

## A Sociological Analysis of Gender Construction among Children Through Bengali Nursery Rhymes

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**Abstract:** *Children do not have any understanding of gender or act as any gendered self unless they are taught to be one. Early socialization into performing gender roles are learned from the immediate care-givers. Parents, care-professionals, grandparents play an important part in child's performance of gender in the future. This paper shall look into an analysis of Bengali Nursery rhymes and how the rhymes have ingrained certain gender stereotypes, imagined performance of gender role that give a child its ideal for performances in future. Children do not read rhymes but rhymes are either orally transmitted or are taught from print to children as a pass-time, mainly as a lullaby to control her/his indomitable energy. An analysis of nursery rhymes sung/read out to children shall help to understand the impact it may have on young minds especially in gender construction.*

**Keywords:** Bengali Nursery Rhymes and gender construction, Gender stereotypes, Bengali children and nursery Rhymes, Nursery Rhymes in Bengali, *Bangla Chhora*

### What are Nursery Rhymes?

When ballads are presented in a rhythmic fashion meant for both adult and children in a pre-literate society, it is generally recognised as a shared oral tradition. Most of these pieces originally not intended for children, are adopted and mostly used by adults to manage children. The rhythm helps to calm a child whom an adult wants to keep amused or direct. For this reason, "a rhyme is that which was passed on by the word of mouth and taught to children before it was set down in writing and put into print."<sup>1</sup> The Nursery rhymes, as an example of oral tradition has characteristics like rhythm, musicality, a motion in play, a formulaicity and repetition that are meant to be certainly inspiring and involving both parent and child.

There is a general musical pattern in the nursery rhymes of many languages; focussed on the oral tradition that follows the needs of orality, focusing mostly on prosody and isochrones.<sup>2</sup> The metrical pattern is considered the source of

vocal sound prior to language;<sup>3</sup> it is also considered to be the most proficient way to create sentiment and empathy with others. While language works in simplified of set norms to create a mutual ground of understanding,<sup>4</sup> music answers to friendship and engages where language might stop.<sup>5 6</sup> Rhymes follow a common binary rhythmical system which becomes the predictable 'beat' for the musicality of metrical combinations. It is a fact that many of the nursery rhymes, as we have come to know them, were originally songs,<sup>7</sup> were used in festive and ritual dances.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, rhymes are unforgettable because of their rhythm and music and connected to motion – as well as their cyclic and accumulative structure, which follows another characteristic of orality. Rhymes are structured information based on recurrence, gathering of frequent words in a cycle; rhyme organizes and helps to predict knowledge.

Rhymes are generally rooted in the corporeal world and make reference to people, objects, and actions like the pussy cat which is asked 'where it had been' or the 'strong' cat which prepares to escort the child. This importance of situation<sup>9</sup> makes rhymes more recognizable, as the objects and actions they portray are related to a culture that can be found in everyday activities. A rhyme could then be remembered and 'activated' when in contact with any of these familial activities which it mentions.<sup>10</sup> Currently, however, numerous objects and actions portrayed in nursery rhymes are no longer part of everyday lives of children and adults, and much of the vocabulary might seem unfashionable and unused – the triangular relationship between rhythm, repetition and formulaicity. Nursery rhymes have a type of memorized formulaic sequence,<sup>11</sup> where the child learns a rhyme as a part of the socialization process linked to language acquisition. The socio-interactive outline of children as the first language learners<sup>12</sup> makes them aware that "the rhyme and song signify a certain linguistic behaviour."<sup>13</sup> However, the child, as a resident of the spoken world, initially learns the rhyme in units: linked with strings of words, without being mindful about their divisions. Thus, the characteristics of nursery rhymes displayed are a result of their oral nature and their aural purpose: their predictable musicality connected to the usage of metrical patterns that help in memorizing and generate a sense of the community; the repetition found in words, in sequences, grammatical structures and rhythm that help in expectation and sharing; the formulaicity in the rhymes' construction that embedded in the language of the community have a shared ideology. The nature of nursery rhyme is one of presentation and contribution: they exist to be said or sung out loud, in a participatory environment. When adults work together with children through unrestrained musicality, through nursery rhymes and songs; they remember how verbal communication is an object of play in itself. Language learning takes part through play, as the child acquires words, formulaic sequences and becomes phonologically aware; it is evident that nursery rhymes play a significant part in the development of the child. It is not to say that transgression does not takes place, through non-pronounced words, unprepared

vocabulary manipulation, and mislabelling and unrehearsed rhyme combinations.<sup>14</sup>

