

Classic Poetry Series

Sukumar Ray
- poems -

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Sukumar Ray(30 October 1887 - 10 September 1923)

Sukumar Ray was a Bengali humorous poet, story writer and playwright. As perhaps the most famous Indian practitioner of literary nonsense, he is often compared to Lewis Carroll. His works such as the collection of poems "Aboltabol" "HaJaBaRaLa" , short story collection "Pagla Dashu" and play "Chalachittachanchari" are considered nonsense masterpieces equal in stature to Alice in Wonderland, and are regarded as some of the greatest treasures of Bangla literature. More than 80 years after his death, Ray remains one of the most popular of children's writers in both West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Sukumar Ray was the son of famous children's story writer Upendrakishore Ray (Ray Chowdhury) and the father of legendary Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Sukumar Ray was also known as the convenor of "Monday Club", a weekly gathering of likeminded people at the Ray residence, where the members were free to express their irreverent opinions about the world at large. A number of delightful poems were penned by Sukumar Ray in relation to the matters concerning Monday Club, primarily soliciting attendance, announcing important meetings etc.

 Life

Ray was born in a Brahmo family in Calcutta, India. Born in the era which can be called the pinnacle of the Bengal Renaissance, he grew up in an environment that fostered his literary talents. His father was a talented writer of stories and popular science; painter and illustrator extraordinaire; musician and composer of songs; a pioneering technologist and hobbyist astronomer. Upendrakishore was also a close friend of Rabindranath Tagore, who directly influenced Sukumar. Among other family friends were Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy. Upendrakishore studied the technology of blockmaking, conducted experiments, and set up a business of making quality blocks. The firm M/s U. Ray & Sons, where Sukumar and his younger brother Subinay were involved.

In 1906, Ray graduated with Hons. in Physics and Chemistry from the Presidency College, Kolkata. He was trained in photography and printing technology in England at the School of Photo-Engraving and Lithography, London, and was a pioneer of photography and lithography in India. While in England, he also delivered lectures about the songs of Rabindranath before he (Tagore) won the Nobel Prize. Meanwhile, Sukumar had also drawn acclaim as an illustrator. As a technologist, he also developed new methods of halftone blockmaking, and technical articles about this were published in journals in England.

Upendrakishore started a publishing firm, U. Ray and Sons, which Sukumar and Subinay helped to run. While Sukumar went to England to learn printing technology, Upendrakishore purchased land, constructed a building, and set up a printing press with facilities for high-quality halftone colour blockmaking and printing. He also launched the children's magazine, "Sandesh". Very soon after Sukumar's return from England, Upendrakishore died, and Sukumar ran the printing and publishing businesses and the Sandesh (magazine) for about eight years. His younger brother Subinoy helped him, and many relatives pitched in writing for "Sandesh".

Apart from the cultural and creative activities, Sukumar Ray was also a young man who was a leader of the reformist wing in the Brahmo Samaj. The Barahmo Samaj is the monotheistic unitarian branch of Hinduism launched by Raja Rammohan Roy following the philosophy of the monotheistic Hindu scripture Isha-Upanishad of 7th Century BC. Sukumar Ray wrote a long poem "Atiter Katha", which was a popular presentation of the history of the Brahmo Samaj—it was published as a small booklet to introduce the rationale of the Brahmo Samaj to children. Sukumar also campaigned to bring in Rabindranath Tagore, the most famous Brahmo of his time, as a leader of the Samaj.

 Death

Sukumar Ray died on September 10, 1923 of severe infectious fever, leishmaniasis, for which there was no cure at the time. He left behind his widow and their only child, Satyajit. Satyajit Ray would later become the most well known of Indian filmmakers and shoot a documentary on Sukumar Ray in 1987, 5 years before his own death.

Baburam The Snake Charmer

Hullo, there Baburam – what have you got in there?
Snakes? Aha – and do you think there's one that you could spare
You know, I'd love to have one, but let me tell you this–
The ones that bite aren't right for me – nor the ones that hiss.

I'd also skip the ones that butt
As well the ones that whistle
Or the ones that slink about
Or show their fangs, or bristle.

As for eating habits, I think it would be nice
To go for ones that only take a meal of milk and rice.
I'm sure you know the kind of snake that want from what I've said,
Do let me have one, Baburam, so I could bash its head.

[Original: 'Baburam Shapure' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

Khichuri

Was a duck, porcupine (to grammar I bow not)
Became Duckupine, but how I know not.

Stork tells turtle, "Indeed it's a delight-
Our Stortle shape is exactly right! "

Parrot-Head Lizard feels decidedly silly:
Must he spurn all bugs for a raw green chili?

