

Landmark

Between the Lines

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Entering *terra incognita*

Language is an unknown land of tricky delights. Words are used not only to mean this or that, but also to suggest multiple significations. To obscure as much as they reveal. To evoke as much as to state and demonstrate. To be ambivalent and multivalent. However hard humans have tried over the centuries to tailor language to the demands of different disciplines (the broadest one being “the arts” and the “sciences”), there are writers who delight in crossing borders.

They do so by using humour to speak of violence, without taking away from the horrors or effect of violence; by provoking readers to question the “authority” of the know-it-all omniscient author; by “explaining” or revealing the mysteries of nature without taking away the quality of the marvellous; by fabricating tantalizing titles...and so on. If the language of science and technology has to be precise and objective, does it necessarily mean that the language of literature is wishy-washy, vague and generally dreamy? Is subjective such a bad word? Does imagination have nothing to do with understanding facts? Are not facts liable to change? Can playing with language actually hone critical skills, cut across disciplines, move across

cultures? And how often do we find reading material that allows us to do so?

I wonder how many of these issues merit a mention in our conceptualization of textbooks and indeed in the teaching-learning process as a whole. On the contrary, increasingly—and this is happening at a global level—there is a tendency to think of language in a purely instrumentalist way. Answers must be written within “x” number of words, shrinking to the point, where Ph.D. entrance examinations in (once) premier universities are being held through multiple choice questions. Learning how to question and what to question are basic survival skills in a global age of big data and misinformation.

In this paper, I will draw on some short texts which seem to fit the bill with regard to the many questions raised here, although the texts were written for children about a century ago!

Introducing *Sandesh*

Diving into the digitized archives of a children's magazine of about a hundred years ago is fun, even addictive. I share some of my findings from *Sandesh*, a monthly magazine founded by Upendrakisor Raychaudhuri (1863-1915), who was also a

pioneer in printing technology. *Sandesh*, with its pun on news and the Bengali *misthi* or *mithai*, with full-page colour illustrations of very high quality, was meant for children, although adults also figured as its avid readers! The first issue came out in April-May 1913; Upendrakisor died in December 1915. In its first phase, the publication ended with his son Sukumar Ray's death in September 1923. *Sandesh* would be revived in only 1961 by Sukumar's son, Satyajit Ray. As the firm was called "U Ray & Sons", I shall hereafter refer to Upendrakisor as UR and Sukumar as SR.¹

UR represented a challenge to the frontiers of technology by developing as a colonial British subject, as a *swadeshi*, the most subtle and sophisticated range of printing in Calcutta. More significantly, he challenged notions of children as passive readers.

Great care was taken with the format, layout and illustration for each piece in *Sandesh*. UR crafted a meld of word and image that was an equally sophisticated mode of bringing to his juvenile readership, news of the world. He focused particularly on the latest marvels of technology in the realm of transport (submarines and monorails), various versions of air travel (balloons and aeroplanes), the latest in arms and ballistics (cannons and guns), as well as the printing press. World War 1 figured explicitly in many of these lucidly written articles.

As a children's periodical, eclecticism was encouraged. A precise description of the trajectory of a bullet within the body of a soldier might have been followed by a boisterous retelling of a Puranic tale or a

nonsense poem. Many of the texts mentioned loss of life, depicted violent deaths, even providing graphic details of cause and effect, whether in "raw nature" or in the workings of technology in nature. Little was censored. If the successes of technology imparts to its readers a sense of being a witness to new wonders, there was also the flip side of technology—what we euphemistically call "collateral damage" today. The implication was that understanding or harnessing the mysteries of science to construct a highly industrialized economy—constituting the British Empire, in this case—also entailed that the powers unleashed and put to use in more "efficient" ways were always in a state of experimentation. Technology was *not* the new god which never failed. Perhaps, the same questioning spirit can be used to analyse what goes by the general name of "development" in our times.

