

Bengali Webzines: Literature in the Digital Mode

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We live [...] in the twilight of the Age of the Printed Book. It is at least arguable that many of today's children, and most if not all of their children, will come to think of the book as a quaint device from another era – useful in many ways, to be sure, and no doubt never to altogether disappear; but fixed, linear, noninteractive, and, most restrictive of all, essentially confined to a single medium.

(Finneran 1996: ix)

It is debatable to what extent these remarks, uttered a quarter of a century ago in the preface to a volume on literature after and beyond the book, have proven accurate. It appears that the printed book has been more resilient than Finneran predicted, the common picture being one of diversification rather than replacement. Material books printed on paper are still a long way from becoming “quaint devices”. But doubtless the conventional book now contests for its share on the market with other, digital formats – plus, more fundamentally, with new forms of orality and visuality beyond the traditional audio-visual media (radio, television, cinema, etc.), that are currently being facilitated by the Internet. The picture is similar in the case of periodicals, journals and newspapers. In Bengal, with some delay due to the technological hurdles involved in reproducing the Bengali script online, the diversification between print and online versions has become a common feature in the last decade, resulting in a two-tier mediality. All major Bengali newspapers have online editions these days, from top sellers like *Ānanda Bāṅār Patrikā*² and *Pratham Ālo*³ to regional papers like Chittagong's *Dainik Pūrbakoṇ* (Dainik Pūrbakoṇ 2020).

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² According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, *Ānanda Bāṅār Patrikā* sold more than a million copies daily in 2018 and is ranked as number 14 among the top-selling newspapers in India (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2018).

Similar developments are taking place in the domain of literary journals. The diversification, or partial transition from print to digital format, is exemplified by the sophisticated literary magazine *Kāli o kalam* (“Ink and Pen”), edited under the direction of Anisuzzaman since 2004 as a forum of contemporary Bengali writing in Bangladesh and beyond. *Kāli o kalam* started off as a print magazine. For a couple of years into the past, monthly issues are provided for free download in the digital archive of *Kāli o kalam*’s website. Along with this, certain portions of those issues are separately prepared for online publication under the category *natun kalam* (“new pens”). However, the main bulk of texts continues to be presented and organised in the printed issues, and the online presentation is so far not more than an add-on to the conventional format. Community functions are absent from *Kāli o kalam*’s webpage (Kāli o kalam 2020).

Webzines or webmags, the theme of this contribution, differ from these news media and conventional literary magazines both in character and in targeted readership. Basically functioning as digital platforms for literary and cultural activities, Bengali webzines stand in a certain continuity with little magazines that have for long been such a distinctive medium in the Bengali cultural sphere. As digital formats, they also border on Internet platforms such as blogs and share much common space with social media, particularly in as far as they encourage and technically enable community functions. They are characterised by their rather young editorial teams, authors and readers, and thus to some extent mark a generational shift in reading habits.

In the following, I will attempt a brief outline of this rather recent avatar in popular Bengali literary and web culture. The webzines I will look at are small- and middle-scale, community-oriented online magazines that have in the last 25 years been evolving in both parts of Bengal as well as in the North American and European Bengali diasporas. After sketching the beginnings of Bengali webzines and assessing their editorial self-positioning, I will present and discuss three particular cases: epitaphs of deceased cult author Nabarun Bhattacharya (Nabāruṅ Bhaṭṭācārya) in the Bangladeshi webzine *Lāl jīper dāyēri* (“Red Jeep’s Diary”); a portrait of African artist Jean-Paul Mika in *Paraspar* (“One Another”), equally from Bangladesh; and Bengali climate fiction in the West Bengali science fic-

³ In the advertisement section of their homepage, *Pratham Ālo* claim to generate 280 Mio page views per month and to reach 7.6 Mio people every day with their print and online editions combined (Pratham Ālo 2020).

tion webzine *Kalpabiśva* (“Phantasy World”). In conclusion, I summarise some media-specific developments in webzine literature.

Digital Literature

An outline of Bengali webzines can conveniently start with a motto, particularly if there is a catchy one at hand. The following line is from *Uttarādhikār* (“Heritage”), the name of a yearly award for web literature in Bengali, inaugurated in 2016 and funded by a number of online publishers. In the announcement it says (Kalpabiśva [uttarādhikār] 2020) (Figure 1):

*pāthar hāriye yāy, hāriye yāy tāl'pātā, bhurjapatra, pyāpāirās, pārc'ment, kāgaj.
sāhitya bēce thāke.* (“Stones get lost, and so do palm leaves, birch leaves, papyrus, parchment and paper, but literature remains alive.”)

The webpage further claims that “Bengali literature is presently being reborn through new electronic media”⁴ (ibid.), and illustrates this message by a stylised book – actually a hybrid between a book and a computer screen, unfolding its wings like a butterfly out of a keyboard set on a globe, or more exactly on the South Asian part of it, apparently to commence its global journey (Figure 1).

The existence of such an award would hardly deserve mention *per se*. Literary prizes have a record going back to colonial times in Bengal,⁵ and have for a long time been a constant feature in the Bengali literary landscape. State institutions like the Sahitya Akademi and the Vidyapeeth in

⁴ Bengali original: *natun ilektranik mādhyame bāmlā sāhityer nabajanma ghaṭe caleche ekhan.*

⁵ Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s *Kulīn kulasarbasva* (1854), regarded as the first successful proscenium theatre play in Bengali, was authored in competition for an award of 50 Rupees by one Babu Kalichandra Chaturddhvarīṅ (Tarkaratna 1991: 3). Cf. also Bipin Bihari Shom’s “Physical Errors of Hinduism”, a prize essay in the *Calcutta Review* in 1849 (discussed in Strube unpublished: 148 f.). Literary patrons in the 19th century included people like Kaliprasanna Sinha, a famous writer himself, who indirectly supported a number of periodicals and provided the fine of 1000 Rupies Reverend Long had to pay for having published Dinabandhu Mitra’s proscribed play *Nil'darpan* (1860). Regular literary awards appear to have been instituted since the late 19th century, with the cosmetics and hair oil company Kuntalin taking the lead in 1896 (personal communication with Alokeranjan Dasgupta, April 2020).

