

(ii) **Poet of the Present: the Material Object**

**in the World of Iswar Gupta**

*By “modernity” I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.*

Charles Baudelaire, 1863<sup>58</sup>

*At the very moment when the withdrawal of functions obscures the relations existing in the world, the object in discourse assumes an exalted place: modern poetry is a poetry of the object.*

Roland Barthes, 1953.<sup>59</sup>

**Historical Memory and its Politics**

An appreciation of the achievements of Iswar Gupta is something that has receded with time – the further Bengal travelled the road of the nationalist high modern, the further away it went from any understanding of, or sympathy for, the works of Iswarchandra. This is glaringly evident in most of the commentaries that accompanied the various editions of Iswarchandra’s works as well as in the meagre attention spent upon him in standard literary histories; a small detail should suffice here to illustrate this descent into condescension. Iswar Gupta had had an informal education, in that he is said to have had no formal knowledge of English and very little of formal Bengali. In 1904 Sibnath Sastri wrote, ‘Iswarchandra, so to speak, had not received anything that can be called an education. English education he never had, and whatever he learnt of Bengali from his own reading became his only resource.’<sup>60</sup> In the very next sentence,

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<sup>58</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 2008) 12.

<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’ in Annette Lavers and Colin Smith translated *Writing Degree Zero* (1953; New York: Hill and Wang, 1967) 50.

<sup>60</sup> Sibnath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri o tatkalin bangasamaj*, first published in 1904 (Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 2003) 223. It still remains, however, that this ‘uneducated’ man had, in 1832, translated a part of Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason* into Bengali and published it in the *Sambad prabhakar*, challenging the missionaries, chiefly Alexander Duff, to reply to its charges. See Bhabatosh Datta, *Kabijibani*, p. 46.

however, he added: ‘Nevertheless, even with these meagre resources, in a very short time he came to be known as a good poet (*sukavi*) and good writer (*sulekhak*) of Bengal.’ This comment by Sibnath Sastri, of Iswarchandra being more or less uneducated, was repeated in 1958 by Sushilkumar De in his forward to Bhabatosh Datta’s edition of the *kabijibani* verbatim; De’s intention seemed to be to highlight the ‘naturalness’ of Iswar Gupta’s attainments in order to praise the extent of his ‘astonishing uneducated skill’ (*apurva ashikshita-patutwa*). De then goes on to declare (although Iswarchandra was the first to publish an edition of Bharatchandra) that,

it is to be doubted whether he actually understood the real meaning of Bharatchandra’s poetry. He and his contemporary song-writers did not have the education, understanding, or imagination to have taken in Bharatchandra’s refined and dense language, educated sensibility, easily-learned wit, and condensed presentation style. That is why Bharatchandra’s flawless classical language did not endure in the following era. All we see in the half a century following the start of the nineteenth century are incompetent and disgusting imitations of *vidyasundar*.

Iswar Gupta’s own poetry too did not reach a very high standard.<sup>61</sup>

How could it? De is convinced that this rustic, uneducated and unrefined natural poet was out of place in the educated world of new Bengali poetry, and he approvingly (and selectively) quotes from Bankimchandra, prophet of the new age, who had said, in his introduction to Iswar Gupta, that there is no room for such a poet as this in the modern world. How far we have come, in De, from the time of Sibnath Sastri may be measured by the fact that Sastri’s concluding sentence in praise of Iswar Gupta as a good poet and a good writer (*sukavi, sulekhak*) is not similarly endorsed in De’s text, for De has already concluded that the new age had no time for the old poets, and in this he is partly following the high priest of the Bengali modern, Bankimchandra, who had held up Iswar Gupta’s case as a dire warning to the youth of his time. ‘If there is one great truth that we imbibe from an analysis of Iswarchandra’s life’, Bankim had said, ‘then it is this –

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<sup>61</sup> Sushil Kumar De, Foreword to Bhabatosh Datta ed. *Kavijivani*, p. ii.

talent cannot reach its fullest apotheosis without good education.’ He had also said, ‘It is a very sad thing that he [Iswar Gupta] did not complete his education. If he had, then with the talent he had, if he had used it well, he would have had a much greater command over his poetry, work and society.... Bengal’s progress would have moved further ahead by almost thirty years.’<sup>62</sup> Bankim, however, was nothing if not conflicted in his opinions, and a classic instance of this conflict of opinion is present in this 1885 introduction, which veers from high praise to open censure, from delight to condescension, from respect to rejection to appreciation in a regular pendulum-like motion in the space of the few pages of the essay. In his earlier English essay of 1871, ‘Bengali Literature’, he is more categorical in his opinion, saying, ‘He [Iswar Gupta] was a very remarkable man. He was ignorant and uneducated. He knew no language but his own, and was singularly narrow and un-enlightened in his views; yet for more than twenty years he was the most popular author among the Bengalis.’<sup>63</sup>

Remarkably, this opinion, repeated ever after Bankimchandra right up to the time of Sushil Kumar De, has persisted even among critics writing in the twenty first century, who have been unable to step outside of the humanist, universalistic and fundamentally bourgeois preoccupations of the preceding eras. Typically, therefore, Sudipta Kaviraj, perhaps both unwilling as well as unable to dispel with the enormous shadow of the revolutionary accomplishments of Bankimchandra upon the modern Bengali man, has no hesitation in marking the difference between Iswar Gupta and Bankimchandra as essentially the difference between the high and the low, the pre-modern and the modern:

From *a vehicle of frivolous enjoyment of insignificant objects* in the world, exploitation of the infinite resources of punning and *slesha* on things like the *tapse* fish or babus who for altogether contingent reasons incurred the hostility of Iswar Gupta, irony came in Bankim to have a serious object, indeed an object beyond which nothing could be more serious to the modern consciousness. Instead of *trivial things* in a world which *is not fixed in a historically serious gaze*, it now reflected on three objects entirely

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<sup>62</sup> *IGKS*, p.8.

<sup>63</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee, ‘Bengali Literature’ (1871) in *Bankim Rachanavali*, Vol. III (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1969) p.106.

distinct from each other, all implicated in the historical world. These are the self, the collective of which the self was a part, and the civilization of colonial India which formed the theatre in which this darkly comic spectacle of the search for the self unfolds.<sup>64</sup> (My emphases)

From Bankimchandra onward, irony achieves ‘a new dignity’ it had never had before, Kaviraj states; thus, with Bankim, a new tradition of Bengali self-irony is born. Iswar Gupta’s poetry is about the ‘frivolous enjoyment of insignificant objects in the world’; he writes about ‘trivial things’ such as the *topshe* fish or the babu, and if Bankim too made the babu the special object of his satire, then Bankim is different because he did so as a babu himself, which presumably Iswar Gupta was not. Here, Kaviraj finds that ‘irony came in Bankim to have a serious object’, unlike in Iswar Gupta’s poems, which exist ‘in a world which is not fixed in a historically serious gaze’. The argument assumes that selfhood came to the Bengali only with the advent of Bankimchandra, for the ‘frivolous’ was not ‘serious’, and the ‘contingent’ reason was somehow not an adequate one. Kaviraj sees Iswar Gupta through the lens of Bankimchandra, as someone who is, in Bankim’s words, ‘singularly narrow and un-enlightened in his views’, for essentially the concern here is with progress and evolution (Bengal would have moved forward thirty years, Bankim had claimed, if Iswar Gupta had had an education). For Kaviraj, Bengali subjectivity appears to have been absent until a certain date, which is why he reads Kaliprasanna Sinha too as inadequate, for Kaliprasanna ‘did not realise *yet* the gravity, and the tragic taste of turning banter towards the self. (my emphasis)’<sup>65</sup> The use of the ‘yet’ in this sentence gestures towards a notion of arrival, of deferral – modern subjectivity is yet to be realised in the gravity of selfhood by the writer of *Hutam*. Bankim, then, is shown to have attained a self-ironical mode denied to Iswar Gupta and Kaliprasanna, both of whose choice of subject matter lacked dignity, and who personify the unreconstructed self of the Indian that we have (hopefully) left behind in our serious and progressive march on the road to the attainment, and the critiquing, of self-hood.