The goat now hatches a plan to wed-
Mounts scorpion's neck-body unites with head!

The giraffe's reluctant to wander nearby
With his grasshopper wings, he longs to fly.

Says the cow, "What disease has entered the pen
That my rear belongs to a rascally hen? "

Observe the Whalephant: whale wants the sea;
Elephant says, "It's the jungle for you and me."

The lion has no horns, that's his woe-
He joins with a deer; and now antlers grow!

[Original: Khichuri (Bengali) , Translation by: Prasenjit Gupta]

Khichuri: a common dish all over India and among the Indian diaspora, a flavorful mixture of rice and dal cooked with spices; also used figuratively to mean a hodgepodge or mixture. The Anglicized spelling was 'kedgerie'.

Sukumar Ray

Old Tickler

Go East or West, go North or south, by land sea or air,
But before you go, make sure the old Tickler isn't there.
Tickler is a terror, and I'll tell you what he's after –
He'll have you stuffing tickle chops until you choke with laughter.

It's hard to tell where he lives, and harder to restrict him,
He's always round the corner looking for a victim.
His method is quite simple ; he'll grab you by your sleeve
And tell you anecdotes which he insists you must believe.

He thinks they're very funny, while others find them grim,
(They have to keep on laughing though, so as to humour him).
One wouldn't mind the stories if they were all one had to bear,
He also uses tickle – feathers, which is most unfair,

And so he goes on cackling, "Oh, but don't you think its funny –
Aunt Kitty selling pigeons' eggs and figs and cloves and honey
The eggs are long and conical, the cloves are all convoluted
The figs have arabesques on them nicely executed,
From dawn till dusk Aunt Kitty sings a string of motley airs
All mew and barks and brays and neighs (Aunt Kitty calls them Prayers)."
Saying so, he brings his hand behind your back to pinch you,
At which you have to laugh unless you want that he should lynch you

[Original: 'Katukutu Buro' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

Stew Much

A duck once met a porcupine ; they formed a corporation
Which called itself a Porcuduck (a beastly conjugation !).
A stork to a turtle said, 'Let's put my head upon your torso ;
We who are so pretty now, as Stortle would be more so !'
The lizard with the parrot's head thought : taking to the chilli
After years of eating worms is absolutely silly.
A prancing goat - one wonders why - was driven by a need
To bequeath its upper portion ta a crawling centipede.
The giraffe with grasshopper's limbs reflected : Why should I
Go for walks in grassy fields, now that I can fly ?
The nice contented cow will doubtless get a frightful shock
On finding that its lower lombs belong to a fighting cock.
It's obvious the Whalephant is not a happy notion :
The head goes for the jungle, while the tail turns to the ocean,
The lion's lack of horns distressed him greatly, so
He teamed up with a dear - now watch his antlers grow !

[Original: 'Haans chilo sojaru' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

Sur-Prize

Innocent pen, innocent ink [and Muse]
On an innocent page scribbles abuse--
"Monkey, stupid, queer and dud,
Donkey, silly, diffuse, absurd,"
Again, writes the pen with equal care
Seemly, sweet words proper and fair--
"Soft, precious, sober, wise
Sweetie, cutie", goodness surprise!
Words concealed within the mind
On paper do their expression find
Under twist and turn of alphabet's bulk
Some cheer, the others sulk
Regular sequence of same old ink
Makes some laugh, takes others on tears' brink
Scripts do not strike, neither confine nor yell
Why then do men laugh or cry, just tell?
Black and white patterns, what magic do they know?
I rack my brains, but really am unable to follow!

[Original: 'Ashchorjyo' (Bengali), Translation by: Zinia Mitra]

Sukumar Ray

The King Of Bombaria

In the land of Bombaria
The customs are peculiar.
The king, for instance, advocates
Gilded frames for chocolates.
The queen, who seldom goes to bed
Straps a pillow round her head.
The courtiers- or so I'm told-
Turn cartwheels when they have a cold:

... The King's old aunt- an autocrat-
Hits pumpkins with her cricket bat
While Uncle loves to dance Mazurkas
Wearing garlands strung with hookaha.
All of this, though mighty queer,
Is natural in Bombaria.

[Original: 'Bombagarer Raja' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray
(the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

The Missing Whiskers

They always knew the Boss babu
To be a gentle fellow
What happens if he in a jiffy
Turns all blue and yellow?

He was seated in his chair
Relaxed and free from care,
Indulging in his post-meridian nap,
When without a warning,
In the middle of his yawning,
Something right inside him seemed to snap.

With muffled cries he rolled his eyes
And threw his arms about,
'Alas I'm sick. Come save me quick'
Was what he sputtered out.

