

# Sadhanbabu's Friends

Science Fiction in Bengal from 1882-1961

DEBJANI SENGUPTA

*Lazy servants cause Sadhanbabu's ire.  
Babu says, "Servants out, robots the answer".  
Robot inmate, Babu's in a state,  
Robot says, "Hey", Babu replies, "Master".*

(Limerick by Satyajit Ray)

Science fiction in Bengal had always been fiction written for children, but not necessarily with childish concerns. The pulp category of SF in the 1920s and 30s in the West, with the vulgarity of titles, covers and blurbs is remarkably absent in the variety in Bangla, probably because of the colonised Bengali's awe and respect for western science and technology. For many of the early practitioners of the genre, science fiction was "the literature of the Technological era".<sup>1</sup> The first science fiction to be written in Bengal was in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the effects of the Industrial Revolution were beginning to be felt with the rapid rate of technological change, something noticed in one lifetime. For the urban elite of Calcutta, science stories were a kind of myth formation of the industrial age. Science was perceived as essentially 'Western', an attribute of European civilisation. Here I propose to see how a literary genre, based entirely on premises of science and technology, gained popularity and thereby accommodated Western science into a local worldview. This is very much a part of the intellectual discourse of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The advent of Western science began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Calcutta with the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 and the teaching of mathematics, including trigonometry. The earlier contribution of the Asiatic Society (estd. 1784), cannot be denied in developing a scientific spirit as well, although most of its members were Europeans.<sup>2</sup> One of the students of Hindu College, later called Presidency College, was Akshaykumar Dutta (1820-1886) who distinguished himself as a rationalist and one of the first writers in Bangla on scientific subjects. Presidency College produced several mathematicians like Gurudas Bannerjee and Ashutosh Mukherjee who earned their livelihoods from law rather than science. Two men who were responsible for an advancement of the scientific temperament in the city were Mahendralal Sircar (1833-1904) and Ashutosh Mukherjee (1864-1924). Sircar

was responsible for the establishment of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science in 1876. One of the most notable of the scientists of the age was Jagadishchandra Bose (1858-1937), Professor of Physics at the Presidency College and a pioneer in the research on electromagnetic waves. The scientific and rational temperament was also aided by the growth of two schools of thought that had taken root in Calcutta – the Derozians had inspired rationality and scientific temperament much beyond their numbers, and the Brahmo movement, though a reformist one, had also inspired a similar creed. In spite of the deficiencies in the teaching and research of science in schools and colleges, science was increasingly gaining popularity among the educated elite. This was because of a rapid mechanisation of English businesses by the 1880s that led to a growing desire amongst the colonised Bengali to master these alien technologies and sciences, perceived as a remedy against superstitions and ignorance, and a way in which modernity could be mastered and understood. Economic factors and technological progresses interacted and interpenetrated in a variety of ways. This in turn affected the way people began to perceive the world around them. The interface between science, technology and culture could be duly seen reflected in literature.<sup>3</sup>

Asimov's statement that "true science fiction could not really exist until people understood the rationalism of science and began to use it with respect in their stories" is actually true for the first science fiction written in Bangla. This was Hemlal Dutta's *Rahashya* ("The Mystery") that was published in two installments in 1882 in the pictorial magazine *Bigyan Darpan*, brought out by Jogendra Sadhu. The story revolved around the protagonist Nagendra's visit to a friend's house, a mansion completely automated and where technology is deified. Automatic doorbell, burglar alarms, brushes that clean suits mechanically are some of the innovations described in the story, and the tone is of wonder at the rapid automation of human lives. Jagadishchandra Bose's story *Palatak Tufan* ("The Runaway Storm") in 1886 used the rationality of scientific theory to weave a tale of a storm at sea that is controlled by dropping a bottle of hair oil on the waves.