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<sup>64</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Tradition in Bengali Literature,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May, 2000) 388.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

A simple juxtaposition of two passages from either writer, however, confounds the basic assumptions of Kaviraj's enquiry, for when we read the passage Kaviraj quotes from Bankim's *kamalakanta* on the babu (I shall do whatever you consider proper. I shall wear boots and trousers; put spectacles on my nose, eat with knife and fork, dine at a table...) <sup>66</sup>, what comes immediately to mind are Iswar Gupta's already extant lines on the spectacle of the bibi who shall eat with knife and fork [*shab kanta chamche dhorbe sheshe*] and the uncaring babu, '*bujhi "hoot" bole, "boot" paye diye, / "cheroot" phunke sharge jabe*' [I suppose they will say 'hoot', wear 'boots', smoke 'cheroots' and go to heaven] in the vastly dire scenario of scarcity of food among the common people in the country, in a poem/song named 'Famine' [*durbhikkha*]. <sup>67</sup> The long shadow of Iswar Gupta's trenchant lines fall upon Bankimchandra's depiction unmistakably; only the satire is less pungent in the later writer, depoliticised of its horrible context of starvation in the countryside, made safer and sounder and altogether more harmless and containable as a vehicle for laughter.

Kaviraj is not alone in having been unable to find any new insight into the textured world of Iswar Gupta's poetry. A long line of distinguished Bengali literary critics have been left bewildered by the chaotic confusion of Iswar Gupta's poems, their apparent formal conventionality hiding from sight the modern urban language of material pleasure they encapsulate with so much energy and verve. The commonest metaphor that has been used in the context of his poetry, then, has been that of the conjunction – in him and his poetry – of the old and the new. It was Bankimchandra, once again, who put these terms in place in his essay on Dinabandhu Mitra when he said, of the years 1859-60, that they were 'the meeting point [*sandhisthal*] between the old and the new', because 'The last of the old party, Iswarchandra's sun had set, and the first poet of the new, Madhusudan's, had just risen.' <sup>68</sup> But Bankimchandra had used these terms of the years, not of the poet; unfortunately, the metaphor came to be displaced subsequently to the poet and his poetry rather than to the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.389.

<sup>67</sup> Iswar Gupta, '*Durbhiksha*', *IGSK*, p. 111.

<sup>68</sup> Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, '*Kabitva*' [1886] in J. Bagal (ed.) *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol. II (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1998) 758.

era in question. Brojendranath Bandyopadhyay, in his introduction to the poet in the *sahitya sadhak charitmala* written in 1941 could only emphasise: ‘In the conflict between the old and the new, just at the spot where there is an upheaval on the road, exactly at that spot, he presides like a *milestone* planted in the bowels of the earth...’, using the English word *milestone* in this description.<sup>69</sup> Sukumar Sen falls back upon the same metaphor: ‘I do not say that Iswar Gupta bade farewell to the old poetry and welcomed the new, and I do not claim that his works proclaim the conjunction of two worlds. But he had wanted to grasp the old and the new world together at the same time – in this lay his uniqueness. Yet he was not the prophet of an age’.<sup>70</sup> Mired firmly as they were in the progressive, modern and nationalist prejudices of their time, every commentator, from Sushilkumar De to Bishnu De, had much the same to say in his evaluation of the significance of the poetry of Iswar Gupta. The crucial point, however, is that neither the old nor the new are configured here in terms of calendar time – instead, both the temporal markers refer to the *same* moment of modernity.<sup>71</sup>

### **Readers, publics**

Almost every established zamindar in Bengal and all the wealthy families of Calcutta were subscribers to Iswar Gupta’s *sambad prabhakar*. Further, Iswar Gupta gave a free copy of the paper to many persons who were unable to pay the subscription – at least three or four hundred in number. *prabashi* or out-of-station Bengalis living in the Western and Northern provinces were also grouped together as subscribers, sending local news of importance to the paper – these contributions became especially valuable to the paper at the time of the rebellion in 1857, when it became established as the pre-eminent Bengali newspaper of its time.<sup>72</sup> Since Iswar Gupta’s poetry appeared regularly in the columns of his newspaper, his poetry reached a wide

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<sup>69</sup> Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, ‘Iswarchandra Gupta’, *SSC [SSC]*, Vol. 1, p.6.

<sup>70</sup> Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Eastern Publishers, 1970) 122-23.

<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to Sibaji Bandyopadhyay for pointing this out in his comments on the paper.

<sup>72</sup> *IGSK*, p. 15.

audience of receptive readers, unparalleled in his time or the following ages for the manner in which a newspaper and a poet each benefited from proximity to the other. This bond between paper and poet was reflected in a popular refrain, which, typically, punned upon several words (*'īśvar'* referred to both the poet and god himself, and *'gupta'* means hidden, but is also the poet's surname, while *'prabhākar'*, of course, indicated both the sun and the newspaper): "*Ke bole iswar gupta byapta charachar / Jahar prabhay prabha pay prabhakar.*" [Who says Iswar Gupta is absent, he is present all over the world / In his radiating influence glows the *prabhakar*.]

The *sambad prabhakar* was the first daily newspaper in Bengali, starting as a weekly in 1831, developing into a thrice-weekly publication from August 1836, and finally morphing into a daily from the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1839. A notice at the end of the last column in the newspaper of 5 April, 1849, proclaimed: '*Ei prabhakar patra rabibar byatireke prati dibash kalikatars Simuliya hendua pushkarinir dakshin parshastha prakashya rastar dakshin digastha galir madhye 44/3 nombor bhabane prakash hoy. barshik agrim mulya koth 10 taka.*' [This *prabhakar* newspaper is published every day excepting Sundays from house No. 44/3 situated in the lane on the southern end of the open road appearing on the south side of Calcutta's Simuliya Hendua pond. Yearly advance is valued at Rs 10.] After Iswar Gupta's death in 1859, it continued to be edited by his brother, Ramchandra Gupta, circulating till the 1880's, after which it became irregular, and finally ceased operations.

In Walter Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's poetry of the same era in Paris, he shows how art throws up new strategies of survival to adapt to the changed conditions imposed by industrial society in an era of high capitalism. One of the great motifs of this age, for Iswar Gupta no less than for Baudelaire, was the newspaper, and Benjamin remarks upon the manner in which at this time the newspaper signified 'the replacement of the older narration by information, and of information by sensation, reflect[ing] the increasing atrophy of experience'.<sup>73</sup> Keeping in mind the essentially urban character of Iswar Gupta's poetry, it should be possible to see, in Benjamin's foregrounding in Baudelaire of the metropolitan masses that inhabit 'giant cities', the public as

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<sup>73</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism* trans by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973) 113.

it was taking shape in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta. The verse of Iswar Gupta, so different in form from his French contemporary, was similarly inhabited by the pressure of a public made up of ‘the people in the street’ – this crowd, he feels, is unique in this period in the nineteenth century, when ‘it was getting ready to take shape as a public in broad strata who had acquired facility in reading.’<sup>74</sup>

For Iswar Gupta, these are the readers of a poetry which, both in its physical incarnation and in its content, was essentially poetry that was fundamentally designed to be sold in the streets. Sibnath Sastri describes the scene upon which the theatre of Iswar Gupta’s poetry was enacted before the public readership in the city of the time in an unforgettable vignette:

When the *prabhakar* was published, newspaper-sellers would stand at the cross-roads and read aloud from the poetry in it and in no time at all a huge number of papers would be sold. Slowly, a group of Iswarchandra- type poets began to grow and a new age was inaugurated in Bengali literature. Just as nowadays every person – young or old, male or female – who composes poetry does so in the mould of Rabindranath, in those days whenever anybody desired to compose poetry he did so, consciously or unconsciously, in the mould of Iswarchandra. As time went on, Iswarchandra’s imitators and followers, his students and student’s students all branched out in many directions and gave birth to a school of poetry. Among these followers, the composer of *sudhiranjan* Dwarakanath Adhikari, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Dinabandhu Mitra, Harimohan Sen, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay and Manmohan Basu achieved fame and status in later life.<sup>75</sup>

This list of followers makes its way into almost every biography and notice of the poet Iswar Gupta, almost as if the list of names that it boasts as his followers were of more importance historically than the poems that he wrote. Whereas a Bengali reader would be inclined to remember Madhusudan because of the *meghnadbadh kavya* and Rabindranath perhaps for *sonar tori* or *manashi*, Iswar Gupta, it seems, is liable to be remembered not for his works, but for his men – the stalwarts of Bengali modernity that he forged, like Prometheus, in the workshop of the *Prabhākar*.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>75</sup> Sibnath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj* (1909) 231.

The poetry in the *Prabhākar* had appeared in narrow newspaper columns, filling up the back sheets with its effervescent content, sometimes with a small heading on top that proclaimed, simply, ‘*padya*’ [Poetry]. When it was not printing his own poetry, on occasion the poems were contributions sent in to the editor, who presumably published them at his discretion, and here a short prefatory line would include the address to the editor. One such insertion in the last page of the paper on the 26<sup>th</sup> of *Chaitra* [April-May] 1849 proclaimed, at the head of the verse, with each word following the other in separate lines: ‘*rupak / pranay / padya*’ [Rupak / Love / Poetry], and at the bottom, it carried the poet’s nom de plume: ‘*premanurakta janashya*’ [love-smitten one]. In another, the poem, ‘*sikh porajoy*’ [Sikh Defeat], was preceded by the line ‘Submitted with respect to the esteemed editor of the *prabhakar*’, and the poet’s identity given as ‘*kasyachidranranga bilasin*’, which might tentatively be translated as ‘one whose heart delights in pleasure’.<sup>76</sup> In this it was following quite closely upon the conventions followed, for instance, in the pages of the *India Gazette* when Derozio was contributing regularly to that paper between 1825 and 1831.

The *sambad prabhakar* was perhaps the first Indian regional language newspaper to carry a literary supplement – from the Bengali New Year of 1853 it published a monthly supplement that provided a much more substantial space than the daily newspaper for the publication of a variety of occasional verse, as well as an eclectic range of prose and imaginative writing, providing Iswar Gupta with more space in which to indulge his creative output than was available in the news-oriented daily newspaper.<sup>77</sup> Through the newspaper and then the literary supplement, a poet such as Iswar Gupta first seems to enter the marketplace in the ‘style of the *flaneur* who goes botanizing on the asphalt,’ and poetry becomes a commodity that helps fashion the phantasmagoria of city life in its own way.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Sambad prabhakar*, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 1849. ‘Rupak’ is a particular *taal* or rhythmic pattern on the *tabla* to the accompaniment of which a song may be sung. Many of the poems of this time were prefaced with an indication of the *taal* in which it should be sung.

<sup>77</sup> Bankim ed. Iswar Gupta, p.18.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, *ibid*, p.36.

Although critics have been unwilling to identify Iswar Gupta as a member of civil society in the sense of the Bengali *bhadralok* or *babu* as these categories evolved over the course of the century, the society he belonged to was undeniably one in which the markers of a modern urban culture of the city such as literary societies and clubs, debating societies and philosophical associations were already very much in place, as indeed they had been since the time of Derozio. The first literary society in Calcutta that I have found evidence of participation in by Indians was the Oriental Literary Society of 1825, which had members primarily from both the East Indian and Indian communities of the professional class.<sup>79</sup> From 1851 onward, Iswar Gupta began to organise a literary festival in Calcutta on the day of the Bengali New Year on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April at his printing press. Almost every person with any pretension to an education was to be found there, from the wealthy zamindar to the impoverished pundit, as they travelled to attend this gathering from the city and its outskirts, as well as from the *mofussils*. Bankimchandra writes of the presence of Calcutta's most respected and established families – the Mallicks, the Dattas, and Shobhabazaar's Debs – as well as of some of Calcutta's most important men, such as Debendranath Tagore, at the festival. Iswar Gupta would read and recite from his prose and poetry, followed by his best students, who were then awarded prizes in order of merit for their compositions by the wealthy men of the city and districts. At the end of the proceedings, Iswarchandra would organise a feast for about four to five hundred people.<sup>80</sup>

Crucially, Iswar Gupta's ambit was not confined to the precincts of the city of Calcutta alone. Publishing profusely in the *sambad prabhakar*, he reached a wide and eager audience in the towns and villages of Bengal; in the annals of Bengali literary history, no less significant than Rabindranath's description of the eagerness with which every issue of Bankimchandra's *bangadarsan* was awaited, is Nabinchandra's account of the reception of Iswar Gupta's poems by

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<sup>79</sup> See Rosinka Chaudhuri, 2012, 'The Politics of Naming: India's First Modern Literary Society, Calcutta, 1825', in *Freedom and Beef Steaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture*, Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 68-92.

<sup>80</sup> Bankim, *IGSK*, p. 17-18. Bankim mentions that Iswar Gupta was 'a Brahmo at one time', and belonged to the Adi Brahmo Samaj, and that Debendranath Tagore was a close friend. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

his father's circle in his childhood and youth in Chittagong in the 1850s:

In those days, Bengal's *saraswati debi*'s pale and poor image was to be found installed at the *bat-tala*. There, whatever rubbish [*chhai mati*] was birthed by the mother on the poorest paper in illegible print – I read it all. Gradually, Iswarchandra Gupta and the god-like (*debpratim*) Iswarchandra Vidyasagar began to dawn upon the sky of Bengali literature. That both of them are the gods (*iswar*) of Bengali verse and prose is a universally acknowledged fact today. In those days Bengal was blinded by the light of Gupta-ja's 'Prabhakar'....

“*Ke bole iswar gupta byapta charachar  
Jahar prabhay prabha pay prabhakar.*”

[Who says god / *iswar* is absent / *gupta*, he is present all over the world  
In whose lustre glows the radiant Prabhakar.]

This proud and cutting remark was known to everybody and accepted as if it were the word of the Vedas (*vedavakyavath*).....

My father was a great follower of Gupta-ja. Gupta-ja had once come to Chattagram on his travels and had charmed everybody with his talents. My father used to read the *prabhakar* with his friends all the time – he used to love to read poetry. So much so, that there were days spent reading poetry when he would forget to sleep or eat.<sup>81</sup>

This description of the birth of Bengali literature in poor circumstances achieves one memorable connection – it perspicaciously links the *bat-tala* to *saraswati devi*, a historically wholly accurate conjunction. From those mean surroundings, Nabinchandra seems to imply, rose the powerful Bengali literature that was in its adolescence in his own heyday in the 1870s and achieved manhood in Bankim; but of the two gods he mentions who take that infant literature forward towards glory, it is Vidyasagar who is described as god-like, 'debpratim'. For undeniably Iswar Gupta, whose paper, like the sun's light, 'had blinded them all', remained very much a man of this world, not a god, or even one who was made in his image, but a material man who, his poems made abundantly clear, liked his meat and drink, his alliances firmly rooted in the newspaper he edited and published his poems in, as well

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<sup>81</sup> In Bengali, the word used is *vedavakyavath*, meaning the word of the Vedas. Nabinchandra Sen, *Amar Jiban*, Vol.1, *Nabinchandra-Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1959) 91-92.

as in the *bat-tala* that existed in close proximity to the *half-akhrai* he composed songs for.

