

## THE METAPHYSICS OF TEXT

The advances of book history and editorial theory remind us that it is vital to look behind the text we read. Sukanta Chaudhuri explores, at a very fundamental level, how texts are constituted and how they work. He applies insights from many lines of study not brought together so closely before: theories of language, signification and reception alongside bibliography, textual criticism, editorial theory and book history. Blending case studies with general observation and theory, he considers the implications of the physical form of the text; the relation between oral and written language, and between language and other media; the new territory opened up by electronic texts; and special categories like play-books and translations. Drawing on an exceptionally wide range of material, both Western literature and Indian works from Sanskrit aesthetics to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, Chaudhuri sets a new agenda for the study of texts.

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# THE METAPHYSICS OF TEXT

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*To my teachers*

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## *Preface*

The idea of this book came to me in the course of wide-ranging, initially unrelated activities over several years: teaching courses on bibliography and textual criticism; plans and discussions for the scholarly editing of Indian authors, especially Rabindranath Tagore (Thakur); the first attempts at creating digital archives and electronic texts of Indian authors. Many such activities are reflected in the work of the School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University, with which I have been associated since its inception. The School has enjoyed fruitful interaction with centres of textual scholarship round the world, and many individual scholars at those centres and elsewhere. This book owes much to that intellectual exchange.

The varied projects of the School allowed me to observe many lines of textual study and practice that are usually carried out as separate programmes at separate locations. This book attempts to integrate various fields of linguistic and textual study. My work with the School gave me a rare opportunity to see such integration in practice.

A visitorship at St John's College, Cambridge, for six months in 2004 enabled me to carry out intensive reading for this book. A similar invitation from the School of Advanced Study, University of London, in 2007–8, though primarily for another project, gave me more opportunities for library work. I am indebted to both these institutions, as to the Institute of English Studies, University of London, and the Centre for Textual Scholarship, De Montfort University, for their unfailing welcome and support. I must also thank Jadavpur University for granting me leave to avail of these opportunities.

I am deeply grateful to Peter Shillingsburg and to my wife and colleague Supriya Chaudhuri for reading extensive sections of the draft chapters and offering valuable comments. I have received help and support of various kinds from Swapan Chakravorty, Amlan Das Gupta, Marilyn Deegan, Hans Gabler, Sankha Ghosh, Warwick Gould, Abhijit Gupta, Swapan Majumdar, Graham Shaw, Kathryn Sutherland, Alexis Tadié and

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The first versions of Chapters 1, 7 and 10 were read as conference papers at Jadavpur University. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 began life as the H. L. Basak Memorial Lectures at Presidency College, Kolkata, and Chapter 8 as a paper at the 2006 World Shakespeare Congress at Brisbane. A part of Chapter 6 was presented at a symposium at the Italian Cultural Centre, New Delhi. An earlier version of Chapter 5 appeared in *Moveable Type: Book History in India*, ed. Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), pp. 224–46. I thank Rukun Advani of Permanent Black for his courtesy in the matter. Chapter 7 is expanded from an article in *Jadavpur University Essays and Studies*, 18 (2004), pp. 17–22, by kind permission of the University. Chapter 9 is based on an article in the *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15 (2002), reprinted in *In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*, ed. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2007), pp. 71–8. It is used by kind permission of the publisher.

I have received many courtesies from the staff of the British Library; the Warburg Institute; Rabindra-Bhavana, Santiniketan; Cambridge University Library; the Bodleian Library; Senate House Library, University of London; and Jadavpur University Library. I am grateful to the institutions that have supplied copies of illustrations and permitted me to reproduce them: in particular, for gratis permission, to the British Museum; Cambridge University Library; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; the Maison Française d'Oxford; the National Gallery, London; and Peterhouse, Cambridge. Formal acknowledgements have been incorporated in the List of illustrations.

My most general debt is to my colleagues at Jadavpur University: above all to the members, young and old, of the School of Cultural Texts and Records.