They heard him and they all began
To cluster round the stricken man
And pondered on the safest plan.
To bring him to his senses.'
Call the police ' 'No - the Vet'
His partner said, 'He seems upset'
'But careful he might bite yet'
Said his amanuensis.

But Boss Babu - his face all red and swollen -
Now declared, 'My moustache has bean stolen'.

'Stolen whiskers? ' they all cried,
'The Babu must be pacified"
And so they held a mirror to his face.
'There sir', they said 'You see
Your whiskers where they used to be
Who would dare to put you in disgrace? '
Babu now began to scream
'You dunder heads, I would not dream
Of ever wearing whiskers so outrageous.
They make me look a shaggy butcher

Know this - in the near future
I ought to - no, I must reduce your wages.
This he did. And then at random
He composed a memorandum
Herewith quoted (minus appendages) .

If you think your employees
Deserve your love - correction please:
They don't. They're fools. No commonsense.
They're full of crass incompetence.
The ones in my establishment
Deserve the highest punishment.
They show their cheek in not believing
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving
Their moustaches, I predict,
Will soon be mercilessly picked;
And when that happens they will know
What Man is to Moustachio:
Man is slave, Moustache is master,
Losing which Man meets disaster!

[Original: 'Gonf Churi' (Benglai) , Translation by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

The Power Of Music

When summer comes, we hear the hums

- Bhisma Lochan Sharma.
You catch his strain on hill and plain from Delhi
- down to Burma
He sings as though he's staked his life, he sings
as though he's hell-bent;
The people, dazed, retire amazed although they
- know it's well-meant.
They're trampled in the panic rout or languish
pale and sickly,
And plead, 'My friend, we're near our end, oh
- stop your singing quickly! '
The bullock-carts are overturned, and horses □
- line the roadside;
But Bhisma Lochan, unconcerned, goes
- booming out his broadside.
The wretched brutes resent the blare the hour
they hear it sounded,
They whine and stare with feet in air or wonder
- quite confounded.
The fishes dived below the lake in frantic search
for silence,
The very trees collapse and shake - you hear the
- crash a mile hence -
And in the sky the feathered fly turn turtle while
- they're winging,
Again we cry, 'We're going to die, oh won't you
- stop your singing? '
But Bhisma's soared beyond our reach, how'er
we plead and grumble;
The welkin weeps to hear his screech, and mighty
mansions tumble.
But now there comes a billy goat, a most
ragacious fellow,
He downs his horns and charges straight, with
bellow answ'ring bellow.
The strains of song are tossed and whirled by
blast of brutal violence,
And Bhisma Lochan grants the world the golden

ꠘft of silence.

[Original: 'Ganer Gunto' (Bengali) , Translated by: Sukanta
Chaudhury]

Sukumar Ray

The Rule Of 21

In Shiva's homeland, the rules are quite strange, as I can truly attest,
If someone slips, and falls by err, police come by to arrest.
Your ordeal continues inside of a court room,
Where judges are ready to fine you a fortune -
21 rupees is the price you must pay,
but wait till you hear what they charge in the day -
for sneezing before six, a ticket is needed,
without this in hand, you will be ill-treated -
they beat you like drums, and snuff up your nose,
you sneeze not just once, but 21 blows!
The fine for teeth-chattering is 4 rupees flat,
for growing a mustache a bit more than that -
a hundred nickles, paid out in cash,
plus 21 prayers with both hands clasped.

While walking the streets, your steps cannot wander,
a step left or right and the king is called yonder.
He summons his guards who come in with a run,
to force you to sit while you sweat in the sun.
There is some relief, as they offer some water,
unfortunately so much that its not worth the bother.

But this isn't the worst of it, by any means really,
for those who write poems, their punishment is silly,
they're placed in a cage under strict lock and key,
with no chance of exile, or option to flee.
A hundred Orrisans are placed, so it's fabled,
proclaiming exhaustively the multiplications table.
And then there's more math as you tend to a store,
account for the sales - it's a menial chore.

One last offense, that's punishable by law,
Is snoring at all - it's seen as a flaw.
The glue from a bilva tree, the dung from a cow,
It's all used quite viciously, here's how:
they rub it in coarsely, the hair of an offender,
who's tied to a tree and spun like a blender.
For 21 spins he goes round and round,
and 21 hours till his feet touch the ground.

[Original: 'ekushe ain' (Bengali), Translation by: Sujoy and Chandana Chatterjee]

Sukumar Ray

The Sons Of Ramgaroo

To the sons of Ramgaroo
Laughter is taboo
A funny tale will make them wail:
"We're not amused, boo - hoo!"