The self-division of Bengali modernity, at odds between the *bat-tala* and *saraswati devi*, found a fusion of form and figure in the personality of Iswar Gupta in mid nineteenth-century Bengal. In that battle, it seemed to be the newly incarnate form of the goddess of learning that won the field in the coming years, as a new generation of men was created far exceeding the pattern of Iswar Gupta's performance, of whose initial overwhelming influence nothing seems to have survived except a few perfunctory pages mandatory in the telling of literary histories. Yet the fuzzy intermediate space of fusion between the two that Iswar Gupta carved out as his own domain was not to be wiped out by all the zeal of reforming Young Bengal, persisting in the interstices with tenacity to outlive many other trends and schools that developed at this time in the battlefield of Bengali literature, whether Sanskrit or Anglicist, orthodox or reformist, country or western.

### Popular Poems

It might be instructive, at this point, to pause for a moment and consider the total corpus of Iswar Gupta's poetic production. Iswar Gupta had published more poems than any other Bengali poet up to the time of Bankimchandra; Bankim remarks that Gopalchandra Mukhopadhyay, the man who did the actual work in compiling the material for the anthology edited by Bankimchandra, estimated that Iswar Gupta 'wrote almost fifty thousand lines of verse', of which only a fraction was presented in their edition of 1885.<sup>82</sup> All of this poetry, it is worth emphasising, was published in the pages of the newspaper he edited, the *sambad prabhakar*, as none of it was collected and published in book form in his life time. Yet the editions of Iswar Gupta's poetry, that first began to appear from the year 1861, have continued to appear unabated in some form or the other through the

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<sup>82</sup> *IGSK*, p. 36. The first book of Iswar Gupta's poetry was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay ed. *Iswarchandra Gupter Kabita Sangraha* with a life of the poet and appreciation (Calcutta, 1885-6). This was followed by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna ed. *Iswarchandra Gupter Granthabali* (Calcutta: Basumati Press, 1900) and Manindra Krishna Gupta ed. *Granthabali Iswarchandra Gupta Pranita* (Calcutta: Gurudas Chatterjee, 1901).

course of the century and a half that has followed. Eight slim editions of his poetry were published after Iswarchandra's death by his brother Ramchandra Gupta, the first three appearing in 1861, the fourth in 1869, the fifth, sixth and seventh in 1873 and the eighth in 1874. After Bankim's famous 1885 edition, two subsequent editions, one from the Basumati Press in 1900 edited by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna and the other by his grand nephew, Manindrakrishna Gupta, in 1901 followed in quick succession. Both these editions presented a more complete selection than had been available so far to readers, in so far as they include poems left out by Bankim in 1885 for immoral content.<sup>83</sup> Testifying to the fact that this poet, who was not deemed to be a proper poet at all, is still read up to the current day is the fact that the latest edition of his work, titled *iswarchandra gupter sreshtha kabita* [*Best Poems of Iswarchandra Gupta*], edited by Alok Ray, was published in 2002 and reprinted in 2009, while the Bankimchandra edition is still in print, reprinted in 1995, as is the Kamalkumar Majumdar selection, reprinted in 2007.

It is very important to note that in keeping with the priorities of an age when religion and worship were the primary priorities of all men of intellect, from Rammohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore to Akshay Datta and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, the first section in the 1901 edition, of near about a hundred poems, is called 'Moral and Spiritual' [*naitik ebong paramarthik*]. This section contains poems with titles like 'God's Mercy' [*iswarer karuna*], 'Prayer' [*prarthana*] and 'Who is a Man' [*manush ke*]. This was followed by sections called 'Society and Satire' [*samajik o byanga*], 'Of War' [*yuddha bishayak*], 'Description of the Seasons' [*ritu barnan*], 'Love' [*prem*], and finally, 'Various' [*bibidha*].<sup>84</sup> In the third section on war, apart from a few general poems called simply 'War' (*yuddha*) or 'Victory in War' [*yuddher joy*], all the poems are about contemporary wars in India, both civil and political, and so we have 'Sikh Conflict', 'Nana Saheb', 'Victory in Kanpur', and eponymous poems on the Delhi, Kanpur, Allahabad, Kabul and Agra battles. Iswar Gupta's loyalties were firmly with the British every

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<sup>83</sup> The Manindrakrishna edition and *Basumati* edition are essentially similar with only a slight difference in section headings.

<sup>84</sup> The section called 'Love' in the *Basumati* edition is renamed 'Poems of Pleasure' [*Rasatmabodhak Kabita*] in the Manindrakrishna edition.

time, and in this he was no different from the poets of the *Dutt Family Album* (1870) who wrote in English and were looked at askance for writing eulogies to Lord Canning after 1857.<sup>85</sup> The difference lay, in fact, in the treatment, for Iswar Gupta is contemptuous of leaders such as Nana Saheb ('even though he is Hindu, he is an ocean of evil') and the Rani of Jhansi (using debased slang to call her 'hare-lip aunt' [*thontkata kaki*] and 'she-fox' [*magi khenki*]), sneering at them for, as he saw it, their impudence and idiocy in language far more vitriolic than the 'well-educated' Dutts would have used. It is the language he uses against the Muslims that is the most offensive, however, and they are described as 'worse than the most fallen' (*noradham neech nai, nereder mato*), 'filled with badness like the chilly that is burnt whole' (*jaeno jhaal lanka pora, aga gora, nashtamite bhara*), whose throne the British should seize and whose blood they should suck. Such sentiments, expressed with an appalling coarseness of language in the context of Muslims, are repeatedly present in poems such as 'Delhi's War', where he asks the Hindu community, who are Bharat's favourite children, to freely say Victory to the British (*bharater priyaputra hindu samuday / muktamukhe bolo shobe britisher joy*), or 'Kabul's War' which has an image of the British shaking the Muslim by his beard, or 'Peace after War' which celebrates the British destruction of Delhi, ending with the lines 'Say Victory to the British, say Victory, brothers all/ Come let us sing and dance and praise the Lord'.<sup>86</sup>

Iswar Gupta's hostility towards women, reformed babus and Anglicized Indians in his poetry (rather than his prose, which was altogether more tempered, liberal and generous) marks it out as representative of the most common prejudices of his time, aligning it in spirit with the bazaar painters of the Kalighat *pat* or the performances of *shong*, who mercilessly satirised the pretension and hollowness of a society rapidly on the make. Thus whereas in a poem he might denounce educated women, saying '*aage meyegulo chhilo bhalo, bratadharma korto shobe / eka bethune eshe shesh korechhe, aar ki tader temon pabe?*' [The girls were better before, they performed all the religious

<sup>85</sup> See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002).

<sup>86</sup> 'Yuddha santi', Basumati edition, p. 231. '*Britisher joy joy balo shobe bhai re/ Esho shobe neche kunde bibhugun gai re*'

rites / Bethune alone has put an end to all that, will you ever find them like before anymore?], in an opinion piece in his paper, he could express exactly the opposite view:

Alas, it is impossible to describe the worry caused to us by the fact that women are unable to access routes towards an education. If we ever look into the reasons for the falling apart of families, of brothers, or of other unpleasant incidents, we will have to admit that at its root lies the ignorance of women. Therefore, if they are educated then all these illnesses may easily be overcome and society will be happier and pleasanter than before.<sup>87</sup>

This dichotomy between poetry and prose might well have been premised upon an understanding of poetry as a performative genre, prone to the hyperbolic gesture or the rhetorical flourish, and to always keeping its sensation-seeking audience in mind.