India or the Bangla Academy in Bangladesh, the Pashchimbanga Bangla Academy and the Nazrul Institute, private publishing houses like Calcutta-based Ananda Publishers as well as literary magazines like the above-mentioned *Kāli o kalam* from Dhaka, have been active in bestowing awards on writers or particular works.



Figure 1: Announcement of Uttarādhikār Oṅeb Sāhitya Puraskār 2018 (Kalpabiśva 2018).

What is significant about the Uttarādhikār Web Literature Award (*uttarādhikār oṅeb sāhitya puraskār*) is, on the one hand, its emphasis on science fiction, fostering a tradition in Bengali literature that can boast of quite a thriving record in the 20th century, but has been regarded as popular literature somewhat below the necessary level of dignity. On the other hand, what strikes us about this particular award is the explicit focus it places on the new mediality of web literature. Somewhat in contradiction to its motto's message that literature exists quite independently of the media that carry it, the award is meant exclusively for one of them, the Internet. The self-proclaimed idea of the award is to preserve pre-digital phenomena like literature in the media transition towards the digital age.⁶

⁶ The line referred to in note 4 continues as follows: *i-sāhityer sei uttarādhikār*

From Diasporic Forum to Cyber Hangout

It is indeed undeniable that digital formats in general, and webzines in our particular case, have become a feature to be reckoned with in the Bengali literary sphere. The Bangladeshi *Lāl jiper dāyeri*, for instance, one of the leading five or six webzines from the country until about 2015, gives the 2014 figures of visitors as more than 100,000: the bulk are Bangladeshi readers, followed by a very substantial number of US readers – presumably non-resident Bangladeshis in the main – and a much lesser figure of Indians.⁷ *9 nāmbār bās* (“Bus Number 9”), another Bangladeshi webzine, gives a total number of 44,117 “passengers” (9 nāmbār bās [about] 2020).⁸

As hinted in the beginning, part of my contention in this article is, following Dhaka-based webzine editor and English scholar Anika Shah, that webzines can be conceived as an electronic continuation or extension of the extremely rich scene of Bengali little magazines. As far as the initial impulse for going online is concerned, however, this connection does not seem to hold true. The first Bengali webzine appears to be *Parabās* (“Exile”), the outcome of an initiative launched from California in the 1990s to use the Internet for connecting diasporic Bengalis among themselves and with Bengal. Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare state (Iyer & Zare 2009: 200f.):

Launched in 1997, Parabaas sought partly to address, in the words of one of its founders, “the internet not allowing a level-playing field for (non-English, specifically Bangla) cultures/communities”. [...] The site’s focus has always been on Bengali literature, but this has grown to include trans-

astitvake binamra svikṛti dite suru hala bāṛṣik uttarādhikār oḅeb'sāhitya puraskār („In order to give some modest recognition to the existence of that heir of this literature, the yearly Uttarādhikār Web Literature Award was started“).

⁷ The top countries of origin of the *pāṭhak yātrī*, literally “reader-travellers”, with figures above 1,000 are: Bangladesh 57,573, USA 34,389, India 6,417, UK 2,203, Australia 2,156, and Canada 1,646. Germany is in position 8 with 637 visitors, and surprisingly Italy, one of the main centres of Bangladeshi migration in Europe, is far off with only 8 visitors. Unfortunately, the flag counter statistics these data were retrieved from in 2019 are no longer to be found on *Lāl jiper dāyeri*’s website.

⁸ Figures for other webzines are not available, and repeated queries sent to the editor of *Rās’print*, a very popular webzine edited from Sylhet, have to date remained unanswered.

lations into Bengali (of both creative work and interview with writers in other languages) as well as translations of Bengali literature into English.⁹

The foundational editorial of *Parabās* from 1997 proclaims that, “*Parabās* inc. was born with the aim to put Bengali language and culture and their discussion on the Internet.”¹⁰ The editors deplore that since the net is a technology developed in the West, Bengali script does not work on it, and use image files to upload Bengali text. The goal is to create a webzine to enable Bengali-speaking Internet users to engage with Bengali culture and literature *in Bengali script* (ibid.). *Parabās* can boast of quite an impressive archive of original Bengali writings.

Not as historic and pioneering, but equally marked by the diasporic urge to connect back to the homeland is *Urāl'pul* (officially anglicised *Urhalpool*), another US-based webzine with the programmatic title translating as “flyover” and the mission to connect the continents. *Urāl'pul* was inaugurated in November 2008 and celebrated in a big function and speech by, among others, famous novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay (Sunil Gaṅgopādhyāy) at the Calcutta book fair in 2010.¹¹ *Urāl'pul* hosts some original writings, but is in the main conceived as outlets of literature that happens elsewhere, i.e. in the print sphere.

More specifically cyberspatial are the more recent webzines from Bangladesh and India that I turn to now and will focus on in the following. *Rāś'prinṭ* (“Rush Print”), *Lāl jiper dāyeri*, *Paraspar*, *Śiriṣer ḍāl'pālā* (“Shirisha-Flower Twigs”), and *9 nāmbār bās* (Bus Number 9) from Bangladesh, as well as *Sāhityakyāphe* (“Literary Café”), *Kalpabiśva* and *Megh'bāmlā* (“Cloud Bengal”) from West Bengal are some of the quite numerous webzines from the 2000s and 2010s that attract original writings in the main, and are more self-conscious in using the new medium than their predecessors of the first hour.¹² Generally, just as little maga-

⁹ Cf. also the online review of its history and profile in Somanjana Chatterjee (2013). Chatterjee claims that *Rāhuler dāyeri theke* by Indranil Dasgupta was the first online novel in Banglish – which however doesn't seem to be true because the work is entirely in Bengali (Dāś'gupta n.d.).

¹⁰ Bengali original: *āntarjāle bāmlā bhāṣā o saṁskṛti tule dharā ebaṇi tār carcār uddeśye parabās, in-k-er janma* (Parabās [about us] 2020).