In 1879, Jagadananda Roy, an eminent science writer published *Shukra Bhraman* ("Travels to Jupiter"), though it had been written twenty-two years earlier. This story is of particular interest to literary historians. Jagadananda describes an interstellar journey and visit to another planet. His description of the alien creatures that are seen in Uranus uses evolutionary theory about the origins of man: "They resembled our apes to a large extent. Their bodies were covered with dense black fur. Their heads were larger in comparison with their bodies, limbs sported long nails and they were completely naked". This story was published a decade before H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1889) in which Wells describes the aliens from Mars.

Sukumar Roy (1887-1923) was probably inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* when he wrote *Heshoram Hushiyarer Diary* ("The Diary Of Heshoram Hushiar"). Like Jagadananda, Sukumar was also a prolific writer on scientific and technological subjects explaining natural phenomena or new advances in technology to young readers. *Heshoram* is quite unlike any science fiction written in the West. It is a spoof on the genre because Sukumar is poking fun at the propensity of the scientist to name things, and that too in long-winded Latin words. He seems to be playing around the fact that names are arbitrarily con-

ferred upon things by humans for their own convenience, and suggests that the name of a thing may somehow be intrinsically connected to its nature. So the first creature that Heshoram meets in the course of his journey through the Bandakush Mountains is a "gom-ratharium" (*gomra* in Bangla means someone of irritable temperament), a creature that sported a long woebegone face and an extremely cross expression. Soon the company comes upon another peculiar animal, not to be found in any textbook of natural sciences. They hear a terrible yowl, a sound between the cries of a "number of kites and owls" and find an animal "that was neither an alligator, nor a snake, nor a fish but resembled to a certain extent all three". His howls make Heshoram name him "Chillanosaurus" (*chillano* means to shout). Although just an extract, *Heshoram Hushiyarer Diary* is quite unlike anything written even in Bangla.

Premendra Mitra (1904-1988) was one of Bengal's most famous practitioners of SF. Poet, novelist, short-story writer, he also wrote brilliant and innovative science fiction. He had himself stated that SF not only talked of utopias, but that the best of them were based on firm scientific temperaments and facts. Two of his most well known stories are *Piprey Puran* ("The Story of the Ants") and *Mangalbairi* ("The Martian Enemies"). *Piprey Puran* begins with a dislocation of time from present reality: "This happened many years ago. Everything was strange then... The Earth was beautiful to look at! The ground was covered with soft green grass. Countless varieties of plants sported many hued flowers, and at night the sky was covered with thousands of stars – it was a wonderful sight". This displacement, when our present has become a thing of the past, introduces a comic note in an otherwise sombre story. This future world, now real, is overrun with Ants, huge in size, intelligent and organised. They have defeated the humans in battle, having taken them completely unawares. When humans were busy fighting each other, the Ants had begun their preparations to take over the planet. Six feet tall, they had emerged from their hideouts in the Andes Mountain and had begun their assault in the year 7757. One by one the cities of Peru, Venezuela and Ecuador came down like blocks of cards. A cavalcade of monstrous Ants had completely surrounded the few remaining humans and had annihilated them. The only man who escaped unscathed was Don Perito who escaped to Mexico. He was the first human to describe the destruction wrought by the Ants. Within a few years the Ants had taken over Guyana, Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina. The weapon of mass destruction that they used was a powerful bomb attached to the body of an Ant. They also used advanced technological weapons. In the battle that they waged with the humans, the Ants used a kind of searching, powerful light, somewhat green in colour. This light took away human sight in an instant. Under this onslaught all the nations forgot their enmity and came together to fight the common enemy.

