FOREWORD

There are few people who have not been subjected to the command, "Tell me a story," and those who, on such occasions, find pleasure in trying to make children happy, rack their brains to find something new to tell. They desire that their story should contain nothing but thoughts full of good-will and encouragement to follow good examples. In the telling of the story it is natural to picture the details of the scene according to the story-teller's own experience. Such is the incentive from which the folk-tale is born.

To those of us who come from the West, it comes as a pleasing surprise to find in the folk-tales of India scenes and incidents which are familiar to us from our early reading of Grimm's Fairy Tales and Hans Anderson's Fairy Tales. This similarity early attracted the attention of scholars and there have been controversies as to the original sources of tales common to East and West: Sir William Jones and the early Sanskrit scholars who worked with him, found two collections of these tales so complete as to leave no further doubt that the origin was, as had been surmised, in the East. This discovery made it
clear that those tales, with which we are all so familiar, had their origin not later than the early days of the Christian era; and there were many who saw in the incidents and the teaching of the tales the influence of the life and teaching of the Lord Buddha and his disciples. For long it was supposed, therefore, that the tales had had their origin in the ancient kingdom of Magadha and that they might have been composed by the followers of the Lord Buddha himself. More recently, however, the Jataka collection of the Buddhist stories was discovered and amongst the carvings on the railings round the Bharhut stupa—scenes from these stories were recognised. As the carving dates from 250 to 200 B.C., the origin of the tales is now believed to be not later than the time when Buddha lived about the 5th century, B.C., and it is recognised that the features which seemed to prove a Buddhist origin are really alterations made to suit the Buddhist doctrine. It is not likely that materials will come to light to enable us to trace the origin still further back, but who can say when these tales were first conceived?

The attempts to trace the source of the tales have brought to light hidden knowledge. The history of the Indian people in these ancient days is but imperfectly known, but the tales are a mirror of the customs and the thoughts of the people and, as such, are of far greater value
to us than the dates and the names of a few individuals—the dry bones of history. It needs but a glance at the pictures of the Bharhut carvings in the book of Jataka stories edited by Francis and Thomas to enable us to picture the life of the people in those times—and from these little carvings, we can create a mental picture of the incidents in the other tales; and the picture is so very like the scenes we see every day. Human nature changes little, and the primitive emotions are depicted on men’s faces now as they were then. In India there has been little change in the environment of village life for thousands of years and often little change in the fashion of the simple dress of the villager. In the West, on the other hand, the environment of to-day is so different from that of ages gone by that our pictures of folk tales have often grotesque appearance almost entirely absent in India. The monkey, the elephant, the fighting ram of the Bharhut carvings have in no way changed, and their environment is the same.

In these lectures, Mr. Dineshchandra Sen gives us an interesting account of the history of some of these fables and he puts forward a fascinating suggestion that possibly the tales of the Middle Kingdom were carried by means of the ships which sailed from the coasts of Bengal to the ports of the Persian Gulf and that thus
they travelled, with those who transported the merchandise, to far away ports of Europe—long before any translations of the Panchatantra or Hitopadesa or translations like our fables of Pilpai were known.

In the following lectures, our attention is directed in particular to Bengal, and the examples given afford a delightful picture of village life in that Province. When I read in the first lecture the author’s enthusiastic appreciation of Bengal folk tales, the thought crossed my mind that possibly the Rai Sahib’s patriotism had affected his judgment: but after I had read the translation of the beautiful story of Malanchamala, I went back to the first lecture and I knew that what he said was true.

Everyone who reads this Bengali folk-tale will endorse what he says. It is a tale of which a nation might well be proud: it has all the attributes of a beautiful lyric: it contains a conception of purity and love which evince a high state of civilization. The rural scenes are full of the joy of life. One cannot but feel the fresh air of the morning when the King rides out to the mango grove: one shudders at the scene round the funeral pyre: the forest is gloomy in the darkness but fresh and smiling in the sunshine. Nothing could be more simple or charming than the account of the life in the cottage
of the flower woman: I have never read anything which lead me to such an understanding of the sublimity of the conception of the ideal Hindu wife, as I have obtained from the reading of the story of Malanchamala. The interest never flags. No one who begins the story can rest till he has reached the end. The teaching too is sublime.