### **Nursery Rhymes and Child's Socialization**

Children are considered as the ordinary recipients of such nursery rhymes, especially at school and from home. The children tend to accept these beliefs, the knowledge received, and opinions through discourse from the adults as trustworthy, or credible sources.<sup>15</sup> As children, the recipients are less experienced to deal with such discourse. Elinor Ochs<sup>16</sup> studied the role language played in socialization of the children of Samoan village and informs that language plays an essential role in the spread of knowledge and alteration of social behaviours of children. Piaget<sup>17</sup> said that children possess the tendency of giving new interpretations to the symbols used in their language. Nonetheless, this tendency may worsen if children are misleading of the interpretations of these symbols. So in the process of 'becoming a man or women' the role of language is of prime importance.<sup>18</sup> From a linguistic point of view, the discourse of gender can be understood on the basis of the *performative* category of language.<sup>19</sup> Gender is performed as a role by our bodies. The roles are assigned without our consent. Language works as a structure, which dictates our behaviour and demands us to act according to the pre-written script.

The symbols used in language strengthen certain attitudes which not only work literally but also create meanings by its recurrent practice over a period of time. It means that over-emphasizing of a gender role by means of rhyme has a probability of being engulfed in those meanings, whether correct or incorrect. At school level especially in pre-primary and primary, nursery rhymes are very essential parts of the syllabus. The nursery rhymes are sweet-sounding and are mostly recited by children at home, in crèches and at playtimes. The unknown authors strive to weave beautiful strings of vocabulary attractively to produce rhyme that children can easily relate to.

### **Bangla Rhymes**

The literature on gender-oriented studies of particularly Bangla nursery rhymes is few. These rhymes are claimed to share "the thousand-year history of the Bengali language itself,"<sup>20</sup> which is the state language of Bangladesh and spoken by 98 percent of its citizens.<sup>21</sup> The Bangla language also has the seventh largest world population of more than 230 million speakers, inhabiting Bangladesh, the Indian state of West Bengal, and different parts of the world, who use Bangla nursery rhymes at home and school. Nonetheless, the gender-based analyses of the rhymes remain relatively unexplored. Existing studies focus mostly on their origin and classification,<sup>22&23</sup> compilation and editions.<sup>24</sup> Apart from translations,<sup>25</sup> geographical variations,<sup>26</sup> literary features<sup>27</sup> and values, pedagogical applications,<sup>28</sup> and (socio) linguistic analysis<sup>29</sup> – very few address gender issues.<sup>30</sup> The gender identities and cognition is emphasized in Anjuman Ara's

work (2024).<sup>31</sup> There are only random, brief, and occasional reflections on gender representations in some of these studies. Sircar, for example, observes that Bangla rhymes are dominated by the theme of marriage, a ubiquitous presence of mothers, and stereotyped definitions of female beauty which tie it firmly to long hair and fair complexions.<sup>32</sup> Bandopadhyay<sup>33</sup> claims that “the saddest and sweetest” Bangla rhymes relate to female children’s marriage. These studies, however, did not concentrate on gender issues in their full length.

### Analysis of Selected Bangla Rhymes in Print

The objective of the paper is to identify areas where gender discrimination, gender construction can be identified in rhymes in Bangla popular in West Bengal. For this purpose two books have been selected. Published in 1950 and in its fiftieth reprint Mahendranath Dutta’s collection of Bangla rhymes (*Chorar Chhobi* 2) has been selected alongside poems written by Sunirmal Basu (*Chorar Chhobi* 4) published in 1984 and in its twenty-second reprint has been selected for this paper. The reprints suggest their popularity and demand. Both the compilation of poems/rhymes is published from *Sishu Sahitya Samsad* under a series of poems/rhymes for children.