Narrative Modes

The articles in *Sandesh* aimed at a domestication of the latest technology not only by imparting its "secrets" and "incertitudes" to colonial children, but also by making the subject more accessible through a particular mode and medium of colloquial Bangla. UR created comfortable-sounding neologisms: for example, the submarine was called, "*duburi jahaj*"—literally, the diving ship or the diver-ship, thereby humanizing the machine.

There were several narrative modes in which UR illustrated the role of technology. A familiar trope (one we are increasingly suspicious of), was that of "mastering nature"—a piece featuring windmills and

fighter planes was called “*Prakritir Posh Mana*”/ Taming Nature. He also illustrated how technology captured and brought to life for ordinary people the marvels of nature in distant lands—human beings using the cinematograph in the Polar region.

However, it was the third approach that was unique by all standards. Not only did it stand the test of time, it has sadly, become the test of our times: that even the latest technology is not immune to failure. “*Duburi jahaj*”/ Submarine, carried the excitement of undersea scouting, details on how a periscope works. But there was a sombre note, as when the narrator gave instances of torpedoes destroying a submarine. He even asked the young readers to imagine a situation where humans were trapped (forever) in the inside of a malfunctioning submarine. He ended though, with an illustration of specially pressurised diving suits which would allow humans to escape.

The Lighthouse and Migratory Birds

Sandesh's focus (by way of text, image and layout) on the marvels of nature alongside the latest in technology was an intertwined legacy from earlier children's periodicals in Bangla, such as *Sakha* (1883), *Sathi* (1895) and *Mukul* (1895). Young UR had contributed as illustrator and writer to these periodicals. *Sakha* was radical for its time, as it carried articles on controversial social questions such as child marriage. With regard to science however, it strove to reconcile science with the construction of moral character and an abiding faith in the creator –“Our Father” (*Parampita*). Every piece in *Sakha* had an exemplary quality, whether it was in the genre of a biography (David Hare) or natural history (“*Sarpa*”/

Snake) or even in a descriptive piece on a place or a man-made object (“*Alokmancha*”/ Lighthouse). In the last text, the lighthouse becomes a beacon of *dharma* or true conduct arising from belief in the “Supreme Father” through the stormy waters of life. This is more in tune with what Richard Noakes (2004) has perceptively termed a “theology of nature” in his study of Victorian periodicals for children, particularly those run by missionary/ evangelizing societies:

“Scientific subjects [were] used in a variety of ways, from supporting a theology of nature and providing the basis for rational amusement, to furnishing material for inculcating mental discipline and satisfying children's taste for facts.”²

The most popular of these was the *Boy's Own Paper* (hereafter BOP), to which SR and UR had access. The BOP was a penny weekly, launched by the Religious Tract Society (1879) in England with special attention paid to the seductive powers of fiction in helping readers absorb information—whether on historical or scientific or nature-related subjects.

Sandesh marked a departure from these earlier efforts, indigenous and foreign; firstly, in the range of narrative “tones” deployed in the meld of “scientific” and “fictive” pieces. I mean “tone” as both speech and mode of address, an idiolect—marking registers of belief, or suspension of belief. UR's project was driven by the need to overcome a colonized subjectivity, thereby enabling a juvenile readership to think through various modes of liberation. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, success is never absolute. The article on the lighthouse

in *Sandesh (Alok stambha/ Pillar of Light)*, enthusiastically speaks of the life-saving quality of the lighthouse for ships at sea, but it does not leave out the unintended perils. The lighthouse, later called simply, “*bati-ghar*”, kills hundreds of migratory birds (*prabashi pakhi*) who are disoriented and driven off course by its brilliant light, finally dashing themselves to death against the glass panes.

UR's article carried a detailed photo of the lamp in the lighthouse with a human figure alongside, suggesting the scale, and an explanatory text on the system of its rotation, refraction, the use of mirrors and so on. But his concern for the birds and their flight route is evident in the full-page illustration by UR reproduced below.



