

SCIENCE FICTION

How Satyajit Ray, Premendra Mitra and two others wrote a science fiction story jointly for the radio

‘Sabuj Manush’, or ‘Green Men’, was a pathbreaking experiment in Bengali fiction and drama in creating a futuristic universe.

Soham Guha

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From left: The authors of Sabuj Manush, the cover of the story published in 1982, the surviving copy of the spool recording and the recovered digitised copy

In pulp stories of first contacts (with extra-terrestrial beings) and in Hollywood films like *Mars Attacks*, the aliens or pseudo-hominids are predominantly imagined as reptilian creatures, or, in a much broader vision, as “Green Men” (sometimes Little). These non-human sentient beings are identified by the colour of their skin or in some occurrences, body hairs – which is green. The colour is one of the prominent aspects of dissimilarity with humans on earth.

Before the stereotyped application of aliens or Martians as Green Men, the term was ordinarily used to describe supernatural creatures like the green children of Woolpit (12th century England) or goblins in 19th

and 20th century fairy tales (*Puck of Pook's Hill*, Rudyard Kipling, 1906). Another example of this can be found in the fantasy poem written by the German poet Matthew Gregory “Monk” Lewis, aptly named “The Little Green Man: A German Story” (1801).

However, with the emergence of science fiction in the west, the term began to be used to describe a race of extraterrestrials. From Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars* (1912) to the Flash Gordon comics in the 1930s, the stories of Martians as green men proliferated. Harold M Sherman (*Green Man: A Visitor from Space*, 1946), Dallas McCord “Mack” Reynolds (*The Case of the Little Green Men*, 1951), and Fredric Brown (*Martians, Go Home*, 1955) also wrote notable Green Men stories during the Golden Age of American science fiction.

Bengal gets a sci-fi magazine

Fiction met rumours with the supposed UFO crashes in the US in the 1950s. Various “encounters” with the alien were recounted, with vivid descriptions. Often the stories presented an uncoordinated striking similarity between themselves. And, of course, the aliens retained the same skin colour: green. The stories became so popular and widespread that *Variety* magazine novelised them in *Behind the Flying Saucers* (Frank Scully, 1950). The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune – all published articles on the incidents.

The waves of this phenomena also reached Bengal – or, more precisely, science fiction writer Adrish Bardhan. Bardhan himself was experimenting with his newfound magazine *Ashcharjya*, the first Bengali magazine of science fiction and fantasy. The genre was still largely unknown in Bengali literature, despite works by, among others, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose and Premendra Mitra. Bardhan’s *Ashcharjya* took a bold step with its first issue in January 1963 and coined the Bengali synonym for science fiction – *kalpavigyan*.

Ashcharjya gained tremendous popularity among mainstream Bengali readers in a remarkably short time. While the Cold War and the accelerations of scientific breakthrough alongside the space race propelled the popularity of science fiction in the West, Bardhan and his magazine curated the genre in Bengali. Bardhan himself played the roles of editor, translator, writer and even a columnist for the magazine in the early years owing to a shortage of writers.

Moving to radio

With *Ashcharjya* reaching its peak, Bardhan decided to expand the genre in other media formats, especially radio. When he told Premendra Mitra, the primary advisor of *Ashcharjya*, about the Green Men of the west, Mitra proposed an anthological broadcast. Though science fiction podcasts are common today, in 1965, in a country and state still in the grips of political turmoil, war winds, and economic flux, a radio programme in the genre was nothing but historical. On 3rd March, 1965, in the “Sahityabator” programme broadcast from Akashvani (All India Radio in Indian languages) Calcutta station, Bardhan himself, along with writers Dilip Roy Chowdhury, and Mitra broadcast a story titled *Mahakashjatri Bangali (The Bengali Space Voyager)*. When this proved success, Bardhan decided to broadcast an Indian take on Green Men.

And so, Sabuj Manush

In its execution, *Sabuj Manush (Green Men)* was different from the *Mahakashjatri Bangali*. Film director Satyajit Ray, himself a science-fiction aficionado, joined the writers. And with his addition to the team, *Sabuj Manush* was no longer a single story told in segments written by different writers, but different stories taking place simultaneously in a shared universe.

Today we are familiar with the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) as a means to extend a franchise, but on 16th February 1966, when *Sabuj Manush* was narrated on radio, the idea of a shared universe was new not only to Bengali literature but also, possibly, to India. Each of the four parts of *Sabuj Manush* is a standalone story connected through a delicate cohesive thread of concurrent interpretations of the phenomenon by the four authors.

The story of secret changes being made by a race of *Sabuj Manush* (green men) to adapt to human society and participate in its administrative, scientific and cultural life is similar to the Marvel comics group’s *Secret Invasion* story arc. Coincidentally, the race called Skrulls in the Marvel universe is also one of shapeshifting Green Men.

Sabuj Manush was conceptualised as a part of a three-stage campaign designed by Ray and Bardhan to popularise *kalpabgyan* in Bengal, the other two being a magazine and a film club. The idea of a radio drama

came from the famous production of *The War of the Worlds*, narrated and directed by Orson Welles in 1938. Welles's presentation was so dramatic that it was believed to have caused panic among audiences who mistook it for real news.

Among the four authors, Ray's narrating style was particularly impactful, and the programme became a sensation. The recording was broadcast several times, and articles on it appeared in newspapers. *Betar Jagat* magazine, brought out by Akashvani Calcutta, printed the story as the first Bengali work of anthological science-fiction, complete with author biographies and illustrations.

The story since then

Enthused by the success of *Sabuj Manush* on the radio, Bardhan expanded the works with poems on the alien race in the pages of *Ashcharjya*, alongside a story by Niharendu Das in 1967. However, with the untimely end of *Ashcharjya*, the expansion of the *Sabuj Manush* universe came to a halt for a while.

The next instalment in the saga came in the pages of *Bismoy*, another short-lived science fiction magazine, written by Siddhartha Narlikar and Hiren Chattopadhyay. Bardhan also wrote a play for radio in the same universe named *Sabuj Manush*. All these works were collected and published in a book by Bardhan's *Fantastic* magazine. The latest story in this universe has been written by Sudip Deb for *Kalpabiswa* webzine.

Now all the works on *Sabuj Manush*, along with relevant news and documentation, has now been published in book form by Kalpabiswa-Fantastic Publication. After being inaccessible for more than fifty years, the only surviving copy of the original recording of the *Sabuj Manush* radio programme was discovered in Bardhan's home shortly after his death on 21st May 2019. The original spool tape has been restored and rerecorded in digital format.

Sabuj Manush not only chronicles the story of an alien race in collaborative form, but also holds a clue to the trajectory of futurist literature in India. It revolutionised the genre and, arguably, created a template of international standard.



The cover of a new edition of “Sabuj Manush” imagines a prequel in comic book form.

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