This story of the battle of the Ants and Humans is broken into small sub-sections with first-person narrations. The first narrator is the storyteller who begins the story. Soon it is broken by the diary of Asesh Roy, an explorer who had first seen the Ants in 6757. The third narration is by Señor Sabatini, a famous writer of Rio de Janeiro who describes the third deadly attack by the Ants. The fourth and final narration is by Sukhomoy Sarkar, who was imprisoned by the Ants for five years and who gives the most comprehensive details of the social and economic organisation of the Ants. These breaks in the narrative structure

create very interesting fissures in an otherwise continuous story. They not only make the impossible appear possible (because of 'eye-witness' accounts), but give a certain detachment to the narrator so as to emphasize the moral of his tale. This moral is to be found in comparing the Ants with humans, in which the humans are perhaps found wanting. The description by Sukhomoy Sarkar of the society of Ants makes this clear. The Ants live in an advanced democracy where there are no differences in wealth. What they do have are Ants of differing abilities. The intelligent Ants provide the scientific and technological know-how and are strategists who look after the state. They are highly advanced compared to humans in knowledge and social structures, and have a strict sense of justice.

The moral that we see in *Piprey Puran* can also be seen in *Mangalbairi*. When the Earth is attacked by Martians who poison its entire ecosystem by planting a new kind of seed that grows into a deadly flora that spreads like wildfire, all nations are united to fight this common enemy. "In this hour of danger... the one cause of happiness is that... humans have forgotten enmity as if by some magic. The whole world is united today". In both these stories Mitra hints at a time when the very existence of humans will be endangered, when common flowers and trees will be a thing of the past.

Another of Mitra's theme is the way we use science. Science is often misused out of greed or fear, and the character of Ghanashyam Das (Ghanada) who foils all such attempts is indeed memorable. He first appeared in a story called *Mosha* ("Mosquito" 1945) in which a mad scientist creates a new strain of mosquito, deadly and invincible. Ghanada's timely appearance saves mankind from this virulent breed. By one slap of his powerful hands Ghanada kills this enemy of man. Ghanada is famous for his tall stories, but this lanky, prankster also appears full of his own brand of courage and curiosity. Ghanada is a personification of Premendra Mitra's humanistic ideology and moral universe. Without greed and scrupulously honest, Ghanada is continually striving to rescue mankind from the apocalyptic failure of science. He is forever getting into escapades that make special demands on his human heart and virtues. He is sometimes outrageous in his tall stories but never unbelievable. This perhaps accounts for the way in which he has occupied a special place in the minds of SF readers in Bengal.

In collections of stories like *Ghanadar Galpa* ("Stories of Ghanada") and *Abar Ghanada* ("Ghanada Again") we see this quintessential Bengali travelling to space in search of a Black Hole, or diving under seas to discover the mysterious origin of the universe. *Mangal Grahey Ghanada* ("Ghanada in Mars") is an unusual novel featuring this uncharacteristic hero because it is one of the few Bengali SF stories that is concerned with gender. Ghanada is forced to travel to Mars with the mad scientist Ludvic where he discovers an even more advanced civilisation than ours. But their sophisticated technology has not stopped the Martians from fighting each other, and the only inhabitants of Mars now are a few Martian females. Ghanada comes to their rescue. In order to save their race he leaves behind Batukeshwar, the servant of a friend, exiling him to Mars for a good cause. The motif of the faithful retainer, seen in this story as well as in others, are pointers to the class relations in the real world. The working of power within these relations creates a subtext in which these stories can be read.

Two other contemporaries of Mitra who became popular SF writers in the 1940s and

50s were Hemendrakumar Roy and Khitindranarayan Bhattacharya. Roy's *Kacher Coffin* ("The Glass Coffin") and *Amanushik Manush* ("The Super Human") have racy narratives and utopian visions. Chandrasen – the protagonist in *Amanushik Manush* – after years of experiments creates a breed of super humans who describe themselves in these terms: We are not incomplete or disabled like you. Our minds are not serving our bodies, they rule over them. We do not possess a single bone, because they are unnecessary. We can do what we like with this body of ours. Khitindranarayan's *Akasher Galpa* ("The Story of the Sky"), *Luptodhan* ("The Hidden Treasure") and *Dhumketu* ("The Meteor") are remarkable in their imaginative use of scientific facts. He states categorically that a science fiction writer does not simply evoke the curiosity of his readers, he "is also responsible to make them scientific minded, attract them to the magical powers of science so that they begin to respect it".<sup>4</sup> This view is consistent with the ways in which science fiction was often used by some of these writers as a didactic means of mediating modern science and disseminating knowledge, similar to certain conceptions of science fiction prevalent in the West.