আফ্রিকার কাছে একটা দ্বীপের দৃশ্য। হাজার হাজার পাখী সমুদ্র পার হবার পথে এইখানে ব'সে বিশ্রাম করে। বছরের মধ্যে প্রায় এগার মাস এখানে জনপ্রাণী থাকে না আর শীতের শেষে মাসখানেক পাখীর গোলমালে কাণে তাল লাগিয়ে দেয়—ছমাইল দূরে জাহাজের লোকেরা সে শব্দ শুনে পায়।

Image courtesy CSSSC (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta) Archives

Flocks of birds are sitting, nesting, alighting on and flying over an island near Africa—one of their “resting places” on a long migratory route! The caption to this vibrant illustration was formatted with care. A rough translation follows:

The scene of an island near Africa. Thousands of birds come to roost and rest here, after they have crossed the seas. For almost eleven months of the year, there are no living creatures here; at the end of the winter, for about a month, the cacophony of birds deafen the ears—people aboard ships can hear the sound from two miles away!

The concise caption (43 words in Bangla) pushes the reader/viewer to make connections between distance and sound, land and ocean, people and birds, travel and rest, inhabited and uninhabited spaces. It is a classic example of how information can be combined with humour, objective detail with a personal comment, leaving so much still to the imagination!

Yet, there is hope that in time, science will come up with a safeguard against unintended consequences. Already, we are told, there are perches being placed on many such lighthouses so the birds may find a resting place before they set off again on their long flight. But again, the task of setting up the perches needs “careful calculation”: “If too close to the light, birds do not like to perch on them, and if too far, they do not see the perches”. UR sounds a cautionary, though optimistic note, in relation to the “marvels” of technology. The *unfinished* agenda of technology (*vis-à-vis* discoveries in science), the need to constantly search for better methods and

modes, to continuously calibrate results and measure consequences was characteristic of *Sandesh*. It reflected the constant experimentation with photography, printing and publishing that went on in the family concern.³

Intriguing Strategies

UR develops an entirely new mode of address, conceptualising his readers as actively engaged in the reading-viewing process. He also works on the 'dosage': that is, he does not wish to dilute the process of understanding or dumb down the data. At the same time, there is enough variation in the pace, focus and tone in each of the pieces to retain the reader's interest. The immediate attempt is to provide analogies from the known, familiar and everyday, to the unknown, obscure and even 'unimaginable'.

The general, the rule, the abstract is brought within the cognizance of the young reader's world not only through analogy, but by bringing the 'now' of the reader into the text: the narrative is self-referential both for the reader and the writer of *Sandesh*—thus demystifying *the making of the magazine*. So, the description of a printing press moves into the actual copy of *Sandesh* that young readers are holding and reading from. Rarely is there a 'conclusive' closure: rather, the idea is to embed questions and inspire a critical approach. This delicate balancing of information and interrogation, tempered by humour, is achieved in a number of ways, summarised below:

By creating a lively conversational direct approach that privileged colloquial speech even when the piece was written in formal

Bangla (*sadhu bhasha*). (Soon after, many writers, including Rabindranath Tagore, shifted to *chalit bhasha*, closer to the spoken language.) Information is indeginised; Latinate and /or Sanskritic constructions are assiduously avoided. So, 'differently abled' would not be 'translated' as *divyangan*.

Although in the first person, the writer is emphatically not the omniscient narrator who knows all. Rather, the tone keeps changing, with different registers ranging from the sure to the skeptical, to a frank 'confession' of "I really don't know..." or, "Well, it could be this or that"; or, "I have heard it said by a grandpa" type.

Sometimes, UR simply presented two versions and left it for the reader to decide. Some pieces showed a certain philosophical acceptance of varied responses; people were reluctant to change their minds even when the facts were before them. In "*Nuton Batsar*" / New Year, UR explained the difference between ancient Indian astrologers and contemporary almanacs or *panjikas*. He ended on resigned note: "However that may be, when that calculation is not to be; what will it gain to be lamenting about it?", followed by an ironic twist: "May your hundred years pass in supreme happiness as per the conventional mode of calculation."

The reader was often alerted by a note of scepticism when the writer was not willing to vouch for the authenticity of a printed text, as in "*Kumirer galpa*" / The Story of a Crocodile where the writer says "I've read in a book about an amusing way of hunting crocodiles. It is a story from America, but I cannot say if it is true or false." ("*Ekta pustake ek mojar rakamer kumir shikarer*

katha parechhi. Eta America desh' er galpa kintu satya kina boltey parina.”) [emphasis added]. The critical use of the word “but” (*kintu*) in this sentence is fairly common.