The sectioning of the poems by Manindrakrishna in 1901 is interesting for the fact that the poems on nation, for which Iswar Gupta was praised by critics such as Akshaychandra Sarkar, are lumped together into the last section, which therefore contains ‘*matribhasha*’, ‘*swadesh*’, ‘*bharater abastha*’ and ‘*bharater bhagya bilap*’, as well as ‘*duel yuddha*’ and ‘*babajan budo shiber stotra*’. The sections on love and the seasons may automatically remind one of Rabindranath’s famous sections of the *gitabitan*, but the love poems here belong to an entirely different sensibility. Poems such as ‘The Proud Woman Appeased’ [*maninir manbhanga*] were very far from the Tagorean definition of ‘Prem’ and did not find a place in Bankim’s anthology, while neither did those such as ‘Meeting after Separation’ [*bichheder por milon*] or ‘Unrequited Love’ [*prem nairashya*] that harked back to an earlier pre-colonial idiom of separation and longing with roots in either the Hindustani *khayal* or Bengali *baishnab* poetic traditions.

If Bankim left out the poems that according to him contained obscenity, then later modernist/nationalist generations simply ignored or forgot about the poems on the wars, on ethics and morality and on the seasons. As a result, the modern reader has little idea of what an astonishing range of poems are to be found in the complete volumes of his works. Some of these were retrieved and reprinted by Kamalkumar

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, Vol. 7, p. 133.

Majumdar for his famous selection of 1954, where the poems were accompanied by his own woodcuts to accompany the text.<sup>88</sup> The only poems to have merited sustained discussion over the years, apart from the odd occasion when a poem such as ‘*nirgun iswar*’ [God Without Attributes] was praised by the modern critic, were those satirical poems that commented scathingly on contemporary manners, and those that contained aphorisms that have survived as one or two liners in colloquial speech. Both the satiric poems and the poems about ‘things’ were immensely popular, and survived the passage of time; their accent on the ordinary and on lived life led later critics to emphasise these above his other works, for the acerbic humour they contained continued to be celebrated by one and all. Here we have reflections on ‘The English New Year’ [*ingraji nababarsha*], ‘Widow Remarriage Law’ [*bidhaba bibaha aeen*], ‘Babu Chandicharan Singha’s Love for the Christian Religion’ [*babu chandicharan singhar khristadharmanurakti*], ‘Status’ [*kaulinya*], ‘The Topshe Fish with Eggs’ [*kndawala topshe maachh*] and ‘Pineapple’ [*anaras*]. Many of these made it into Kamalkumar Majumdar’s selection, which also included the famous eulogy to the goat, ‘*panthha*’, on the disguised missionary, ‘*chhadma missionary*’, and on Christmas Day, ‘*borodin*’. While the satirical pointedness of many of these poems mocked the colonial dilemma with a topicality that lingers on in the neo-colonial world order, and while ‘laughter and subjectivity’ might remain one of the commoner tropes towards a reading of Iswar Gupta’s poems, it might be profitable to explore further the conflicted reasons behind the enduring validity of this body of work.<sup>89</sup>

### **Objects in the World: *yāhā āche* [whatever is there]**

The reason why poets such as Madhusudan were considered great, and Iswar Gupta low class (*nimnasreni*), Bankimchandra had said in his evaluation of the poet, was because those poets had articulated the

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<sup>88</sup> Kamalkumar Majumdar ed. *Iswar Gupta Chhora O Chhabi*, first published 9 Aswin, 1361 BE, Mahalaya.

<sup>89</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Laughter and Subjectivity’, *ibid.*; Milinda Banerjee, *A History of Laughter: Iswar Gupta and Early Modern Bengal* (Calcutta: Dasgupta and Company, 2009).

highest ideals of man. However, Bankim went on to say, that was not the last word to be said on the subject. Iswar Gupta had ‘an ability that was unmatched by others – what he had, none other had, he was king in his own domain.’<sup>90</sup> This domain Bankim named as the domain of the present, of the real – ‘Whatever is there, Iswar Gupta is its poet’ (*jaha achhe, iswar gupta tahar kabi*).<sup>91</sup> Among the reasons Eliot enumerated when he spoke of the peculiar problem in the evaluation of Rudyard Kipling’s poetry, was a ‘further obstacle’ – ‘their topicality, their occasional character, and their political associations.’<sup>92</sup> Yet Bankimchandra, in his appreciation of Iswar Gupta, had pointed to exactly this lack of transcendence of the particular as the very reason for the survival of the poems. Iswar Gupta brought something into the Bengali language, he said, that was not there before him, which had given the Bengali language strength. Iswar Gupta’s poems in the *prabhakar* showed for the first time how ‘everyday business, political events, and social events – all this can become the subject matter of poetry.’ Thus ‘today the Sikh war, tomorrow the festival of *poush*, today the missionary, tomorrow soliciting for a job, that all this is under literature, is the stuff of literature [*sahityer adhin, sahityer samagri*], was shown by the *prabhakar*.’<sup>93</sup>

In a short introduction to the most recent edition of Iswar Gupta’s poems available to a Bengali reading public – *iswar gupta: chhabi o chhora* [*Iswar Gupta: Pictures and Rhymes*] – republished in January 2007 after its initial appearance in 1954 as the Kamalkumar edition, the current editor, Aniruddha Lahiri, tries to put his finger on the pulse of the matter: what constitutes Iswar Gupta’s enduring appeal to modern Bengal? The question is asked in the context of the illustrations around which the book is constituted – the *chabi* of the title – which are a series of woodcuts by the writer Kamalkumar Majumdar, who created these in conjunction with his own selection of Iswar Gupta’s poems here. *Chara*, the word used for ‘poem’, is a word that in Bengali primarily indicates ‘nursery rhymes’, although here it seems to have been used in the context of alliterative word use and prosody, for these

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<sup>90</sup> *IGSK*, p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> T.S. Eliot, ed. *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 6.

<sup>93</sup> *IGSK*, 13.

are hardly children's poems, ranging as they do in subject matter from war and ethics to the seasons and satire.

The historical force of these poems, Aniruddha Lahiri suggests in introducing Kamalkumar's selection, lies in the fact that

as time went on, the pressure behind the spread of Gupta-*kabi*'s poetry shifted from the circle of tradition to that which is accidental, suddenly put together and therefore *topical*, and thereby historical. In the *Historical Novel* Lukács had noticed at one point that the inclination towards historicity became strong in all of Europe after the French revolution. Even if not expressed as forcefully, could not a similar inclination have accelerated in British India's centre of power, at the nerve centre of the flow of events, Calcutta? Even if unknown to himself, Iswar Gupta gave a shape to that historicity – in that sense probably is he not India's first modern poet?... From the point of view of this spurt in the awareness of history, his claim will not be either easy or wise to destroy.<sup>94</sup>

Taking the argument further, one might suggest that the shape that Iswar Gupta gave to the historicity of events in Calcutta resided in his emphasis, in the poems, on the materiality of things-as-they-are. Here, in poems on contemporary urban life, on manners and the lack of them, on politics and the hypocrisy of status, in short addresses on food, dress and speech, Iswar Gupta was *sui generis*, writing in a genre peculiar to himself in that age, managing to baffle the later historian of literature and the literary critic, who remained at a loss about whether to read these as 'literature' or not. More often than not, these poems were cutting edge in their subject matter, but in their style and form, they were rooted in 'tradition' or the older styles of Bengali literary composition. Falling uneasily in the cracks of modern Bengali literature, this corpus of poetry confounded the subsequent literary historian, who could only manage, therefore, to reiterate old clichés rather than find a new language with which to read these poems.

