

Curator's Note

The annals of printed book history in Bengal span an expanse of nearly 250 years, commencing in 1778 with the introduction of letterpress printing and culminating in the contemporary era marked by the prevalence of digital printing technologies. This journey was borne out of the colonial intervention, with the book titled '*A Grammar of the Bengal Language*' authored by *Nathaniel Brassey Halhed* in 1778 serving as the inaugural exemplar to integrate the Bengali script within its pages. With the advent of colonial intervention, the nascent decades of Bengali book production bore witness to a conspicuous Western influence that markedly permeated the realms of aesthetics and craftsmanship. This influence was manifested in various facets of book design and production. However, as the tumultuous currents of nationalist sentiments, as well as the middle-class educated '*Babu*' class, emerged, a subtle, (sometimes self-contradictory) but discernible shift in the approach to book production developed. Intriguingly, several pioneering institutions and individuals became torchbearers of this transformation, imparting distinctiveness to the printing culture in Bengal. Among these, the *Aadi Bramhasamaj Press*, *Prabasi Press*, *Visva-Bharati Granthalaya (later Granthanbibhaga)*, *Signet Press* and so on embodied unique facets of this evolving printing culture. Their varied approaches and contributions exemplify the dynamic relationship between book production and the sociocultural milieu, exploring the minute interplay of aesthetics and linguistic identity in the evolving landscape of Bengali print culture.

‘Mudranbinyas’, the exhibition is intricately dedicated to the meticulous unravelling of the historical odyssey that defines the evolution of Bengali book printing. This journey, marked by its resilience in the face of rapidly changing political, social, and technological landscapes, has exhibited both mainstream and clandestine trajectories. In the pursuit of curation, we have undertaken the task of dividing this narrative into distinct timeframes. It is vital to acknowledge that while our chronology delineates the formative transformations, the examples presented within it do not adhere to a linear progression. Instead, they interweave and overlap across various timeframes. It is through this nuanced exploration that we seek to discern the distinct characteristics that have been attained in Bengali books through the varied utilization of technology, and the profound impact of these technological nuances on the larger tapestry of Bengali book history. In this exhibition, we aim for a comprehensive exploration of the significance of Bengali book history within the broader framework of historical studies. The printed volumes, serving as sanctuaries of erudition and narrations, rise to eminence in their unique capacity to unveil profound insights into the intricate tapestry of history they enshroud. As we embark upon this rigorous exploration of these volumes, we endeavour to fathom the profound historical narrative they hold, a narrative profoundly interwoven with the physicality of Bengali bookcraft. This physical manifestation, inherently reliant upon the mediums and craftsmanship employed in their production, bears the weight of an expansive spectrum of historical discourse. Within this discourse, the books illuminate the nuanced dimensions of class structures, the complexities of identity formation, the stages of nationalism, the evolutionary trajectories of

modernism, and a plethora of other facets integral to the overarching historical narrative. We shall find immense delight if our discerning audience carries the profound essence that we have meticulously woven into this historical tapestry.

Aranya Sengupta is the Project Coordinator for this Foundation implemented by India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), under the Arts Practice programme, made possible with support from Sony Pictures Entertainment Fund. All the books displayed here are from his collection. In this context, my heartfelt appreciation extends to *Mr. Aranya Sengupta*, *Mr. Adwaita Krishna Basu*, and *Mr. Subhadip Mondal* whose benevolence has granted me the privilege to participate in this odyssey of erudition. And, last but by no means least, our gratitude extends to the *India Foundation for the Arts (IFA)* and *Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni*, whose unwavering support has been the bedrock upon which we have built this journey. We welcome your feedback and inquiries and invite you to partake in the discourse as we collectively traverse the annals of Bengali printing history.

Sarnali Dutta