¹¹ Sunil Gangopadhyay's 2010 speech is available on YouTube (Gaṅgopādhyāy 2010). However, *Urāl'pul* appears to have stopped in 2015, the year of the current issues and latest archive entries (*Urāl'pul* [archives] 2020).

¹² *Rāś'prinṭ*, e.g., gives links to quite a number of other webzines; the list contains

zines in pre-digital times, many webzines seem to be short-lived, which shows in the scarcity or absence of recent posts and the lack of maintenance evident from expired links etc. However, facilitated by their online 'liquidity' and the different temporality of the Internet, these things do not make them unavailable, and they linger on in a way quite different from sold-out paper issues of little magazines. In fact, some of the quite recent upshots we will deal with have in the meantime already ended their active life, like Calcutta-based *Megh'bamīlā* and the Bangladeshi *Lāl jīper dāyjeri*, while others, such as *Rās'prinṭ* from Sylhet or *Kalpabiśva* from Calcutta, seem to have consolidated their web presence.

As for the self-staging of the magazines, it is interesting to look at the editorials or mission statements most of them carry. These items function like paratexts in framing the reading experience, even though, unlike prefaces and introductions in print, they no longer precede a central text or body of texts in linear book manner, but often feature just as a choice in a menu and are arguably more likely to be skipped or overlooked than the foreword or introduction of a book. In the interpretations of webzine reading they offer, these editorials usually evoke the imagery of informal, leisurely get-togethers of a friendly community. *Sāhityakyāphe*, for instance, projects itself as a cyber-hangout in the following terms (Sāhityakyāphe [home] 2020):

Even though Bengalis are dispersed in various countries, the online [mode] makes it oftentimes seem nowadays that we all are sitting in some coffeehouse in our own city and engaging in *āḍḍā* together, [discussing] literature from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. *Sāhityakyāphe* shall be the reflection of this *āḍḍā*. Those committed to writing and creativity shall be its main driving force! Instead of any single editor, it is them who shall be its editors and readers!

The idea of a community space and of a free public sphere looms large in these words, together with an implicit reference to engaging with literature from the Global South. The *āḍḍā*, the informal get-together for spirited talk and snacks that is perceived and much discussed as a central institution of Bengali sociality,¹³ serves as a comparison to the virtual community experience *Sāhityakyāphe* aims to imitate.

also other items like Rabindranath Tagore's work edition, but features at least 30 proper webzines (Rās'prinṭ [home] 2020).

¹³ Recent contributions on *āḍḍā* include a well-known eponymous chapter in

Lāl jiper dāyēri likewise strikes a very interactive note in the way it greets its visitors. The “red jeep’s diary” of its title vaguely evokes the image of a small group of people jointly setting out to explore and protocol their experiences. The webzine’s editorial eventually also alludes to the museum as another type of public arena it wants to remodel in cyberspace as a collective space open for use by a community of unique individuals (*Lāl jiper dāyēri* [page 0] 2020):

Lāl jiper [sic] *dāyēri* is a webmag. We do not only want to upload stories, novels or poems. We want your unique writings about your favorite poems, stories, novels or paintings. We have no objections even if such write-ups have only 15 or 20 sentences. [...] We want unusual books to be discovered for everybody through personal fascination. [...] And *Lāl jiper diary* wants to become a museum of your unique writings on your favorite book, poet, poem, story or novel.¹⁴

The editorial “*Rās’priṅṅ’rekhā*” of *Rās’priṅṅ* of 2015 calls the webzine a *melāpyāṅṅdel* and a “get-together” (*geṭ-ṭuḡedār*), thus covering the ground between a performative space familiar in Bengali religious culture, particularly the Durga Puja, and an international, western type of sociality. Like in the aforementioned webzines, the *Rās’priṅṅ* editors extend their open invitation to non-established, new writers (*khari-hāte likhiye*), thus again making explicit a certain informality of the exercise.¹⁵ And another Bangladeshi webzine, somewhat in extension of the jeep in *Lāl jiper dāyēri*, uses a local public bus as a metaphor for the public and yet secluded space it aims to create. The mixture of intellectual jargon and English loan words with Dhakaite dialect strikes the reader as a transgression

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (Chakrabarty 2000: 180–213) and two edited volumes, one on the Bengalis’ *āḍḍās* in general (Cākī 2009), the other on Calcutta’s *āḍḍās* (Dās 2010).

¹⁴ Bengali original: *lāl jiper dāyēri ekṭi oḡeb’myāḡ. śudhumātra galpa, upanyās, bā kabitā āp’loḡ kar’te cāi nā ām’rā. ām’rā cāi, bhāla lāḡār kabitā, galpa, upanyās, citrakalā niye lekhā āp’nār asādhāraṅ gadyaṭi. eman’kī se gadya yaḍi 15–20 bākyer haḡ tāte-o āmāder āpatti nei. [...] cāi byaktir muḡdhabodhatār bhitar diḡe asādhāraṅ granthagulo ābiṣkṛta hok sabār janye. [...] ār āp’nār priya grantha, priya kabi, kabitā, galpa, upanyās samparke āp’nār lekhā asādhāraṅ gadyer miujiyām haḡe uṭṭ’te cāi lāl jiper dāyēri.*

¹⁵ This editorial actually announces *Rās’priṅṅ*’s new layout in 2015, i.e. three years after its start (*Rās’priṅṅ* [*rās’priṅṅ’rekhā*] 2015).

of conventional linguistic codes and marks the somewhat countercultural and unruly image this webzine cultivates (9 Nāmbār Bās [about] 2020):

9 Nāmbār Bās [„bus number 9“], with its subtle pretence of impartiality, is an eco-feminist, anarcho-socialist, anti-postmodernist, postmodern mag. It is a local bus, therefore its doors don't close. You can send any kind of writing to our address (noynumberbus@gmail.com).¹⁶