For the first the poems are a collection and for the second book mentioned the poems are written. In the first case the poet is unknown suggesting that the poems might be orally transmitted and collected and printed later. The poems in these two books do not have titles unlike the other book published under the same publisher, namely *Hashirashi* (1976, 22nd Reprint 2013) written by Jogindranath Sarkar. The titles of the poem in the last mentioned book suggest that those poems were also popular. But this book is not a part of this discussion because no poem in the text is dedicated to a girl child and her antics. The poems are dedicated to the stunts associated with the boy-child namely, *Bir Shishu*, *Petuk Damu*, *Dustu Tinu*, *Singha O Balak* etc. The characters of ‘child’ (*shishu*) are depicted as if it is the boy and his bravery, greed, pranks, work style therefore keeping out the girl-child from the purview of a juvenile. This omission may be deliberate or may be accidental. Nevertheless it signifies a serious exclusion. If the listener or the reader of the poems is a girl she may be amused by the acts of the child but certainly will not identify with the actor in the poem as one.

In the first series *Chhorar Chhobi* 1 there are thirteen rhymes out of which seven are directly dedicated to Khoka the male child and show clear discrimination. The only rhyme that depicts gender selected from the book written by Sunirmal Basu is marked as the 9th rhyme in this essay. For example,

#### Rhyme 1:

*’ke merechhe, ke dhorechhe*  
*Ke diyechhe Gaal?*  
*Tai to khoka raag korechhe*

‘Who has scolded, who has caught  
 Who has abused?  
 Is that the reason why Khoka is angry

*Bhaatkhayenikaal.'*

And did not have his meal?

Here, it is evident that the poet assumes a soft corner for the male child who has skipped his meal and perhaps the mother tries to find out the arbitrator. In the second poem from the same book, '*Khokhon Khokhon Dak Pari,/Khokon moder kar bari?/ Aye re khokon ghore aye/ Dud makha bhaat kake Khaye'* the mother calls for the boy child, named Khokon (usually Khoka and Khokon are names given to the boy child and also a synonym for male baby in Bangla) and laments that his meal has been eaten by crow. The mother and the child especially the bond between mother and son is evidenced in other rhymes too. For analysis very popular and anonymous rhymes are also selected to drive the issue on which the analysis is drawn. For example,

### Rhyme 2

*'Aye re pakhi Lajjhola  
Khokak e niye kor khela  
Khabidabi kolkolabi,  
Khokake niye ghum parabi'*

Come the long tailed bird  
Come and play with Khoka  
Sing, talk and eat with him  
Keep my Khoka asleep

### Rhyme 3

*'Khoka Gelo konkhane  
Sal piyaler majhkhane  
Sekhane Khoka ki kore  
Thoka thoka Phool pare'*

'Where has Khoka gone?  
To the jungle of Sal and Piyal trees  
What does he do there?  
He plucks flowers'

### Rhyme 4

*'Aye re Aye Meni  
Khokhar Dhudhe chini  
Dudh khabena raag koreche  
Khokonjadumoni'*

'Come, come the Queen cat  
I have mixed sugar to Khoka's milk  
He will not drink his milk as he is angry  
My dear Khoka'

The mother shows care, affection and sometimes also indulges or gives the male child a liaison to do things that are not approved of older boys, like to be angry, or to be persistent in doing things their way. The mother tries to allure the son into eating, sleeping and doing everyday activities sometimes by inviting the crow, the cat or a bird. But if we look into this further we might find that the gender of an animal too is sometimes carefully chosen. For example in the anonymous rhyme below the male child when goes fishing or to his in-laws the accompaniment is a male cat and not the female cat who is allured to drink Khoka's milk with sugar.

### Rhyme 5

*'Khoka jabe machhdhorte/*

Khoka shall go fishing/

*Khoka jabe Soshurbari*  
*Sange jabe Ke*  
*Ghore ache huloberal*  
*Komar bendheche'*

Khoka shall go to his in-law's house  
 Who shall accompany him?  
 The Tom cat is at home  
 He has decided to go with him

Gender stereotypes are also expressed enforcing masculinity and its characteristics like expressions of anger, disgust, ignoring anything around that is trivial, in the male child.