I hope Rai Sahib Dineshchandra Sen will be able to do a further service to literature by making a collection of Bengali folk tales. Such a collection would help the people of the West to get nearer to the people of Bengal. There are so many barriers. Good will is often present, but good will must be supported by knowledge. It is easy to obtain some knowledge by studying the history and the literature of the country and by reading novels such as those of Bankim Chandra, but here is a door that has been little more than pushed ajar by Lalbihari De, and from the evidence we have in these lectures, I feel sure the author could open it for us. Our childhood is spent under very different conditions of environment. When we read tales such as Malanchamala it brings us much nearer to understanding, and if we could only learn to know each other's childhood, there would be less anxiety regarding our understanding later on.
I am grateful to the author for having asked me to write this introduction. I hope it may have the effect of bringing the lectures to the notice of some who might not otherwise have been led to a knowledge of the Folk Tales of Bengal.

W. R. GOURLAY.

The 18th January, 1920.
PREFACE

My first course of lectures as Ramtanu Lahiri Research Fellow of the Calcutta University in the history of Bengali Language and Literature, delivered in 1914, was published under the title of Chaitanya and his Companions in 1917. The present volume contains my Fellowship lectures delivered in 1917. From 1914 to 1919, I delivered six courses of such lectures; each course, complete in 12 lectures, forms a volume of the size of this book. As most of these lectures have not yet been published and as there is no certainty about the time of their publication, I owe it to the public to refresh their memory about what they heard long ago, by mentioning the subjects treated in them.

1. Chaitanya and his Companions, delivered in 1914.

2. The second course of my lectures delivered in 1915 treats of the following subjects:

   (a) Glimpses of Bengal History from old Bengali Literature.

   (b) Songs and Ballads of the Buddhistic period.

   (c) Chandidāsa.

   (d) Desertion of Nadia by Chaitanya.

   (e) Humour in old Bengali poetry.
3. The Bengali Rāmāyaṇas. In these lectures, delivered in 1916, I tried to prove that some of the legends and stories about Rāma, Rāvana, and Hanumāna, now found incorporated in the various versions of the Bengali Rāmāyaṇas by different authors, are of a prehistoric origin, probably anterior to Vālmiki’s epic. It is evident that these Bengali authors did not follow too closely the foot-steps of Vālmiki, but introduced indigenous elements in them not contained in the Sanskrit epic.

4. The Folk Literature of Bengal—delivered in 1917.

5. The forces that developed our early literature—delivered in 1918.

6. Chaitanya and his Age—1919.

I have to offer a word of explanation for the publication of my fourth course of lectures delivered in 1917 before the preceding courses of such lectures, delivered in 1915 and in 1916 respectively, have seen the light. An active research is going on in the field of old Bengali Literature and new materials are being made available to us every year. The history of our language and literature no longer presents a fossilized form, but by the powerful impetus given to it by Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, it is fast invading “fresh fields and pastures new” and changing shapes. Some portions of my previous lectures have had to be revised and
re-written in the light of the latest discoveries. Hence those lectures that are found ready at the moment are made over to the press while others have to be held up.

In the present treatise I have for the first time brought to the notice of scholars considerable materials about Bengali folk-tales chiefly those current amongst the Mahomedans of the lower Gangetic valley. It has been a surprise to us to find that stories of Rūpamālā, Kānchamālā, Madhumālā, Pūṣpamālā, etc., are not only the heritage of Hindu children but also of their Moslem cousins who have been listening to these nursery and fairy tales, recited to them by their grand-mothers, from a very remote historical period which I have tried to prove to be much anterior to the Islamic conquest. The Hindu and Buddhistic converts who gave up their faith in the older religions did not forego their attachment to these folk-tales in which legends of Buddhist and Hindu gods are sometimes closely intermixed. The incantation and mantras used by Moslem Fakirs and physicians for curing diseases and the hymns of Lakshmi—the harvest-goddess—recited by a class of Mahomedan mendicants—are full of references to gods of the Hindu and Buddhistic pantheons, and I have tried to trace the continuity of this folklore and folk-wisdom current amongst Mahomedans, from a remote time when they had
not yet accepted Islam but had been Buddhists or Hindus.