Like conventional periodicals, all the webzines in one way or the other have a set of categories under which they organise their material. *Paraspar*, for instance, lists the following items: *sāksātkār – gadya – kabitā – puṅgar-mudraṅ – anubād – bai niye – calaccitra – citrakalā – nāṭak – pārasparik – anuṣṭhān – buk śap – biśeṣ saṃkhyā* (“interviews, prose, poetry, reprints, translations, on books, films, art, theatre, interaction, events, book shop, special issue¹⁷”). With some webmags, a regular issue, sometimes even hinting at the non-virtual hard copy edition appearing ‘out there’, is still a tangible presence (*Kalpabiśva; Megh'bāmlā*¹⁸), while with others, these categories with their line-up of postings are the structure to go by (*Rās'priṅṭ*). The range of topics in these webzines is basically what we expect in literary magazines and cultural journalism. Foci vary from particular literary genres like science fiction to general, reader-produced literature, arts, criticism, film reviews, popular culture, international literature, art, music, and, as far as Bengali literature is concerned, from Bangladesh and West Bengal to North America.

In the following sections I will go into three particular topics rather randomly chosen, guided by my own interest, but also with a view to

¹⁶ Bengali original: 9 nāmbār bās ekṭi nīrapekṣatār sūkṣma bhān'kāri iko-pheminist-enārko-sosyālist-enti-post'madārnisṭ- post'madārni myāg. eiṭā lokāl bās, phale geiṭ'lak tathā ruddhaduṣṭār naṣ. āp'nego ye-kono kisimer lekhā āmāder ṭhikānāy (noynumberbus@gmail.com) pāṭhāte pāren.

¹⁷ *Paraspar* has special *pūjā* and *id* issues assembled in digital format (*Paraspar* [biśeṣ saṃkhyā] 2020). As for *Rās'priṅṭ*, started in 2012 and revamped in 2015, the editors comment on the redesigned structure and proliferation of rubrics (*bibhāg*) (*Rās'priṅṭ* [rās'priṅṭ'rekhā] 2015).

¹⁸ Regular appearance of this Calcutta-based webzine started in 2015 and ended two years later (*Megh'bāmlā* [home] 2020). At present, only the category *Āj'ker khabar* is being maintained with cross-posts from other media agencies (*Zee Bengali, Ei Samaṣ, etc.*).

identifying certain specific traits of the webzine as a newly-established medium in the Bengali public and literary spheres.

Epitaphs for Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948–2014)

In July 2014, Nabarun Bhattacharya died. Son of Mahasweta Devi and Bijan Bhattacharya, Nabarun had attained a somewhat cultic status even during his lifetime – a nonconformist, unorthodox leftist, writing a very idiosyncratic prose, and often employing a revolutionary rhetoric. His early death triggered lots of reactions in the media, social media, and also in webzines. In *Lāl jiper dāyēri* I found a whole section of tributes to him, some of them random samplings from Facebook, but also a number of obituaries by well-known journalists and intellectuals. These texts are invariably characterised by lavish allusions to Nabarun’s works and characters and a rhetoric of hero worship. Under the heading “Nabarun is no longer there but the state of war is still on”¹⁹ – alluding to his book *Yuddhaparisthiti* (“State of War”) (Bhaṭṭācārya 2006) – the curators of that edition, Shibu Kumar Shil, Imran Firdaus, Bijay Ahmad and Arnab Deb write (*Lāl jiper dāyēri* [nabāruṅ-smaraṅ] 2020):

Nabarun, after your great last journey we have assembled with the only purpose of sitting around the planchette. We know that we’ll meet again. We’ll meet again. At the time of the last draw. At the moment of the counter attack! Until then accept our collective salute, master! We are sure the counter-revolution will live long.²⁰

Ample references to Herbert, the protagonist and “master” of Nabarun’s break-through novel *Hār’bārṭ* (Bhaṭṭācārya 1993), and his contacts with the netherworld through spiritistic devices, are combined with a dose of rebellious parlance to revel in a mood of afflicted revolutionary orphans. Among the seven items in this section, there is a compilation of Facebook obituaries, e.g. one by Kabir Suman that has an almost biblical ring to it: “Wherever man will rebel, wherever he will give rebellion a language

¹⁹ Bengali original: *nabāruṅ nei tabe yuddha paristhiti jārī āche*.

²⁰ Bengali original: *nabāruṅ āp’nār mahāprayāṅer par sreph plyān’ceter uddeśya nijei samabeta hayechi ām’rā. jāni dekhā habe. pher dekhā habe. šeṣ dra er samāj. kāuṅṭār āṭāker muhūrte! tār āge āmāder samabeta syāluṭ grahaṅ karuṅ ostād. pratibiplab dīrghajībī habe niścaṅ’i*.

through his own creation, Nabarun will be there.”²¹ (Lāl jīper ḍāyeri [tribiut] 2020) Kabir closes by describing a meeting at Jadavpur University with “Comrade Nabarun” when the latter supposedly said: “This time I won’t let go, sister-fucker, this time I won’t let go” – a mantra, he writes, that won’t stop but continue in the future. The curse word, of course, has the perlocutionary function of certifying and strengthening in-group membership.²²

Faruk Wasif (Phāruk Oḃāsiph), well-known author, journalist of Dhaka daily *Pratham Ālo*, and webzine writer – his most recent submission is a poem on the Corona virus, “Param karonāmay” (Oḃāsiph 2020a) – contributes another interesting and equally transgressive statement in *Lāl jīper ḍāyeri*’s section on Nabarun Bhattacharya, titled “Asantoṣer byakarāṇe [sic] ga.ā tār man” (“His Mind is Built in the Grammar of Dissent”). Taken from literary scholar Renato Poggioli’s book *The Phoenix and the Spider* (Poggioli 1957), the “grammar of dissent” serves Wasif as a keyword for his short account of Nabarun Bhattacharya’s role in West Bengal. He is projected as an outsider who sees through the false pretensions of bourgeois society. Wasif calls him a Bengali Dostoevsky and compares his work to Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider* and Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.²³ The diction is part of the message (Oḃāsiph 2020b):

Whatever was good, what was Sunil Gangopadhyay’s “first light”²⁴ – Nabarun crushed all the lice in the matted pubic hair of that Calcutta’s enlightenment, Hindu-ness, development, rationalism, well-maintained leftist cover and scientism.²⁵

²¹ Bengali original: *yekhāne mānuṣ bidroha kar'be, tār sṛṣṭir madhya dije bidrohake bhāṣā debe, rūp debe, sekhānei nabāruṅ*.

