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“Eating the Yaban’s Rice”: Socio-Cultural Transactions on the Mid-Colonial Bengali Stage

The *Nil Darpaṇ* [“Mirror of Indigo,” 1860], translated as *Nil Darpan; or, The Indigo Planting Mirror*, is a pathbreaking Bengali play written by Dinabandhu Mitra (1829–1874),¹ a disciple of the poet and journalist Íšvarcandra Gupta (1812–1859)² and a functionary in the Indian Postal Service, in 1858–1859. The play, which created a sensation with its initial publication and had a Shakespearean tragedy structure, captured the spirit of the so-called *Nilbidroho*, or Indigo Revolt of February–March 1859 in the Bengal Presidency, when the *ryots*³ (peasant tenants) declined to sow indigo in their fields, in breach of an oppressive contract, in protest against exploitative regulatory mechanisms of forced farming. Here, one must mention that Bengal was the world’s largest producer of indigo in the nineteenth century and this cultivation and production process was devised as a part of a shrewd and brutal system of enforced cultivation, about which I will write a little later. As Dušan Zbavitel writes, quoting Alokrañjan Dāsgupta, Debīprasād Bandyopādhyāy and others, “[f]rom the point of view of its artistic

1 These are the dates given by Dušan Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, in: Jan Gonda, ed., *A History of Indian Literature*, 10 vols., vol. 9, fasc. 3, pp. 119–307 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 226, referring to Suśīlkumār De, *Dinabandhu Mitra*, Calcutta 1960.

2 These dates, too, are given by Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, p. 217, referring to Bhabatoṣ Datta, *Íšvarcandra Gupter jībanacarita o kabitva* [“The Story of Íšvarcandra Gupta’s Life and Poetry”], Calcutta 1968.

3 *Ryot* or *rāyat*, being derived from the Hindi word *ra’iyat* and the Arabic *ra’iyah*, which is translated as “flock” or “peasants” (cf. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/ryot> [retrieved: 6 August 2014]), was another common socio-economic term used in South Asia for farm-cultivators, who were hired tenant-labourers, though there were variants in different regions. Cf. Bindeshwar Ram, *Land and Society in India: Agrarian Relations in Colonial North Bihar* (Chennai: Orient Longman, 1997), pp. 76–126.

Note: With regard to the term “yaban” the translator’s footnote explains: “The Mahomedans and all other nations who are not Hindus, are called by that name.” Dinabandhu Mitra, *Nil Darpan; or, The Indigo Planting Mirror: A Drama Translated from the Bengali by a Native [Nil Darpaṇ, 1860]*, trans. Michael Madhusudan Datta, ed. Rev. James Long (Calcutta: C. H. Manuel, 1861), p. 7. The phrase has a mildly derogatory context, as almost no Hindu caste was supposed to indulge in *commensality* with non-Hindus, especially Muslims and Christians. The word “*yaban*” is derived from the Sanskrit *yavana* (Pali *yona*), which refers to the Indo-Bactrian and Greek communities that came from or had settled in South-Central Asia and North-Western India.

qualities, the *Nildarpaṇ* is not a successful play' [...] and similar judgements have been passed upon the drama by other modern historians of Bengali literature."⁴ It shows the relative novelty of tragic drama in the Bengali cultural milieu, though some of the characterisation and much of the dialogue, especially in the original dialectal Bengali, point to not insignificant dramatic talent. As Zbavitel details, Mitra wrote six other plays, including *Nabīn Tapasvinī* ["The New Female Ascetic," 1863], which seems to have been based upon Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and the societal satire that was deemed by later critics like Sukumar Sen to be his finest creation, *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* ["The Widow-Feast of a Married Woman," 1866].⁵ Here, it is worth remembering that Mitra, due to the initial influence of Ísvarcandra Gupta, started out as a poet, having composed an anthology titled *Mānab-Caritra* ["Human Character"] and started writing in the *Samvād Prabhākar*. This led to Mitra achieving some amount of recognition as a poet amongst the readers of that periodical, with some of his poems attracting even the *cognoscenti* of the time. However, he decided to quit composing poetry and "adopt dramaturgy as the means of developing his creative talents."⁶

