in the direction which needs to be supplemented in the future with exhaustive and meticulous work. The symbols of reference as advocated within the audio-visual messages also keep in mind to supplement the main ethos with recent frames of references. This is an inevitable event to occur in the age of *Harry Potter*, where people often are oblivious to similar works of older authors such as Enid Blyton. With the help of modern media and New Media, some of these older authors and their works and other tales from oral tradition have found a place of resurrection, such as the works of J.R. R. Tolkien and *The Tales from the Arabian Nights*. However, though the channel of mass media changes from print to audio-visual inferences, the main reference in all of these New Media versions remains true to its very base, yet subtly supplementing more recent and relevant symbols of references. Thus, in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the demons and demonesses in the CDs and DVDs look more subtle than the ones which were conjured by the illustrator for the first edition of *Thakurmar Jhuli* a hundred years back; the prince and princesses look more 'human' rather than like Gods and Goddesses as described in the stories, the exotic and enchanting gardens, lakes, rivers, and seas resemble pictures of any modern forest sanctuaries or gardens, rather than an age-old, impenetrable frightening forest as often described in *Thakurmar Jhuli*; the fairies, gnomes, and angels resemble an ordinary young boy or a girl of modern times, instead of looking exotic in appearance and last but not the least, in the age of television channels such as National Geographic, Discovery, and Animal Planet, the animals look anatomically corrected, away from the sphere of the magical descriptions found in *Thakurmar Jhuli*. However, as mentioned earlier, technological advancement has not tampered with the main messages within the stories which remain true to its very essence, making the collection of *Thakurmar Jhuli* popular even in recent times. Quoting VC Bhalotia, CEO of a Kolkata-based animation company, Dawsen Infotech, whose rendition of *Thakurmar Jhuli* runs strong among the modern young audience with immense popularity - "*Thakurmar Jhuli* represents the fascination of Indian audiences towards Indian content". This not only helps in giving new versions of the old text, but the visual messages add to the essence of sketching these important narratives with the help of media that relate best to a fast-changing global world and also act as a connecting link between the world of oral tradition and written speech within specific localities. Preserved over a period of time, these narratives serve as instruments of re-inventing culture. They are critical and pleasurable and is an imperative need in a fast-changing and developing global world to bring to the rural and the urban audience - both young and old - a lifelong vision of ethos.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (1877-1957) was born in modern Bangladesh - East Bengal of yesteryears - in the district of Mymensingh. The district has a rich history of folk narratives, including *Mymensingh Geetikas*, which are ballad-like songs. He was greatly influenced by the vigour and enthusiasm shown by the then great scholar Dineshchandra Sen in the recovery of Bengali folk literature in contemporary times.

<sup>2</sup> The stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, totally there are 17 stories and poems in the collection. The four categories contain six, four, four and three tales and poems respectively. It is interesting to note those national leaders and scholars who eulogized the work of Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar: Sri Aurobindo, Chittaranjan Das, Sir Surendranath Banerjee, Akshay Kumar Maitra, and Dineshchandra Sen, and also excerpts of reviews from reputed international and national publications such as *The Times, London, The Bande Mataram, The Bengalee, The Amritabazar Patrika, Hitavadi, and Bangabashi*. Excerpts of the comments and reviews were included in the following reprinted versions of the book after the first edition and are witnessed even now. These stories are available in print in the form of books with the original drawings of Majumdar. It is also available as children's comic books, CD-ROMs and DVDs, audio tapes, and audio CDs.

<sup>3</sup> *Kantha* is a hand-woven quilt made of cloth, often ornate with multi-coloured, sewed designs. It is an art and craft native to Bengal. They are often a great work of art and the intricate designs help demonstrate the adroit craftsmanship and skills of the women - who were and still are - the main creators of *kantha*.

<sup>4</sup> Kunch is the local name of a fruit in West Bengal. The plant is *Abrus precatorius* L. (Leguminosae). It is commonly known in India as Indian Licorice, Jequirity, *gunja* (Sanskrit and Marathi), *ghungchi* and *rati* (Hindi) and *kunni* (Malayalam). It is indigenously found throughout India, even at altitudes of 1,200m on the outer Himalayas. It is now naturalized in all tropical countries. This plant species is propagated through seeds.

<sup>5</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya (*Banglar Lok Samskriti*, 1927) speaks of three main types of *Chhara* in West Bengal: the ones used by mothers to help them manage their children - whether in the form of coaxing them to sleep, or cajoling them to eat or teaching them a lesson to distinguish between the good and the bad in life. This type is also referred to as the 'Cradle Song'. The other type of *Chhara* is the one written and narrated by considerably older children. This also includes the large proportion of *Chharas* which surround the explanation to young girls of the importance of marriage - especially originating at a time when the ritual of child marriage was the prevalent norm of the age. Most young girls used to be scared of the idea of marriage which resulted in the immediate detachment from one's parent. The third type of *Chhara* surrounds the immense treasure of magical chants which are still used to conjure mystical happenings, including conjuring rains during a drought, curing a person suffering from snake or tiger bites, seeking welfare of a farmer-husband or a fisherman-husband by the womenfolk at home as he goes out to work. Although by no means exhaustive, this explains fairly well the broader category of the genre of *Chhara* - having an intrinsic folk element as its basis of origin and also survival.

**Some illustrations from the original printed publication and the same rendition of concepts and characters in recent versions of digital media in animation and films**



**FIG:-1** The crocodile from the story *Sheyal Pandit* taking his children to the school of the Sly fox- animation, 2005-2007. Language- Bengali. Computer animation



**FIG:-2** The crocodile from the story *Sheyal Pandit* on his way to the school of the sly fox- original print publication, 1907. Drawing by Majumdar



**FIG:-3** The modern demon confronts a character in one of the stories, 2005-2007. Language- Bengali. Computer animation



**FIG:-4** The illustration of a demon from the original publication confronting a character in one of the stories, 1907. Drawing by Majumdar



FIG:-5 The demon queen in a comic-book version of *Neelkamol aar Laalkamol* of *Thakurmar Jhuli* - 2007. Language- Bengali. Sketch by- Satyajit



[ জিভ লক লক ]

FIG:-6 The demon queen in the original print story of *Neelkamol aar Laalkamol* of *Thakurmar Jhuli* -1907. Drawing by Majumdar



FIG:-7 The Brahmin pandit and his wife quarrelling in *Brahmon aar Brahmoni*, 2007- in a comic-book version of *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Language- Bengali. Sketch by- Satyajit



[ হলেন বনগামী ]

FIG:-8 The Brahmin pandit and his wife quarrelling in the original drawing of Majumdar in *Brahmon aar Brahmoni*. Drawing by Majumdar



FIG:-9 The poster of the Bengali movie- Saat Bhai Champa (1978)  
 Direction- Chitrasarathi  
 Production- Chitrasarathi  
 Music- Raghunath Das  
 Actors- Bishwajeet, Sandhya Roy, Bishwanath Chattopadhyay  
 Language- Bengali

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