They live in constant fear
Of chuckles far and near
And start and bound at every sound
That brings a breath of cheer.

Their peace of mind forfeiting
They sit and keep repeating:
'We believe in only grieving;
Happiness is fleeting.'

They shun the summer breeze
That whispers through the trees
For fear the stir of leaf and bur
Their funny bones should tease.

They keep a wary eye
On the autumn sky
For signs of mirth above the earth
In foaming cumuli.

The darkness of the night
Brings them no respite
As fireflies extemporise
Their dances of delight.

Those of you who are jolly
And feel to woe is folly
Must not refuse the Ramgaroos
Their right to melancholy.

The Ramgaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair.

[Original: 'Ragaroorer Sana' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

The Suitable Groom

Heard your daughter's getting married,
From Posta, the news I carried.
Gangaram, the groom you chose,
I wish to describe, the quality he owes.
Now listen, listen, Hark, Hark!
His complexion is awfully dark.
His facial cutting, is somewhat round,
Rather an owl, just to sound.
Education? Oh, just wait!
Not so bright under any rate.
Nineteen times he had to pluck,
Till he left for his rotten luck.
Financial career? Poor indeed,
Somehow makes both ends meet.
And his brothers who are there,
Rather inhuman, know you dear.
One is stubborn, the other insane,
Quite a troupe of hollow men.
Oh, I missed the other two
Real gems are they, not to rue.
One was smart, but now in prison,
Forged bank notes, (So petty a reason!)
The youngest one in profession grand
Earns five bucks from a rustic band.
And Gangaram - is real meek,
Weak, feeble, and always sick.
But they are royal, Is that clear?
Tell you, they are King Kansha's heirs.
And Shyam Lahiri of Banagram,
Is somehow kin to Gangaram.
Overall the groom is not so bad,
Cheer up, cheer up, don't be sad.

[Original: 'Sat Patro' (Bengali) , Translated by: Ruchira Ghosh]

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Sukumar Ray

Uncle's Invention

Chandidas's uncle has invented a device
Which is causing everyone to praise it to the skies.
When Uncle was a year old, or maybe even younger,
He came out with a lusty yell that sounded just like 'Goonga.'
At such an age most other tots just manage 'Glug' and 'Mum,'
So "Goonga' like a thunderbolt, struck everybody dumb.
And all who heard, said 'Here's a boy – provided he survives –
Will one day surely bring about a change in human lives.'
It seems the day is here at last, and victory is won
With what will make a five miles walk seem like only one.
I've seen the contrivance myself, and say with confidence
Never had invention had such greater significance.
Let me tell you how it strikes the eyes of a beholder:
First of all, one notes that you must strap it to your shoulder.
An arm extends, and from its end one notes there hangs a hook
To which you bait some food – stuff which you either buy or cook.
Naturally the choice depends upon your predilections
(It's wiser to restrict yourself to hookable confections).
The sight of morsel dangling close provokes the urge to eat
Which, transcribed to your motive force, soon propels the feet.
Before you know you're on the go, your mind, intent on feeding,
But since the food is travelling too you never stop your speeding
The outcome, I need hardly add, will change our whole existence
Because we'll walk for nourishment, and never mind the distance.
No wonder's there's a move afoot, to honour, Uncle soon
For bestowing on humanity an everlasting boon.

[Original: 'Khuror Kal' (Bengali), Translated by: Satyajit Ray (the able son of Sukumar Roy)]

Sukumar Ray

Woody Old Man

The old man sits at his boiling pot,
Eating boiled wood--even scalding hot.
He nods his head and hums a song
With his sage's air, he could do no wrong.

He mutters words that no one's understood:
"The sky dangles cobwebs, hence holes in wood."
His pate turns hot, his sweat falls and splatters;
He yells in rage, "Who can plumb such matters?"

Those blasted donkeys, completely blind,
Know nothing at all, keep changing their minds.
They don't know the basics: which wood has the best juice,
And why, on the moon's eleventh night, wood holes grow loose.'

He scribbles his calculations on the ground:
Cracked wood, hollow wood--he writes numbers all around--
Which holes are tasty and which unwell,
What sort of fissure has what kind of smell.

One log against the other he'll hit
And say, "Every kind of wood I can outwit!
I've handled wood and lumber and tree,
I know how to deal with their depravity.

Which wood turns tame, which wood has whims,
Which wood is wistful, and which full of vim.
Which wood can't tell what's good and what's best--
And I know why some wood has more holes than the rest."

[Original: 'Kath Buro' (Bengali), Translation by: Prasenjit Gupta]

Sukumar Ray