²² Cf. also Tokan Thakur’s reminiscence of sitting with Nabarun in front of Mahasweta Devi; Nabarun was smoking, and Mahasweta herself told Tokan to smoke as well – events that display revolutionary customs (ibid.).

²³ Oḃāsiph 2020b: “I consider his *Herbert* in no way less than *The Outsider* or *Metamorphosis*” (Bengali original: *tār hār'bar'ke āmi kono aṅsei di āuṭ'sāidār athabā metāmar'phasiser cāite kam mane kari nā*).

²⁴ The term for “first light” is *pratham ālo*, a famous novel on colonial Bengal by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and also the name of the newspaper Wasif works for – named in allusion to the enlightenment aspects of the society described in the novel, and of course also claiming some of this (early morning) enlightening mission for itself.

²⁵ Bengali original: *yā kichu bhāla, yār saṅge sunil gāṅgulir pratham ālo, sei kal'kātāi*

Comparisons with other avantgarde Bengali filmmakers and playwrights (Ritwik Ghatak, Utpal Datta) ensue, and also some harsh criticism of the tame aesthetics of “subaltern gurus” like Ranajit Guha that have prevented them from engaging with Nabarun. Wasif claims that Nabarun is of an entirely different category: none of those who strive to create pure literature, but one who makes art “by sucking the poison from the stirring of the ocean of life”²⁶ (ibid.).

This short portrait of Nabarun Bhattacharya as a world class author, archetypical dissenter and rebel is an interesting piece of rhetoric and conveys quite a distinctive, if exaggeratedly heroic, characterisation of the writer. Whether or not Wasif’s balancing act between intellectual acumen, revolutionary attitudes and curses, somewhat in imitation of Nabarun’s prose, is successful is probably a question of taste. The statement is concluded, or sealed, with the words *sabhyatā codāi*, “fuck civilization”, which risks destroying the balancing act, but at the same time puts a particular trademark of anti-establishment rebellion in place.

The point in giving these quotations is to highlight a peculiar informality of style and transgression of conventional etiquette which, though in this instance triggered by the topic, lends itself easily to the format and can also be found in other webzines.²⁷ The online platform of the webzine, close to social media and, in fact, in this instance quoting from Facebook, seems to facilitate this kind of diction. The Bengali webzines under discussion, or at least a number of them, thus inherit some of the informality of the online forum.

African Sign Art

The next finding I want to discuss is an article titled “Congo’s Sign Art and a Maestro called Mika” (“*Kaṅgor sāin āṛṭ o ek’jan māyestro mikā*”), written by Majul Hasan (Mājul Hāsān) and published in the webzine *Paraspar* in 2016 (Hāsān 2016). The author, born in 1980, is a journalist and writer

en’lāiṭen’meṅṭ, hindutva, pragati, yuktibād, putuputu bām’kholas āṛ bijñān’bāder jaṭ’pākāno gupta keṣer ukun tini cipe cipe mār’ten.

²⁶ Bengali original: *jīban’sāyār manthaner biṣ ṣuṣe ṣuṣe.*

²⁷ Notably in 9 *Nāmbār Bās*, for instance, in the satire *Pānusiṃher gadābālī*. The title is a pun on Rabindranath Tagore’s early compositions of *bhakti* poetry *Bhānusiṃher padābālī*; like *Bhānusiṃha* for Tagore, *Pānusiṃha* is a pen name for an author who – quite appropriately, one would say – remains anonymous just as Tagore initially did (Anonymous 2019).

of poetry and short prose, as we learn from the link to the author's short bio note that *Paraspar* supplies for all contributors. The article opens with a statement by Paul Gauguin that the history of modern art is the story of its alienation from the general public,²⁸ in order to then refute Gauguin's words by pointing out African popular art. Stripping the "popular" in popular art of its pejorative connotations, Majul Hasan introduces Congolese Sign Art as a very lively art form developed mostly by artists without any formal artistic training. Many of them, including Chéri Chérin and Chéri Samba, two internationally renowned exponents, started their careers with murals or directly hail from the craft of advertisement signboard painting – hence "Sign Art".

Majul Hasan focusses on 1980-born, second-generation popular artist Jean Paul Mika who started off as a sign board painter at age 13, moving from there to murals and then to art painting. Like those of other sign artists, Mika's pictures follow certain "narrative figures" and represent a multitude of plots through large assemblages of characters, usually with overt political messages. Commenting upon how Mika developed his own profile vis-à-vis his masters Chérin and Samba, Hasan then discusses Mika's *sapologie* series produced in and around 2010 and the *sapeurs* as one of Mika's particular themes. The movement referred to as *la sape* is portrayed as a kind of fashion-based dandyism particularly popular in Congo. Hailing, Hasan argues, from the re-use of the old clothes of colonial masters, *la sape* started as a mimicry of the colonisers that continued in the post-colonial era, and has reached new heights of visibility and popularity at present. The movement is very ambivalent in so far as it may be interpreted as a radical form of consumerism, but can also be read as a particular kind of identity formation and an oblique comment on colonialism and marginalisation of the non-West.²⁹ Hasan comments on Mika's visual assessment of the *sapeurs* (Hāsān 2016):

²⁸ Hasan doesn't indicate the primary source; following Bättschmann (1993: 28, note 35) this could refer to statements made in Gauguin's letters to his wife and friends, in which the artist deplores the dilemma of either facing alienation from the audience if he follows his artistic calling, or compromising his artistic sense in playing along with the public's expectations. Various modern art movements have proclaimed to have overcome this alienation, e.g. Pop Art in the second half of the 20th century (cf. Bättschmann 1993: 28f.).