The materialism, almost commercialism, in the subject matter of the poems points toward a modern sensibility that captures an element of historicity in the evocation of concrete presence – *yāhā āche*. Bankimchandra identifies the elements of the poetic in Iswar Gupta as 'that which is real, that which is experienced, that which is

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<sup>94</sup> Aniruddha Lahiri, Introduction to *Iswar gupta: chabi o chara* (Calcutta: Kahini, 2007), *ga*.

found' (*jaha prakrita, jaha pratyakkha, jaha prapta*). In identifying the *rasa* that soaks the poetry of Iswar Gupta with such plenitude, Bankim lists the spaces that *are* Iswar Gupta's poetry:

Iswar Gupta's poetry is in the thorn in the rice, in the smoke in the kitchen, in the push of the boatman's oar in Natore, in the indigo loan, in *hotel* food, in the corporeal being of goat-mutton. In the pineapple, he finds not only the juice of sweetness but that of poetry, in the *tapshe* fish he finds not just the fishiness of the fish, but its ascetic look, in goat meat he finds not only the smell of meat but that of the body of the sage Dadhichi.<sup>95</sup>

In this sense, then, Iswar Gupta's poetry is that of the found object, 'readymades' like Duchamp's that are neither attractive nor beautiful but exist by virtue of their selection by the poet or artist. André Breton and Paul Éluard's *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme* defined a readymade as 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist,' a definition applicable to the best of Iswar Gupta's poems on things of ordinary everyday materiality, particularly in their slightly surreal quality that Bankimchandra has tried to capture in his passage without recourse to the vocabulary of the surrealist manifesto. With the self-consciousness of the surrealist artist, where the displaced bottle rack or the inverted porcelain urinal were the exhibited objects, Iswar Gupta's pineapple or goat inhabits a similar surrealism; as in Duchamp's famous addition of the moustache and goatee on the Mona Lisa print titled L.H.O.O.Q., he writes a poetry of irreverence, satire and mockery in an unmistakable statement of intent.

The element of materiality in Iswar Gupta's poetry is factored in two ways: it is tangible and it exists in the image. The subject matter of the Kalighat *pat* is almost exactly the subject matter of Iswar Gupta's poems – the cat with the fish in its mouth in one instance, and the *tapshe* fish with eggs in the other, the babu being beaten by a woman with a *jhadu* in one, and the babu in the boot and hat, scooting off with some urgency ("hoot" *bole uti* "boot" *paye chhuti / kemon amar bhab*<sup>96</sup>) in the other. Sometimes, the image in the poetry springs up with such immediacy that one can almost picture the painting

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<sup>95</sup> *IGSK*, 24.

<sup>96</sup> 'Iswarer karuna', *chara o chabi*, p. 8.

the Kalighat artist should have arrived at – thus when the disguised missionary is described as ‘the corpulent tiger in the Hendo woods, the one with the red face’ (*‘hendo bone kendo bagh rangamukh jar’*), ‘the missionary child-eater who eats up kids’ (*‘missionary chheledhora chhele dhore khay’*) one can just see the big traditional striped tiger painted in black and yellow with a small figure of a boy babu in its mouth.<sup>97</sup>

This pictorial element to poetry and its resemblance to the traditional *patua* or artist (*chitrakar* – literally one who paints pictures) was picked up on by Iswar Gupta himself; crucially however, he felt that the poet was dealing in an immateriality that had no equivalent in the world of the painter. Thus about the *chitrakar* he said, ‘*chitrakare chitra kare, kare tuli tuli / kabishaha tahar tulana, kishhe tuli? / chitrakar dekhe jata, bajhya abayab / tulite tulite ranga, lekhe shei shab / phale she bichitra chitra, chitra aparup / kintu tahe nahi dekhi prakritir rup’* [The painter paints by picking up his brush / How do I hold up a comparison with the poet? / The painter looks at the material body / With his brush, he writes of it all / Thus making a variety of pictures, beautiful depictions / But in them you do not see the beauty of nature].<sup>98</sup> Without a doubt, he is talking here of the *patua* – whom he names as such in the poem itself – the traditional rural artist of mythological themes, whose bold lines and stylized forms had by his time entered the Calcutta bazaar in the incarnation of the Kalighat *pat*, who had no truck with naturalism or perspective, and therefore could not show you ‘the beauty of nature’ as it was. On the other hand, the poet or *kabi* was one who made both the unreal and the real visible, (*‘kiba drishya ki adrishya, shakali prakat’*), who expressed feeling and love (*‘bhab-chinta, prem-ras, adi bahutar’*), and in whose descriptions we see the play of God (*‘kabir barnane dekhi, iswariya lila’*). The painter, he says, ‘writes a plenitude of hands, faces, feet’ (*patua lekhe kata, hath mukh pad*), while the poet-painter writes only in lines (*kabi chitrakar lekhe shudhu matra pad*), punning incessantly on words such as *pad* which can mean both feet and a line of verse, or *tuli*, which can mean both brush and to hold up or pick up, repeating words in

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<sup>97</sup> ‘Chadmabeshi Missionary’ *ibid*, p. 15. The ‘Hendo’ woods might well mean the water tank and area called Henda in north Calcutta where Duff set up what became Scottish Church College and Bethune established the Bethune Collegiate School.

<sup>98</sup> Alok Ray, p. 11.

an excess of alliterative zeal, designing a decorative verse to exhibit his showmanship in language and his expertise in its traditional poetic usage.

Alok Ray, who notices these lines in his introduction to the latest edition of Iswar Gupta's poetry, feels that although he had wanted to speak, as a poet, of the ineffable, he had managed only to achieve in his works a display of the skills of a *patua* – there lay the contradiction of the poet's vision of himself and all he had managed to achieve.<sup>99</sup> The assumption here continues from Bankimchandra's criticism, which is then quoted to corroborate the judgement; Bankim had said, 'He did not know how to express the unsaid. He was not skilled in the creation of beauty. In fact, he did not create very much.'<sup>100</sup> The fundamental premise here on the function of poetry is expressed in the verb 'create' – the modern poet from the Romantic period onward 'creates', he expresses the unsaid, his individual vision transforms the felt experience into essence – this Iswar Gupta failed to do, therefore he was not a 'poet' in the sense that Kalidasa, Bankim said, was a poet, in the sense that we understand *poetry* (and he uses the English word) today. The English word is used because there is no equivalent to the word *poetry* in the Indian languages, because *kavya* and *kavi* in Sanskrit poetic convention had different connotations from that of the English *poet*.

The modern poet, Barthes shows us in 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?', uses words with 'a violent and unexpected abruptness', reproducing 'the depth and singularity of individual experience' in the 'power or beauty' of poetry. 'In modern poetics', he says, 'words produce a kind of formal continuum from which there gradually emanates an intellectual or emotional density... speech is then the solidified time of a more spiritual gestation, during with the "thought" is prepared, installed little by little by the contingency of words.' In contrast, classical poetry depends entirely on 'technique'; it is 'merely an ornamental variation of prose, the fruit of an *art* (that is, a technique), never a different language, or the product of a particular sensibility.' An older traditional poet like Iswar Gupta was in some senses analogous to the European classical poet Barthes invokes, in that he embodies no particular depth of feeling, he does not project

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<sup>99</sup> Alok Ray, *ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*.

out an inner thought, he uses ornamental variation in accordance with ‘a whole ritual of expression’ laid down already for him by social convention. This is poetry, then, that is rooted in the *social*, recognised by the ‘conspicuousness of its conventions’, by its display of verbal skill, its *relational* ties with language. Its aim is ‘to bring a thought exactly within the compass of a metre,’ and here language is not in-depth but on the surface, spread out according to ‘the exigencies of an elegant or decorative purpose.’ Here, ‘poetic vocabulary itself is one of usage, not of invention,’ ‘they are due to long custom, not to individual creation.’<sup>101</sup> That is why the poetic practice of Iswar Gupta fails to meet Bankim’s or Alok Ray’s standard, because individual *creation* is not the criterion that governs its existence at all.