The comparative approach in this text, juxtaposing facts about crocodiles in the Sunderbans in Bengal with a region of America (North), suggested to the reader about scientific disciplines being the great equalizer. That is, *potentially*, any one may observe and write about natural history in any part of the world. It was the observer's powers of discrimination—the ability to separate the true from the false, to verify and so on, that gave him authority, not his race or religion.

There are several ways in which pure information is made tolerable, and possibly memorable: (a) the semi-skeptical tone, mentioned earlier; (b) direct address to readers imagined as thinking subjects: for example, '*bhabia dekho*' (think about it)... '*dhare nao*', (consider or suppose); and, (c) anticipating intelligent questions from the readers: '*tomra hoito bolbe*' (you might say), in an article on how rocks are formed.

The articles show a consistent attempt to interrogate—to separate myth from history, scientific observation from unexamined beliefs; but *equally*, provide links between the above. They suggest that these are not entirely discrete modes of knowing or representing. Folk memory, mythology, hearsay and the latest scientifically proven information may well coexist—as they do on the pages of *Sandesh*. It is *critical* to discern between them, to enjoy them in different ways. Upendrakisor underlines his present (early 20th century) as a time of transition where different generations may

well nurture completely different belief systems; not to mention the license of childhood where the imagination holds sway.

Some of the stylistic and lexical devices are in the manner of the Russian *skaz*, a narrative form in which the first person narrator appears as the naïve teller, deliberately mystifying by professing ignorance. This opens up unexpected spaces for irony, often at the reader's expense; but encourages speculating and generating new texts.

Sometimes, the failure to understand something fully as a child is brought out by the adult narrator, usually in a tolerant kind of way. An example is, “*Pada aar Chhuti*”/ Studies and Holidays, which incidentally refers to the Franco-Prussian war to speak about the laws of Western perspective!

There is one picture about that war that I remember very well. The Prussian soldiers were far away, at a distance, that was why they had been drawn on a small scale. But when we saw those pictures we didn't quite think of it that way; we thought that in reality the French were huge and the Prussians tiny. For a long time thereafter we were puzzled, wondering how on earth did those tiny Prussians beat the huge Frenchmen!

In *Sandesh*, the reader was invited to discuss the subject under consideration: the first person narrator shared his own ambivalence about almost everything, including about the wonders of science. On the whole, UR and SR stayed away from the sentimental and the nostalgic in showcasing nature as the legitimate object

of study in childhood. This sharing of a childhood illusion/ignorance with a young reader marked a break with the earlier periodicals. It was a direct comment on the stages of perception, without following a Piaget-like grid of progress.

Where do we go from here?

We had glimpses of how narratives of “information” may be inflected with (infected with!) a humorous, even whimsical tone. How, it is possible to present rigorous research with an interrogative note, destabilizing the authority of the omniscient or objective narrator of science or technology! The implications are many for our contemporary scenario, at varied levels of pedagogy and practices.

We might find ways of “hooking” readers into information-heavy texts, for creating rigorously researched texts that are also open-ended, for creating and initiating new modes of reading, and not the least, in the way we think about illustrations in relation to written text. Consider the simple yet versatile structure of the “*Bati-ghar*”/ The Lighthouse in *Sandesh*:

1. The focus: the special lamp inside the lighthouse;
2. The larger context: the dangers at sea for sea-faring vessels, especially on dark and stormy nights (touch of the imagination here);
3. The changes: leading to the latest technology in lighting and construction;
4. The evaluation: the pros and cons of the new system/invention;
5. The negative fallout: the unintended/unthought of effects—the death of migratory birds;

6. Possible solution: yes, but still evolving...

Consider too, the range of illustrations integrated into the article:

1. An actual sketch of a lighthouse atop a rocky height surrounded by water;
2. An illustrative “close-up” of details of the lamp enabling an actualization of the written text, with the figure of the lighthouse keeper indicating the scale;
3. The apparently digressive “inset”: an island of birds (somewhere not seen, the shipboard of people)....