²⁹ Ilsemargret Luttman provides an expert and concise overview of the history and socio-cultural background of *La Sape*, its recent international popularity and the interpretations of the movement in anthropology and cultural studies

Mika criticises this trend [*biṣay*, actually topic] through his paintings. To make his statement, Mika has taken refuge to analogy, designing various animal figures. He has clad monkeys, tigers and bears in coats and pants. One can discern in Mika's pictures an attempt to compare these sahib-animals with natural animals. The monkey in pants is held captive by humans, or a circus item. In the same way, a circus is being staged with the black people of Congo and Africa. Most of them don't understand this. This is the message of Mika's *sapologie* series.³⁰

Hasan analyses Mika's paintings like "La ruse du chef" ("The Chief's Cunning") which depicts a tiger receiving a deer with a tablet of fruits, obviously intending to devour the deer rather than the fruits, and "La stupeur" ("Bewilderment") showing a dressed-up dog and monkey being watched by an undressed, wild dog and monkey at the roadside (*ibid.*). Pointing out parallels to Bangladeshi rickshaw painting, Hasan then deplores the fate of present-day rickshaw artists. Somewhat re-valued by the interest shown by foreigners, their situation nonetheless remains critical (*ibid.*):

But we cannot really bring all these artists into the mainstream. Therefore rickshaw artists cannot become a Chéri Samba or Jean Paul Mika. Our infatuation with the West and the mentality of regarding the fine arts as a thing of elitism is extremely painful.³¹

In the remaining part of his article, Hasan goes into the political implications of paintings depicting violence and rape in Eastern Congo, or featuring Barrack Obama and Osama bin Laden, and ends with an interpretation

(Luttmann 2016). For an approach from marketing research that interprets fashion practice among the *sapeurs* of Paris as a sort of creative mimesis, see also Brodin et al. 2016.

³⁰ Bengali original: *mikā sei biṣay'tike kriṭik kar'chen tār peiṅṭim-e. mikā nijer baktabya tairir janya āsray niyechen rūpaker, garē tulechen bibhinna jib'jantur ādal. bānar, bāgh, bhālluker gāye koṭ-pyāṅṅ ca. iye diyechen mikā. ei sāheb jantur sāthe akṛtrim jantur ek'ti tulanār prayās dekhā yāy mikār chabite. pyāṅṅ-parā bānar haṅ mānuṣer hate bandi nay'to sārkaṣer sāmagrī. tem'ni kaṅgo tathā āphrikār kālo mānuṣ'guloke niye sārkaṣ cal'che. beśir'bhāg'i seṭā bujh'chen nā. eiṭāi mikār sāpholaji siriṅer baktabya.*

³¹ Bengali original: *kintu ām'rā eisab śilpider mull'dhārāy ān'te pār'chi nā teman'bhābe. tāi ek'jan rik'sā ārtiṣṭ śyāri sāmā kimbā jepi mikāy pōūchate pār'che nā. āmāder pāścātyapṛiti o citrakalāke „eliṭijamer sāmagrī“-jñān karār mānasikatā pīrā dēy bhīṣaṅ'bhābe.*

of Mika's self-portrait as a *sapeur*. Why does the belt hang between his legs like a tie (Figure 2)? Because, Hasan argues, adopting alien dress codes and ways of life *à la sape* results in displacements and creates comical effects.

কেন এই ছবিতে বেল্টটা ঝুলছে টাইয়ের মতো? কেন পৃথিবীটা দুভাগে ভাগ হয়ে আছে মিকার, যে মিকা একজন কঙ্গো-আফ্রিকানের প্রতিনিধি? সে-সম্পর্কে, ২০১৫ সালে এক সাক্ষাৎকারে মিকা বলছেন—আমি যে শহরে থাকি, সেই কিনসাসার অনেক যুবক sapeurs হতে চেষ্টা করছে। ফ্রেঞ্চ শব্দ sapeurs-এর অর্থ আগুন, আমার মনে হয় উনি ঝলমলে, দৃষ্টি আকর্ষক আর্থে এই শব্দটি ব্যবহার করেছেন। এই sapeurs হতে গিয়ে কী হচ্ছে—অই যে বেল্টটা টাইয়ের মতো ঝুলছে কোমরে। এটাই আফ্রিকান



Figure 2: Mika's painting and an excerpt of Majul Hasan's comments (Screenshot).

This, on the whole, is a rather serious engagement with an aspect of contemporary African culture in the non-academic environment of a Bangladeshi webzine. Through his comparison between Sign Art and Rikshaw Paintings, the author seeks to establish a direct link between Congolese and Bangladeshi popular art. Indeed, also Rikshaw Art uses humanised animals at times, and both practices have their base in commercial painting. But apart from such superficial similarities, there seems to be quite a gap between the amount of artistic freedom: commercial sign painters execute prefigured picture designs, whereas Rikshaw artists are free to create their motifs. And for Sign Art practitioners like Mika and his circle, again, the comparison with Rikshaw Art seems hazardous, since it is precisely their stepping out of the confines of commercial poster painting that made their fame – unlike rickshaw painters who supposedly have not exchanged their artisanal ethos for an artistic one. This accounts for their very different levels of abstraction and sophistication, and particu-

larly for their very different degree of critical potential. But if the comparison may not be entirely appropriate, it is still interesting.

Another comparison that would have been promising, by the way, is that between *sapeurs* and colonial Bengali *bābus* since both these social formations are built, it seems, on a dichotomy between traditional and modern culture, and are characterised by a strong dose of mimicry of the coloniser, the 'West', or modernity.³²

However, such criticism aside, what is discernible in Hasan's approach is an orientation towards the Global South in the context of Bangladesh, in which public attention to African culture is rather exceptional. A certain urge to establish South-South connections, in fact, is also noticeable in some other webzine contributions, for instance in Bidhan (Bidhān) Riberu's critique of *Tintin* comics such as *Tintin in Congo* as racist (2014),³³ or the programmatic committal to Global South literature in *Sāhityakyāp̄he* (Sāhityakyāp̄he [home] 2020). The use of the Internet and its rather unrestricted flow of images, as seen in Hasan's article, to establish such new connections – no matter whether they succeed in every detail – appears meaningful and betrays a cultural orientation towards the Global South.