### **Rhymes 6, 7**

*'Khokabau Jay*  
*Lalmoja pay*  
*Boro didira sob uki mere chay*  
*Khoka phire na takay'*

'Khoka goes  
 With his red socks  
 Elder sisters peep to see him  
 But he ignores them'

*Khoka jabe shikar korte*  
*Dur gayer bone*  
*Laljuta, lalmoja*  
*Dichen Baba kine*  
*Ki marbe, kimarbe*  
*Oto tuku chhele?*  
*Bang marbe, chucho marbe*  
*Samne dhore dile*

'Khoka shall go hunting  
 To a distant jungle in a village  
 Red shoes and red socks  
 The father has bought for him.  
 What shall he hunt?  
 Such a small child?  
 Shall hunt a frog, shall hunt a mole  
 If placed before him'

Gender stereotypes are also reinforced in objects of nature. For example, '*Bisti pore tapurtupur Node elobaan...*' the male river (*Nod*) is signified for tides as if *nodi* (female version of river) do not experience waves. As mentioned earlier a Tom cat is identified with adventure whereas a Queen cat for luxury (sugared milk). As the features of masculinity are enforced through rhymes femininity is also emphasized but attention should be paid to the kind of attributes that are highlighted. Gender stereotypes are reinforced through depiction of kinship ties too. For instance, Mamabari (maternal home) is emphasized in a very popular rhyme (*taitaitai, mamamrbari jai/ mamamrbari bhari moja/ kilchornai*) suggesting the love and affection to be received by a child at maternal home where mama (Mother's brother) plays a significant role. It is not the home of a grandfather or a grandmother, nor of the aunts. It is significant as a home of a future and probable owner, the maternal uncle. Another stereotype on the beauty of a girl is emphasized in the rhyme (*Akash ghire megh korechhe/Sujji gechhe paate/Khuku gelo jol ante/padma dighir ghate/Padma dighir kalo jole horek rokom phool/Hatur niche dulchhe Khukur gochha bhora chul*) where Khuku (referred to the girl child as opposed to Khoka the boy-child) goes to the river side in the evening to fetch water. She is described as one who has long hair that goes beneath her knees. The rhymes that support feminine responsibilities,

stereotypes of a girl child (*Khuku*) are as under:

**Rhymes 8, 9, 10, 11**

**8:** *'Khuku esechhe beriya  
Payer nupur hariya  
Gechhe gechhe hariye  
Abar debo goriye  
Dudhaan go juriye'*

*'Khuku has come after an outing  
She has lost her anklet  
She has lost, She has lost  
Shall again remake for her  
Bring the milk after cooling'*

**9:** *'Khuku kore ranna  
Tai kheye kakabu  
Jure dilen kanna  
Mama eshe mukhe diye  
Ar khete channa'  
(written by Sunirmal Basu)*

*'Khuku cooks  
Kakabau (Paternal uncle ) eats  
He starts crying over it  
Mama (Maternal Uncle) eats  
Never wants to eat it again'*

**10:** *'Dadabhai chaal bhaja khai  
Moynamachher muro  
Hazartakar bou enechi  
Khada naker churo  
Khada houk, bocha hoyuk  
Sob soite pari  
Jhamta kata mukhnara ta  
Sei jala tei mori'*

*'Dadabhai (Elder Brother) eats  
Chalbhaaje (Roasted rice)  
The head of the Moyna fish  
Has brought a wife for thousand rupees  
It does not matter if she has scratched  
nose or blunt nose  
Can accept everything except  
Her quarrels'*

**11:** *'Ata gachhe tota pakhi  
Dalim gachhe mou  
Eto daki tobu kotha kaona keno bou'*

*A parrot in the custard apple tree  
Honey in a Pomegranate tree  
After so much of persuasion why  
does not the bride talk'*

In the Rhyme 8, the girl is unmindful, emotional and forgets her anklet but the mother assures her of another perhaps because it is her ornament and it adorns her beauty. In the following rhyme the girl cooks but it is so distasteful that the uncles refuse to eat any more. The boy child on the other hand is never depicted in bad taste. He hunts for frogs and moles only if presented but the mood does not portray him as unworthy. Cooking skills are essential for a girl child. It is evident in another rhyme (Chandicharan Bandopadhyay, *Ranir Ranna*) where the poet criticizes the culinary skills of a girl Rani (*Chhi-ChhiChhi Rani radtesekhani/Jathaimake bole, Jhol emosla deboki?/Suktanite jhal diyechhe, Ambolete ghee...*) who perhaps mistakenly added ghee to water brash and chilli to a preparation of bitter gourd. Domesticity for girls is emphasized in these rhymes. For example, in the rhyme *Bishti pore tapu rtupur/Node elobaan/Shib Tahuker ebiye holo/Teen kanyadaan/Ek Kanya radhen baren, Ek Kanya Khan/Ek Kanya Raag kore*

*baper bari jaan*. Shibthakur who has three wives (perhaps insisting on polygamy) experience domesticity as his first wife cooks, the second eats and the third goes to her father's home in anger. Perhaps cooking, fighting, showing of anger and eating are the basic components of domesticity which is shown in the rhyme.