Satyajit Ray created Professor Shanku in 1961. The first SF featuring this eccentric hero was written for the magazine *Sandesh* and was called *Byomjatrir Diary* ("The Diary of the Space Traveller"). All thirty-eight complete and two incomplete diaries (the last one came out in 1992) narrate the fantastic world of Shanku's adventures, inventions and travels. Most of these stories are more than science fiction. They are also travelogues, fantasy tales, tales of adventure and romance. As a fictional character Professor Shanku is tremendously real. He is courageous yet forgetful, inquisitive yet self-controlled. His sense of humour makes him peculiarly human and his list of inventions is impressive. Anihiline, Miracural, Omniscope, Snuffgun, Mangorange, Camerapid, Linguagraph – the list is long and impressive. Some are drugs, some gadgets, some machines, but they all have human purposes and use. None are allowed to reign over or be more powerful than the human mind and heart that invented them. Some of Shanku's machines take on human characteristics and are transformed from mere machines to the companions that humans have always craved for. This is amply illustrated in the very first diary. It starts by describing his efforts to build a rocket. The first one that he had built was unsuccessful and had come down on his neighbour Abinashbabu's radish patch. Abinashbabu had no sympathy for Shanku; science and scientists made him yawn. He would come up to Shanku and urge him to set off the rocket for Diwali so that the neighbourhood children could be suitably entertained. Shanku wants to punish this levity and drops his latest invention in his guest's tea. This is a small pill, made after the fashion of the *Jimbhranastra* described in the *Mahabharata*. This pill does not only make one yawn, it makes one see nightmares. Before giving a dose to his neighbour, Shanku had tried a quarter bit on himself. In the morning, half of his beard had turned grey from the effect of his dreams. Shanku's world is a real world, a human world. In his preparations for the space journey he has decided to take his cat Newton with him. For that he has invented a fish-pill. "Today I tested the fish-pill by leaving it next to a piece of fish. Newton ate the pill. No more problems! Now all I have to do is make his suit and helmet". Two more of Shanku's companions in his space travel will be

We are not incomplete or disabled like you. Our minds are not serving our bodies, they rule over them. We do not possess a single bone, because they are unnecessary. We can do what we like with this body of ours.

Prahlad and Bidhusekhar. Prahlad has been his servant for twenty-seven years. Unintelligent but loyal, unimaginative but brave, Prahlad will make a good companion because Shanku believes those qualities will be useful in an emergency. Bidhusekhar is Shanku's robot. The first entry on him is worth a longer look.

"For the last few days I can hear Bidhusekhar making a 'ga-ga' sound. This is strange in itself because he is not supposed to utter a sound. He is a machine, he must do whatever he is told, the only sound that he is supposed to make is the clang of metals when he moves... I know he has no ability to think nor does he possess any intelligence. But now I can see a difference in him". Shanku then goes on to describe how he had tried to invent a new compound as a material for his rocket. He had mixed mushroom, snakeskin and the egg-shell of a tortoise and just when he was about to mix Tantrum Boropacsinate, he had heard a great din behind him. He saw Bidhusekhar shaking his head vigorously as if he was saying "No". Every time Shanku picked up Tantrum the same clatter ensued. When he decided to try another chemical called Velosilica, Bidhusekhar started nodding his head in agreement. That his robot had unimaginable human characteristics became evident to Shanku another time when he made Prahlad wear his spacesuit. "Today I called Prahlad to the laboratory to try out his suit and his helmet. He was in splits. To say the truth even I felt like laughing at this sight as well as his mannerisms. Just at this moment I heard a metallic guffaw and turned to see Bidhusekhar sitting in his chair swaying and making a new sound. There can be only one meaning to that sound. Bidhusekhar was also laughing at Prahlad".