These lectures on the Folk Literature of Bengal are by no means exhaustive. I have not touched the pastoral poetry and boatmen's songs with which the whole air of rural Bengal is still resonant—not her cities and towns, but her backward villages, still lovely with the dark-blue foliage of mango-groves and rich in her summer bloom, where the fierce rays of materialistic civilization have not yet entered to dispel the charm of rural poetry. These songs and pastoral poetry open a vista showing the perspective of ages long gone by. If I find an opportunity I will deal with this fascinating subject in a future course of lectures.

A further enquiry on the lines of these lectures made by me has brought to light several very important facts in regard to the Bengali folk tales. There is a mere hint in this work that some of our old folk stories are interspersed with bits of poetical lines rendered into prose, which have been evidently current amongst our woman-folk from a remote antiquity. I have proved in another course of my lectures that some of the old stories are so fully replete with these poetical bits, cleverly strung together and put in the midst of a prose style, that the work of the goddess of Parnassus lies, as it were, hidden from our view, until the
scrutinising eye of a scholar detects them. The language of these half-verses is generally very ancient and reminds one of the discovery made by Dr. E. W. Hopkins of the existence of Vedic hymnology in the great epic of the Mahābhārata.

I can scarcely suppress a feeling of joy that inspires me in my research work at the present moment. Hitherto I had felt myself alone in the task of writing the annals of the Bengali language and literature, though I do not imply by this any lack of regard for the work of some of my colleagues in the field who have in the midst of their multifarious and scholarly tasks, made important contributions to it from time to time. But a whole-hearted devotion to this cause was wanting in the young generation of Bengalees, and to-day this longfelt want seems to be removed by the daily growing number of those who are wishing to take up Bengali as a subject for the M.A. Examination and by the enthusiasm displayed by these earnest students in the cause of their hitherto neglected literature. They appear to me to be the heralds of a new age, that will, let us confidently hope, ere long dawn on us. In the march towards this goal our confidence is accentuated by the fact that the man at the helm has a never-failing steady foresight and sees the vision of our future glory, as no one else in the country has the
power to sec. The boat is launched and the pilot will steer it on to the shore of the ideal land, let us hope.

I take this opportunity to thank Mr. W. R. Gourlay, M.A., C.I.E., I.C.S., Private Secretary to H.E. the Governor of Bengal, for writing the Foreword. Mr. Gourlay has been in Bengal for more than 20 years and is well known as a diligent student of the life and civilisation of our people. In his address delivered at a meeting of the Indian section of the Royal Society of Arts held in London on the 6th of March, 1919, he indicated the various stages of our national history and suggested a practical scheme of an up-to-date comprehensive history of Bengal with a scholarship and breadth of outlook that evoked the admiration of such eminent men as Sir S. Bayley, Mr. C. E. Buckland, Mr. Skrine and Lord Carmichael. The appreciation of the story of Mālañchamāla as contained in his Foreword, though he had at first hesitated to accept my views expressed in pp. 44-47 will give to the reader a glimpse of the characteristic sympathy and genuine goodness of the heart with which he has always tried to understand India and her people.

I have to thank Dr. G. Howells, Dr. H. Stephen and Dr. H. C. Mookerjee for revising some of the proofs of this book. Mr. A. C. Ghatak, Superintendent of the University
Press, has also helped me in such matters—but I am sorry to say that there are still many printing mistakes in the book. This has been inevitable because I am not a good proof-reader myself and I could not make satisfactory arrangement for getting this very tiresome work done from the beginning to the end.

Behala,
Near Calcutta;  

Dinesh Chandra Sen.