In the Rhyme 10, the rhyme talks of bride-price through which the child groom has brought home a wife who is not beautiful. But the members of the family accept her as she is but disqualifies and rejects her only for her irritable nature. Does it not imply women can be bought by bride price and accepted if she is not ill-tempered? Her antics of anger and irritable behaviour shall not be tolerated even if she is brought with bride price. But it has been mentioned above that anger of a boy-child (Khoka) is accepted and is advised not to be judgmental about. Moreover, the new bride (*bou*) who is shy does not talk to the insistence of the others in the new household. Shyness is never a coveted feature of a male-child. He can hunt a mole when brought before him but can never shy away from acts like hunting that show masculine bravery. He ignores older sisters, goes to the in-laws home with a Tom cat and never looks back. Bride price and dowry play a significant part in the rhymes. Following is an example of one such –

### Rhyme 12

'Alurpata Thalu re bhai

Bherenda pata doi

Sokol jamai khaae gelo

Mejo jamai koi?

Oi aschhe, Oi aschhe

Maath alo kore

Neche neche hele dule

Dhakai Kapor pore

Kapor dilam, chopor dilam,

Kanye dilam dane,

Tobu jamai bhaat khayena

Kiser obhimane?'

'Alur pata thalu re Bhai

Curd placed with bhereda

All sons-in-law hae had their meals

But where is the second son-in-law.

There he comes, there he comes,

like a ray of light

Dancing he comes in his Dhakai

cloth (Dhoti)

Have given him clothes,

given him daughter as gift

Still my son-in-law does not have his meal

For what huff?

In the above dowry and the daughter is gifted to the son-in-law but still he does not have his meals in his in-laws' home. It is a question the father-in-law asks. Perhaps he finds the behaviour of the groom awkward and unsettling and therefore queries for the reason of such behaviour.

### Conclusion

Gender socialization is a "process by which individuals develop, refine and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization, such as their family, social networks and other social institutions."<sup>34</sup> Gender socialization is the process through

which society transmits culture to the next generation and teaches children the socio-cultural roles that society expects from individuals. However, this process is not “simply transmitted from one generation to the other; rather, they are, to some extent at least, constructed by each generation.”<sup>35</sup> Though early and middle childhood is the most penetrating periods for the process of socialization, but it is a process that goes throughout life.<sup>36&37</sup> The principal agents of socialization are family, school, peers, and mass media. It is a process through which the child grows into a personality, acquires the principles of gender role playing.

Playing a role is essentially gendered. The internalization of the standards set by a patriarchal society is reinforced through the performance of gender roles. It is acceptable only if it embraces the gender identity stipulated for a particular sex. Gender identity falls into a trap of a stereo-typicality when gender role playing are considered universal and have proven resistant to change.<sup>38&39</sup> Gender stereotypes claim that women and men have naturally different attitudes, traits, and abilities; for instance, it is assumed that men are aggressive, independent, and strong whereas women are kind, sympathetic, and vulnerable. Society uses these stereotypes to separate women and men in social networks and work settings and has limited women to specific roles. In general, gender stereotypes encourage or force girls and boys to act differently.

The paper has shown how gender roles, gender identities and stereotypes are depicted in Bangla rhymes. Acquisition of gender plays a very significant role in early childhood when these rhymes are recited on the insistence of the adults on learning affect the child's future portrayal of gender roles. The mentioned rhymes have been taught to different generations of children speaking in Bangla. Though a part of oral tradition of the past; such singing of rhymes to children in Bangla in contemporary society is now rare and dying tradition. It is especially true of socialization of a class based society where different ways of socializing children are practiced. Not all learn gender socialization by listening to nursery rhymes. But still as printed version of the rhymes is now in place, they are recommended as books and texts in pre-primary classes to children for any social class. Sometimes, unfortunately, the tradition of singing these rhymes is so firm that teachers and parents appear to overlook the gendered message conveyed through these rhymes. This paper concludes that nursery rhymes are an powerful medium of creating and conveyed social behaviours in a society and it may be assumed that a considerable part of the society still follows the same gender roles on the basis of their childhood learning.

**Acknowledgement:** I am indebted to Ms. Devangi Dasgupta for her caring support to write this article.

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