Climate fiction

The third and last thematic spotlight on current developments in Bengali webzines is shed on a particular genre of science fiction as presented by the Internet magazine *Kalpabiśva* ("Phantasy World"). The main website of this webzine greets the reader with the words: "Welcome to the first science fiction and fantasy webzine in Bengali" (Kalpabiśva [home] 2020). Run by a team of ten authors and six graphical artists from West Bengal since 2016, *Kalpabiśva* has also produced a number of print editions and e-

³² In fact, Ilsemargret Luttmann argues that Homi Bhabha's concept of (colonial) mimicry works neatly to explain *la sape* as a social practice (Luttmann 2016: 25).

³³ Bidhan Riberu (Riberu 2014) in his review of Hergé's *Tintin in Lāl j̄per d̄āȳri* uses Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and other standard works in postcolonial studies for a sometimes one-dimensional, but on the whole accurate reading of the comic *Tintin in Congo*. He carves out *Tintin's* bias against Soviets and Blacks and his bourgeois and racist attitudes, concluding that one should continue reading *Tintin* but with the right critical consciousness. This critique acquires additional relevance in the light of *Tintin's* popularity in Bengal; some volumes are available in Bengali translation.

books that are published along with the online versions. The organisation of the material in editions remains a defining feature also for the webzine, and works quite well.

Issue number 10 (No. 2 of the third year, i.e. 2018) of *Kalpabiśva* focuses on CliFi, “climate fiction”. An editorial self-consciously stresses how the webzine’s coming of age entails growing responsibilities to address urgent social issues, and introduces the line-up of contributions: an interview with Dan Bloom who coined the designation CliFi,³⁴ essays on climate change and CliFi in films, a translation of Yakos Spiliotopoulos’ story “Into the Storm” (2016), and a number of creative writings, stories and novels by members of the *Kalpabiśva* team. The editors point out that they are bringing out e-books along with the new editions, thus campaigning in various ways for the common cause of science fiction: “Come, reader, join this revolution with us, let us walk hand in hand towards a new dawn. Dear reader, you are ready, aren’t you?” (*Kalpabiśva* [sampādakīya] 2018)

In one of two anonymous cover stories (*pracchad kāhini*) apparently written collectively by *Kalpabiśva* team members, the authors introduce Dan Bloom, the “father of CliFi”,³⁵ and trace climate fiction’s antecedents in science fiction literature and film before Bloom coined the term CliFi in 2005. The authors point out that this genre is hardly developed in India as yet, even though India is one of the places that will probably be affected worst by climate change. Following Bloom, they make mention of T. Ramachandran, professor of English at IIT Kanpur, who has started to offer seminars on CliFi and is quoted by Bloom as saying: “How long will I continue to teach Shakespeare and Shelley and make them aesthetically love the beauty of daffodils or skylarks when in reality they would soon become endangered if climate change goes unchecked?” (Bloom n.d.) Besides sketching the history of climate fiction and highlighting its relevance, the *Kalpabiśva* issue consists in the main of short stories and a short novel written by members of the *Kalpabiśva* team themselves and their

³⁴ Cf. interview with Dan Bloom, father of CliFi, on future cities (*Kalpabiśva* [sāksāte] 2018), translation of Thorpe n.d.

³⁵ According to the authors, in coining the term CliFi Dan Bloom, a US-American author and blogger resident in Tokyo and Taiwan, was inspired by *On the Beach* (1957), a post-World War 3 survivor novel by Nevil Shute, as well as by Love-lock, and by general English fiction from Marcel Theroux’s “Far North” (2010) onwards (*Kalpabiśva* [paribeś] 2018).

circle. Originally published on the Internet, these writings fully qualify for the label of web literature in the sense intended by the Uttarādhikār award mentioned at the outset.

In order to give an impression of these works, I now summarise two original Bengali CliFi narratives from *Kalpabiśva*, first Sandipan Chattopadhyay's short novel *Mīr'jāphar* (Caṭṭopādhyāy 2018). The title *Mīr'jāphar* alludes to the historical personality who sided with Robert Clive and thus facilitated the victory of the British side over Nawab Sirajuddaulah's troupes in the famous Battle of Plassey (1757) that started the territorial domination of India by the British. In Bengali the name has come to be inextricably linked with treason, a fact that the narrative's ending exploits for its message, as we shall see.

The novelette's protagonist Ashok (Aśok) works for the Indian branch of a multinational water control company in Calcutta in what seems to be the end of the 21st century. The city is covered by an artificial climate screen (*kṛtrim paribeś*, a kind of centralised air conditioning) and knows no heat, but everything outside the screen is scorching. Villagers are kept out of the city by strict measures. Water scarcity is the global issue, particularly in China, and US-based multinationals are buying up all the resources. In such circumstances, Ashok's boss sends him on a mission to check why a certain drone at a place called Karutirtha (Kārutīrtha) supplies unstable data about subterranean water levels. Ashok takes his self-driven car running on solar energy to the spot, where he finds indications of a huge subterranean water reservoir and makes measurements, but then gets knocked out. Waking up, he finds himself in front of his boss, who reveals to him how he has for many years constructed the largest water tank of the subcontinent and now wants to poison other resources in order to sell the tank profitably at the time of crisis. The drone, however, has left footage on the computer threatening to destroy the plan, and Ashok is forced to go back to Calcutta to take down the firewall for some minutes so that the boss can delete the file. Ashok does so but takes a copy on his secret old, untrackable cell phone and transmits the information to one Robert, the company's US-American head. When he is back at Karutirtha, there is a showdown grafted on the decisive 1757 battle at Plassey between the Nawab of Bengal and the British East India Company. Ashok's boss alias "Siraj" (Sirāj) is killed by Ashok alias "Mir Jafar" (Mīr Jāphar), and gets a congratulatory SMS by the American CEO alias "Robert Clive".