Most of Ray's intended audience was undoubtedly young readers. This was not a limitation as some SF practitioners have thought. The poet and SF writer Thomas M. Disch has propounded that most of what was "radically wrong with science fiction, as well as a good part of what was right" was that SF was a branch of children's literature. It operated under certain limitations, "intellectually, emotionally, and morally" because children remained outside certain "crucial aspects of adult experience... such as sex and love... the nature of the class system and the real exercise of power within that system".<sup>5</sup> Disch goes on to state that genre fiction is shaped more by the demands of the audience than by the creative will of its writers.

Mitra's tales of extraterrestrial Martians as well as Ray's fictional narrative of Shanku's exploits are actually the exact reverse of these theorisations. Although hugely popular and often bestsellers, both these writers express a certain world-view through their fiction that is an integral part of how science is decimated and often looked at in the public domain in Bengal. Science is both a 'narrative of progress', a sign of modernity during the period of colonisation, and also a creator of a space in which a critique of modernity can be accommodated. This adjustment of science and scientific temperament can be seen in the profusion of articles and essays on science that were written during colonial times. But in the genre of SF at least we see a critique of Western science and 'progress'. The eccentric Professor Shanku's adventures point at one truth again and again. Machines must serve humans, and not the other way round. Talent is all very well, but that talent must be nurtured by society or it imposes a terrible burden on the bearer.

In the story *Professor Shanku O Khoka* ("Professor Shanku and The Boy") we see an appraisal of science and society that is extremely satirical. The Boy, a four-year-old child of

a post-office clerk, is a prodigy. He became one after he fell and hurt his head. Professor Shanku is amazed at his extraordinary knowledge of mathematics, geography, anatomy and physics. He is able to speak of Einstein's equation, Shanku's polar rebellion theory, name the highest mountain in the world and recite Hamlet's famous monologue. This ability however makes him a sensation overnight much to Shanku's disgust. People flock to see the child prodigy and things become uncontrollable when the child himself decides to put an end to it. He creeps down to Shanku's laboratory one night and drinks a portion of Anihilin, a deadly acid discovered by Shanku. He does not die but falls into a deep sleep. When the boy wakes he is a normal four-year-old asking for his mother.

A comparison between the science fiction of Maharashtra and of Bengal might be interesting here. Like many of the stories written in Marathi, the SF tales in Bangla have a male scientist as narrator. Both literatures use the stereotype of a lonesome individual in the service of science. But unlike the Marathi counterpart, the heroes in Bangla do not exist in social isolation: they have no wife or family but they have pets, friends, neighbours and colleagues with whom they interact. There is also another point of difference between Marathi and Bangla science fiction writing. The world of the scientist, unlike the one in Marathi, is not "sterilised and remystified".<sup>6</sup> It is a world where a robot is called lovingly by name and accorded the status of a friend. It is a world accessible to its young readers, a utopian world full of possibilities, and real in its human concerns.

## NOTES

1. Campbell, John W.'s Introduction to his *The Astounding Science Fiction Anthology* (1952). The lone exception was Radhanath Sikdar (1813-1870) a Derozian and a mathematician.
2. I am indebted to some of the essays in Chattopadhyaya, D.P. *Science, Technology, Philosophy and Culture (Project of History of Indian Science Vol. 6, 1996)*.
3. Quoted in Bal, Robin *Banglay Bigyan Charcha* (Shomila Press, 1999, Kolkata) p. 52; translation mine.
4. Quoted in Broderick, Damien *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (Routledge, 1995, London) p. 8.
5. Harder, Hans "Indian and International: Some Examples Of Marathi Science Fiction Writing" (in *South Asia Research* Vol. 21, No. 1 Sage, 2001, New Delhi).
6. All translations of Bangla texts are mine.