And do not forget the evocative caption below the illustration!

Texts Outside the Textbook

Our present is immersed in unthinking moments of saturation, or, should I say, long moments where we are pushed not to think. A blitzkrieg of images bombards us across micro and macro screens. Every word and every letter is sought to be substituted by already composed icons, purportedly operating within a single field of global recognition; effortlessly reproduced across digital domains, losing all significance in infinite and limited replay. It appears that we have nothing to do until they are replaced by a fresh set of icons/emoticons—again, by anonymous agents of backroom boards. A make believe of participation with a single click, a zap and a swipe.

The instant coverage of violent acts—presented as narrative, or in random isolated or morphed images, captioned or

peppered with sound bytes, with contesting claims of sources/sites—does not admit of a space for reflection.

Our grids and our capsules in pedagogy are increasingly being pushed into this direction. The greater common good is taken to mean the lowest common denominator, as though, that which is ambivalent, or even unpleasant at first sight, is to be instantly censored or trolled. For this state of affairs the modes of mass communication and the imperatives of passive consumption are unambiguously responsible. The monopoly owners of channels and broadband, of signals and virtual worlds, are the game changers of the day.

Conceptualizing the “child's perspective” is difficult, if not impossible. While this may still be feasible in anthropological or ethnographic studies, it can only be by an act of imagination... *dhare nao/* suppose... as UR says. It means a sophisticated deployment of *a range of linguistic tools* that such perspectives—and not exclusively that of a “child”—find place in literature and elsewhere, or in what has been seen as its other—“science”.

Possible pedagogic exercises to create such literature:

1. *Image and caption writing.* Ask groups of children to cut out any image or a sequence of images from a magazine or newspaper that they find relevant to a particular text in the textbook. Ask them to write a caption (within a word limit) that does more than describe that particular image. In what ways is the selected image linked to the arguments

in the text? How does it move beyond the text?

2. *Descriptive texts about new discoveries and inventions.* Children can read up on, or be told by their teacher about a new scientific discovery (a new planet) or a new invention (a machine that...) and then write small texts that not only list its new exciting features but, also include possible or potential problems, speculate on the future impact of such a product over the next five-ten years.
3. *Working with linguistic features of description, commentary and speculation.* This could be an exercise in using conjunctions and prepositions in relation to a range of verbs.
4. *Comparative approaches:* highlighting analogies; marking out differences; researching the nature and possible causes for differences, implications.

These are only a few insights of language—image found in these articles from *Sandesh* that await refashioning by the apprentice scholar, the veteran teacher, the masterful writer, and also by children, and so made meaningful for a new century of challenges.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of a larger study undertaken during my tenure as Visiting Professor (2014-2016) at the Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, Calcutta. Most of the research was conducted at the Archives, CSSSC; and also at the Sadharon Brahma Samaj Library, Kolkata. A version of this paper was presented in a lecture entitled 'Child Marriages and Submarines: Tones and Half-tones' at Azim Premji University, 11 September 2014.

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- _____'Duburi Jahaj', *Sandesh*, 2nd year, Sravan 1321 BS, No. 4, pp. 116-121.
- _____'Barafer deshe Cinematograph', *Sandesh*, 2nd year, Bhadra 1321 BS, No. 5, pp. 137-139.
- _____'Alok Stambha', *Sandesh*, 3rd year, Jyeshtha 1322 BS, No. 2, pp. 59-61.
- _____'Pada aar Chhuti', *Sandesh*, 3rd year, Ashad 1322 BS, No. 3, pp. 87-89.

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Endnotes

¹ Of Sukumar Ray's probable 166 articles written for *Sandesh*, 136 are science-related.

² Richard Noakes, 'The *Boy's Own Paper* and Late-Victorian juvenile magazines', p. 156.

³ Siddhartha Ghosh, *Kaler Shahar Kolkata*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Ltd., 1991, pp. 128-36.