

Discussions on Science Communication, Popularisation and Extension in Bengali – the Road Ahead



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Subha Das Mollick is a teacher of Media and Film Studies and a documentary filmmaker. A post graduate in Physics from Delhi University, she switched her career from teaching Physics to teaching media in 1996 and was instrumental in setting up the nascent departments of Film Studies and Mass Communication & Videography at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Today, as one of the founder members of Bichitra Pathshala, she is engaged in experimenting with the pedagogy of the moving image. Bichitra Pathshala conducts workshops with teachers to demonstrate how film clippings can be effectively integrated in teaching learning designs.

Modern science as practised in India and modern Bengali prose, both have their roots in Bengal Renaissance, a cultural, social and intellectual movement in Bengal in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Raja Ram Mohun Roy played a significant role in shaping Bengali prose and he was singularly responsible for initiating modern science in the education curriculum of Bengal. Interestingly, his successors like Devendranath Tagore, Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others wrote about science and astronomy in the newly developed Bengali prose. None of them were men of science, but scientific ideas spread rapidly among the Bengali people. The Bengali mind was ignited by the mechanistic worldview of Newtonian science. Science was perceived as an important tool in creating a progressive and rational nation.

When Father Eugene Lafont, Rector of St. Xavier's College gave his popular science lectures, the common people purchased tickets for Re 1/- and flocked to his lectures. Father Lafont had a protégé called Jagadish Chandra Bose, who is today hailed as the father of modern science in India. What is not well known is that Bose also wrote the first science fiction in Bengali prose. Titled *Runaway Cyclone*, this short story set the trend of Bengali science fiction writing – a trend that rapidly gained momentum after India's independence in the hands of Satyajit Ray, Adrish Bardhan, Premendra Mitra and others. Bengali science fiction literature is a thriving genre till date as is evident in the two websites www.kalpabiswa.com and <http://joydhakweb.com>.

Rabindranath Tagore was a close friend of Jagadish Chandra Bose. The scientist fuelled the natural curiosity of the poet in matters of science. A few years before his demise, Tagore penned *Viswa Parichay* and dedicated it to the young scientist Satyendranath Bose. In *Viswa Parichay*, science, poetry and philosophy have blended into one.

A language in which the national poet has flexed his scientific imagination has a bright future. The task of popularizing science and reaching out to the people rests as much with men and women of literature as with scientists. And the rich treasure house of Bengali

science fiction should be tapped creatively to further the cause of science popularization and building scientific temper of the nation.

Bichitra Pathshala, a young organization committed to 'learning with moving images', is equipped to develop teaching learning designs and creative exercises using sci fi literature and cinema.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- The tradition of popular science writing in Bengali language can be traced back to Bengal Renaissance
- Most of these articles and books were written by men and women of literature, not men of science
- The tradition reached a peak when Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Viswa Parichay* at the fag end of his life
- In this era the trend of science fiction writing also developed. The trend was initiated by none other than Jagadish Chandra Bose, which a short story titled *Runaway Cyclone*
- Today Bengal can boast of a rich treasure trove of science fiction literature
- Science fiction films and stories can be used creatively as resource material for popularizing science
- Bichitra Pathshala, a young organization committed to 'learning with moving images', is equipped to develop teaching learning designs and creative exercises using sci fi literature and cinema.

NOTE

In collaboration with Vigyan Prasar, Bichitra Pathshala has reached out to more than 300 teachers in West Bengal as well as seven cities outside West Bengal, through workshops titled "Cinema in the Classroom". In these workshops teachers were given hands on training in developing teaching learning designs using films from the Vigyan Prasar archive. Teachers developed lesson plans on Chemistry behind miracles, healthy food habits, organic farming and much more.