Modelling a scenario of hot-house conditions and water shortage familiar from much international science fiction literature³⁶ and quite within grasp of current realities in some parts of the world, the novelette thus transposes a historical constellation connected with the history of colonialism on the subcontinent to a global level. Not the British, but the US-Americans feature as the global power behind the evil machinations of the corrupted boss. Chattopadhyay's dystopian novelette therefore comes with a political message in its critique of US-led predatory capitalism and neo-colonial exploitation.

Let us also take a look at Piyal Chakrabarti's short story *Pralay* ("Apocalypse") (Cakrabarti 2018), set on the background of another well-known apocalyptic scenario of the opposite kind, that of inundation.³⁷ Protagonist Raj (Rāj) finds himself on the slopes of Mount Everest as one of the last survivors of mankind; all around him is one huge *mahāsāgar* about to swallow Mount Everest too (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A wave about to swallow Mount Everest (Screenshot; Cakrabarti 2018).

It's the year 2345. Skies are orange and red. An old man called Gupta comes and tells Raj that he has built a super-laptop, kept in a temple on

³⁶ Such as Margaret Atwood's *Onyx and Crake* (2003), mentioned also by the *Kalpabiśva* editors, or, more recently, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015), to name just two North American examples.

³⁷ For Hollywood cinema, e.g., the *Kalpabiśva* editors mention *Waterworld* (1995) as the watershed moment when CliFi entered the scene.

Mount Everest, that is the only link to the last functioning satellite. The rocket on top of the mountain hosts the five richest men on earth with a few attendants, about to leave for "Earth 2012" in 333 light years' distance, an exact copy of the intact earth before destruction. But Gupta tells Raj that there is no such planet: the message the info is based on refers to 333 years backwards into the past, and what is actually needed is a time travel. Gupta instructs Raj fight Deadeye, the demon guarding the rocket crew, and then to enter three times 3 in the computer. As he does so, blue skies reappear, and he passes out. When he regains consciousness, he finds himself in a hospital in the year 2012, with Gupta receiving him and lecturing about the things he'll have to do so that the earth takes a different path.

Both narratives thoroughly deal with global scenarios but at the same time use local focalisers, i.e. discernably Bengali protagonists, in the familiar, but defamiliarised surroundings of Bengal and the adjacent Himalaya. This indicates that the narratives aren't thoroughly decontextualised, but use (sub-)national frames of reference and address basically a West Bengali reading community. Both texts present grim dystopias and play with plural temporalities: in the final dénouement of *Mir'jāphar* the fictional world of future West Bengal is related back to what an anticolonial perspective would identify as a particularly un auspicious historic moment. In *Pralaij*, the possibility of time travels could be read as an indication – common in contemporary science fiction literature just as in modern forms of Bengali Vaishnavism, as Rahul Peter Das has pointed out (Das 1997: 19–22) – of linear time as a delusion. Alternatively, the delusion could with a bit of stretching also be the protagonist's: a dystopian nightmare that is resolved in the end, deploying the dream as a device just like classic utopias of colonial Bengal by authors such as Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (Mukhopādhyāy 1895–96; Hossein 2009 [1905]) and others. Striking, but arguably not at all uncommon in popular publishing contexts, is the fact that these grim dystopias are in such stark contrast with the enthusiasm and "new dawn" rhetoric of the editorial.

Some inconsistencies in the narratives call for acknowledgement. *Pralaij*, for instance, doesn't care much to explain why Gupta suddenly turns up walking on the slopes of Mount Everest, perhaps one of the reasons why it fetched only one lonesome *dāruṇ* ("great") from the community. *Mir'jāphar* also isn't much concerned about how Ashok's villain boss is supposed to match tragical hero-figure Nawab Sirajuddaulah, and why more or less honest Ashok himself is in the end equated to the trai-

tor Mir Jafar. This final spin to the plot turns the valuations of the received historic foil on their head in a manner too erratic and sudden for the readers to follow. But in terms of likes *Mīr'jāphar* fares better than *Pralaj*. One commentator is proud of having passed some time in childhood with the author, while a member of the *Kalpabiśva* group exclaims *Guru! kī dile??* (approximately “Brilliant, Master!”) and another reader leaves it at an appreciative *śāllā!!* (“oh shit”), handing us another example of the community-bestowing function of swearwords, and thus bringing this little overview full circle.

But however we may rate such incursions of pulp fiction modes of writing into the narratives we have discussed, it has to be conceded that *Kalpabiśva* is quite functional as a webzine and makes good reading for science fiction aficionados. The consistent focus on CliFi in the issue we have looked at, the assemblage of different related materials, as well as integration of graphics, editorial introduction and community functions make it a convincing reading and viewing experience.

Conclusion

This little overview, in conclusion, has shown that a lively scene of webzines is developing in Bengal, whether East or West, and can be expected to grow further. We have found that some of these webmags stand in a certain continuity with little magazines, but a more general statement on the association between these forms would require much more investigation. What seems to be more decisive is that the advent of webzines coincides with a generational shift in reading habits; it seems to be mostly a younger generation of cyber-affine users that constitutes webzine users. Partly connected with this is the trend to address literature in a continuum with other forms of popular rather than elitist culture; this trend has very conspicuously been reflected in the selection of topics discussed in this contribution, but seems to be a factor in Bengali webzines in general. As for formats, we have seen that material is organised in different ways in these webzines, and that the regular issue is still not obsolete. Webzines do attract some of the informality of the social media, and in the long run it will be part of their editorial policies to negotiate the formal and informal levels of communication they want to favour.

Most basically, of course, the Bengali webzines we have discussed bear witness to the fast and largely unrestricted flow of information that the Internet still grants us, leading to new avenues of exchange such as

South-South interactions. It is hard to estimate if webzines will one day claim their share of the book market and develop into a fully-fledged medium of literary publishing. But whether or not we can subscribe to the Uttarādhikār verdict that “Bengali literature is presently being reborn through new electronic media”, we can state that a younger generation of literary-minded writers and readers in both parts of Bengal are indeed increasingly making creative use of online formats such as webzines for engaging with Bengali literature and popular culture.

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