Yet the division Barthes makes between the classical poet and the modern poet in Europe establishes a dichotomy that does not stand up to scrutiny in the conflicted present of the poetry of Iswar Gupta. For Barthes holds up modern poetry as being, on the contrary, about reducing ‘discourse to words as static things,’ where the primacy of the word is absolute. ‘Modern poetry is a poetry of the object,’ he says, but the unexpected object here is ‘each poetic word’; this ‘Hunger of the Word, common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman’, ‘full of gaps and full of lights,’ ‘filled with absences’ and ‘without stability of intention.’ ‘The bursting upon us of the poetic word then institutes an absolute object’ and here, the object cannot have any ‘resort to the content of the discourse’, it is not about the subject matter, because it ‘turns its back’ on both ‘History’ and ‘social life’. But in Iswar Gupta’s poetry, the object remains an object, it is material, it has a body and attributes, it is physical and tangible in the image. In this it does not aspire to the interiority of the modern individual poet, it has not turned its back on History and social life. Nevertheless, its unmistakable modernity of the urban and the spatial finds a manifestation in all that is anonymous (all of his poetry appeared unsigned in his lifetime), that is of the crowd, the city, the newspaper, and of the lived materiality of things. In this it also has ‘something good, solid and delightful to offer’ as Baudelaire noticed in the minor poets, for it is permeated by a ‘*particular* beauty, the

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<sup>101</sup> Barthes, ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, in *Writing Degree Zero*, pp. 41-52.

beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners.’ As such, then, like Constantin Guys, the obscure painter Baudelaire is concerned with in this essay, Iswar Gupta too is ‘the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.’ ‘Every country, to its pleasure and glory,’ Baudelaire continues, ‘has possessed a few men of this stamp,’ and here in Calcutta in the 1850s it is unmistakably Iswar Gupta who occupies that space.<sup>102</sup>

Such an artist is a *flaneur*, a traveller, a cosmopolitan, but he has a loftier aim. Baudelaire says, ‘He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call “modernity” for I know of no better word to express the idea I have in mind. He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.’<sup>103</sup> The task of such a poet is to separate out, from the garb of an age, the ‘mysterious element of beauty that it may contain’, and if, for Iswar Gupta, that transitory beauty was to be found in the celebration of the English New Year’s Day, or succulent goat meat, then that was the deportment of the age, the special nature of beauty in his day. While the modern painter in Baudelaire’s time captures the gesture and bearing of the woman of his day in the cut of skirt and bodice, the crinoline and the starched muslin petticoats, for ‘every age has its own gait, glance and gesture’, in Iswar Gupta’s descriptions, something like that glance and gesture is present, for instance, in the depiction of the ‘fresh’ Englishwoman in her polka-dotted dress in *Ingraji Nababarsha*.<sup>104</sup> Iswar Gupta is urban in his location and contemporary in his subject matter, writing a performative poetry for his audience in traditional metre and style. The city and its society – with its hypocrisy and sham, its love of pomp and ceremony, in its manners and customs, dress and deportment – is pitilessly reflected in his poetic productions in different forms. This immersion in the city and its ways was something the nationalist modern in the late nineteenth century would decisively turn its back upon, and the material world of urban life as subject matter for poetry would only return to Bengal in the avant-garde 1930s.

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<sup>102</sup> Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ *ibid*, 1, 5.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 12-13.

### Between Sound and Image: The Sound-Image

If the visual element of the language used allows a graphic pictorial imagery to spring up in the reader's mind, then the other dimension that is indispensable to the success of the best of Iswar Gupta's poetry is that of sound. Alliteration, punning and a clever jugglery with words was taken to such an extreme in Bengali poetry in the line of Bharatchandra in the nineteenth century that it was specifically identified as a fault by later literary critics. However, what is remarkable in such usage in Iswar Gupta is how an astonishing onomatopoeia of correspondence created between sound and image in the poem, resulting in something that can only be called, uniquely, a 'sound image'. Take, for instance, the celebrated satirical poem *ingraji nababarsha* [English New Year]. This extraordinary poem is written to commemorate the arrival of the English year 1852 and records, in minute detail, the sights and sounds of the celebrations in the city. Beginning with a reference to the Bengali lunar year that is losing its relevance with the coming of the English, Christian year, the poem initially describes the white man on this occasion, well-dressed, joyous and indulgent, in his carriage on the way to church and then in his well-decorated home. At his side, his wife looks 'fresh' in a 'polka-dotted dress' ('*maanmode bibi shab hoilen fresh / feather-er folorish phutikata dress*').<sup>105</sup> A detailed description of her appearance follows. However, typically in Iswar Gupta, there is a sting in the tail, for, after describing the slippers (*shilipar*) on her white feet and the scarf around her neck, the decorative comb in her hair and the spray of flowers that descend to her cheek, he concludes in a notorious line, '*biralakhi bidhumukhi mukhe gandha chhute*' [cat-eyed, moon-faced, she has bad breath]. Another famous line, '*bibijaan chole jan lobejaan kore*', follows two lines that use the sound effect of fluttering and flowing in the service of an image:

*Ribin urichhe kata phar phar kori  
dhol dhol dhol dhol banka bhaab dhor  
bibijaan chole jan lobejaan kore  
[So many ribbons fly fluttering away  
Leaning, flowing, reclining at an angle  
The beloved bibi goes her way, and one feels like dying].*

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<sup>105</sup> Alok Ray (ed.), 2009, *Ísvarcandra gupter śreshtha kabitā*, p.83.

This repeated use of words such as ‘*phar phar*’ for the sound of the ribbon flying in the wind or ‘*dhol dhol*’, which is actually repeated four times, to indicate the delicious ease of attitude in the posturing *bibi*, is impossible to translate effectively. This repetition, as well as the use of such sounding words for description is, in a subsequent section of the poem, taken to its logical extreme. After a hugely subversive and mischievous section where the poet imagines himself to be a fly buzzing around the couple in their carriage to church, and then accompanying them home to sit at their table, sometimes licking her glass of sherry, sometimes sitting on her gown or her face and happily rubbing its wings, there follows a section on the consumption of ‘*aparup khana*’ [amazing food] in the sahib’s house. Here, the scene is evoked entirely and only through sound, framed by the preceding and following couplet:

*Verybest sherrytaste merryrest jate*  
*Aage bhage den giya srimatir haate*

*Kot kot kotakot tok tok tok*  
*Thhun thhun thhun thhun dhok dhok dhok*

*Chupu chupu chup chup chop chop chop*  
*Shupu shupu shup shup shop shop shop*

*Thhokash thhokash thhok phosh phosh phosh*  
*Kosh kosh tosh tosh ghosh ghosh ghosh*

*Hip hip hurre dake whole class*  
*Dear madam you take this glass.*

This does not need translating, except for the framing couplets, of which the preceding one says that the very best sherry that makes the rest merry is given to the missus before anybody else, while the one following is almost entirely in English except for the word ‘*dake*’ which means ‘calls’. Compare the dissociation and alienation in the description of the scene to a letter written in 1893, where the inherent feeling of repulsion toward the *sound* of English culture in India is brought out into the open by the letter-writer:

When I went and sat in one corner of that drawing room, it all appeared like a shadow to my eyes.... Yet in front of me were *memsahibs* in *evening dress* and in my ear was the murmur of English conversation and laughter –

all in all such discordance! How true was my eternal *Bharatvarsha* to me, and this dinner table, with its sugary English smiles and polite English conversation, how empty, how false, how deeply untrue! When the *mems* were talking in their low sweet cultivated voices then I was thinking of you, oh wealth of my country. After all, you are of this *Bharatvarsha*.<sup>106</sup>

Rabindranath's letter to Indiradebi is sensitive where Iswar Gupta is acerbic, but the impulse to portray the foreignness of the English dinner table remains. Iswar Gupta is fascinated by the sounds the English make and records their difference in objective detail, following up the lines ending '... take this glass' with a rendition of the sounds of the music and dance that follows, all so completely foreign to the Indian ear:

*Shukher shakher khana hole samadhan*  
*Tara rara rara rara sumadhur gaan*  
 [When the pleasurable and exotic food was finished  
 Tara rara rara rara [went the] tuneful songs]

*Guru guru gum gum lafe lafe tal*  
*Tara rara rara rara lala lala lal*  
 [Guru guru gum gum goes the leaping rhythm  
 Tara rara rara rara lala lalal lal]

This emphasis on sound had its roots in a conception of poetry that was closely allied to the performative aspect of the lyrics he also wrote as a songwriter for the *kaviwalas* of Baghbazaar; fundamentally, his conception of poetry was that of lines that were meant to be recited rather than read on the page, as indeed they were, from the street-seller newspaper vendor in Calcutta to the assembled friends of Nabin Sen's father at Chittagong, as we have seen. He himself described his idea of poetry in a poem called '*Kabita*' as that which 'expresses one's feeling or opinion as it is *spoken* by the people, bringing cheer to the public' [*monobhab byakta hoy, lokete kabita koy, ananda bitare janagane*].<sup>107</sup> '*Lokete kabitā kay*', he says here, 'people speak poetry', and in the lines of the poem above we see exactly the function then of

<sup>106</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, letter to Indira Devi, Cuttack, 10 February

<sup>107</sup> Alok Ray, *ibid*, p.9.

the onomatopoeia of sound and image as it is recited rather than read in front of a public or *janagan*, to bring them good cheer.

The poem goes on to describe the shops and hotels, cakes and ‘chops’ of Anglo India and ends, eventually, with a scathing indictment of the anglicized Indian woman, or as he calls her, the ‘black native lady’ (which appellation is followed by the words ‘shame shame shame’) and the half-accultured Indian toady who is neither here nor there, determined to eat at a table, but scared of getting cut by the fork and knife and therefore using both his hands as paws to lift up heaps of rice. This is a poem often quoted for its sarcasm at the expense of the half-anglicized upstarts who dominate Calcutta society, for it is at the fountainhead of an honourable literary tradition that continued right into the Bengali high modern through Bankim and Tagore to D.L. Roy and Sukumar Ray. The physicality of the sound images it so uniquely contains, however, has never been held up to scrutiny, nor has the effect of these onomatopoeic syllables upon the page. What they bring to life with some vitality, however, is the materiality of cultural difference, the sheer obdurate strength of certain sounds to convey a tonality, mood or atmosphere as nothing else may do. In their sheer presence of being, they are a live playback record of the changing shape of the everyday on New Year’s Day, 1852, bringing to the contemporary reader a sense of lived experience as no other imagery may do. This is history in the process of being made, history happening without notice all around the colonial city, history as noise.

In Iswar Gupta’s poems, then, literature approaches historicity along a path of everydayness, an everydayness that is necessarily informed by a sense of the past. Heidegger’s notion that ‘Everydayness is a way *to be* – to which, of course, that which is publicly manifest belongs’, if applied to Iswar Gupta’s poems on the topical, the everyday, and the historical, reveal that all of these poems manifestly belong to the realm of the public.<sup>108</sup> There is, here, no interiority in the sense of the endlessly interiorized self of bourgeois subjectivity; rather, time and literature work together in the poems to recuperate the living history of the banal. The focus, in these poems on the pineapple or the English New Year, is on the detail, detail which is

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<sup>108</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 422.

configured in terms of description (sound or image) and the everyday which is rooted in the domestic sphere of local social life. This focus belongs, conversely, to a politicised account of the traditional, the ordinary and the domestic as sites of knowledge which are outside of the normative western expectations of subjectivity and interiority on the one hand and the drama of nation and history on the other. Iswar Gupta's poems belong, thus, to a culture of irony that is located in the local and the ordinary – not in the grand mission of a nationalist high modern or in the sombre tones of a fraught modernity as they are perceived in his inheritors from Michael and Bankim onward. He is not preoccupied with the polar conflicts of the coloniser versus the colonised, or the state versus the people, but with textures of life that circumvent those epic battles to concentrate insouciantly in the cracks of the edifices that will proceed to build Bengali modernity.

The historicist imperative is conspicuous in its absence in Iswar Gupta's poems, which are based on a total involvement with the overwhelming rush of the present contained in a miscellany of items. In a sense, then, Iswar Gupta's oeuvre is like the gossip in Hutom's Calcutta, which is constituted, as Ranajit Guha describes it, by an 'immediacy of presence' that 'as a phenomenon', 'lives only for the day, literally as an ephemeros or *adyatana*, in a state of utter transience.'<sup>109</sup> Like the gossip of Hutom's city, the poems of Iswar Gupta too 'create a sense of shared time out of the sum of short-lived sensations', helping thereby 'together with other factors, to form the worldhood of a colonial public.' Further, as Guha notes, 'this incessantly unsettled contemporaneity' contains 'fragments of the past' that 'show up in it from time to time as tradition, genealogy or plain nostalgia, but are burnt up at once.' Guha is right to contrast this 'perpetual restlessness' of being in the city with the Wordsworthian mode in 'Westminster Bridge', or the Dickensian in *Sketches of Boz*, both of which subscribe to a historicising tendency, 'adding depth to the ongoing historicisation of the great metropolitan city in English literature.'<sup>110</sup> Their particular schematic lies within the Western aesthetic and epistemological traditions, where the masculine suspicion of the quotidian, of

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<sup>109</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'A colonial city and its time(s),' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2008:45: 341, 42.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 340, 342.

the ordinary, of minute detail has been inherited in part from the organicist aesthetics of G.W.F. Hegel, and the ‘contempt he flaunts for “the little stories of everyday domestic existence” and “the multiform particularities of everyday life” – in short, for all he lumps under the dismissive heading “the prose of the world.”’<sup>111</sup>

Irony, the local and the ordinary inhabit Iswar Gupta’s poems, outside of the grand narrative of a developmental history inaugurated in his wake in the epic poetry of Madhusudan or the historical novels of Bankimchandra. The subjectivity in these poems cannot, however, be denied self-reflexivity – if the colonial everyday was ‘irreparably split in the middle, with one part assimilated to official time and [the other] alienated from the civil society’, and the question Guha asked is ‘How, then could everyday life and everyday people be inscribed in the discourse of the colonial city?’, then the answer must lie not only in parody, as Guha finds with Kaliprasanna’s *naksha*, but in a divided self-reflexivity that was both despairing and hopeful in turn.<sup>112</sup> Once we acknowledge Iswar Gupta’s treatment of the ordinary and trivial detail of life as a site of critical knowledge production, it might be possible to read in the details an indication of a self-reflexive worldview that refuses to take part in the valorised and self-important anti-colonial modernity that was beginning to take shape in Bengal, providing in its place an overlooked alternative of self inscription in the unacclaimed, the unnoticed, the comic – in whatever was there.

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<sup>111</sup> Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 7.

<sup>112</sup> Guha, 344.