It is, however, in its political and economic repercussions that the *Nil Darpaṇ* creates a socio-cultural momentum of its own. This realistic evocation of the popular mood was made possible by Mitra's long association with people from all walks of society, in different places in "Orissa, Nadia, Dhaka, Comilla, the Lushai Hills et al.,"⁷ wherever his work for the Government took him. According to Sivanath Sastri, it was this ability to engage and identify himself with people from different classes of society that had fashioned his dramatic realism: "[s]uch experience, such exposure to human character, and such awareness of varied social situations was available to no one else."⁸ Mitra was in Dhaka in 1859, when there were numerous peasants' strikes against the oppressive indigo-planters in districts like Nadia and Jessore, and could witness, first-hand, the travails of the *ryots*, which created a mimetic backlash in his creative consciousness. These practical and direct experiences of peasant-suffering and agrarian exploitation and misappropriation of the fruits of back-breaking labour—as triggered by colonialism—led to the emotionally charged passages of the *Nil Darpaṇ*. The linguistic register, especially as implicit in the use of an almost elegiac idiomatic mode

⁴ Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, p. 226.

⁵ Ibid. Cf. Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1960), p. 200.

⁶ Sivanath Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍī o Tatkālīn Banga Samāj* ["Ramtanu Lahiri and the Contemporary Bengali Society," 1904], ed. Barid Baran Ghosh (Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 2009), p. 185.

⁷ P. 186.

⁸ Ibid.

throughout the initial scenes, tends to be quite fatalistic and even submissive, as when Ray Churn says, "Oh, my Ill-fortune! Ill-fortune (burnt forehead)! What has the Indigo of this white man done?"⁹ However, as the play progresses, the mood of the poorer peasants, certainly those who have nothing to lose, like Torap, and even the wealthier, more gentrified Nobin Madhab gets more aggressive and even confrontationist. In Act 2, scene 1, Torap, the firebrand Muslim peasant, observes something that has, later, characterised a number of Indian cultural stereotypes about British class divisions: "We have now understood, these Planters are the low people of Belata."¹⁰ In fact, one of the strategies of early colonial Indian lobbying, at various echelons of the East India Company and even, post-1858, the Crown, was to make a clear distinction between the presumably well-intentioned intellectual upper strata of the Empire's leadership, usually based in London and metropolitan Calcutta, and the perceived proletarian British underclass who would go to the Indian *mofussil*¹¹ and busy themselves with the dirty, day-to-day business of keeping Indians under their physical yoke.

This strategy, seen in the writings of the eminent Bengali journalist-cum-editor Harish Chandra Mukherjee, especially during the so-called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, often allowed the higher British officialdom to distance itself from the unpalatable acts of oppression and exploitation perpetrated by, among others, the indigo-planters. As Sivnath Sastri writes: "[w]hile, on the one hand, Harish-chandra used to support every legitimate disciplinary action of the Government, on the other he protested against all kinds of unacceptable behaviour on the part of the English."¹² In the play, as in India's struggle for Independence, some of the characters, especially Torap, get increasingly more aggressive. In Act 3, scene 3,

9 Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, p. 9.

10 P. 28. The Bangla word *b[i]let* comes from the Urdu/Hindustani word *vilāyat*, which is used to connote any foreign country; it owes its origin, ultimately, to the Turkic and Persian *vilāyet*, normatively translated as "province" or any similar administrative unit. However, Torap is referring, in this context, to Britain. Cf. Andrew Stuart Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow/New York, NY: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 180: "Other Indian words include *blighty* ('one's home country', from the Hindi word 'bilayati' meaning 'foreign', whence 'British') [...]."

11 A word initially used by Anglo-Indian officialdom to connote the non-metropolitan, "up-country" areas of India, even those outside the three "Presidency" cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, and later used in some Indian languages for provincial areas and even small towns outside major conurbations. Cf. Herbert Compton, *Indian Life in Town and Country* (London/New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons/The Knickerbocker Press, 1904), chap. 13 "[Anglo-Indian Life:] The Land of Exile," pp. 183–198, esp. pp. 189 f. The word originated from the Urdu *mufaṣṣil/mufaṣṣal*, from the original Persian-Arabic *mufaṣṣal*, "divided."

12 Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 144.

Torap thrusts Mr. Rose, one of the planters, onto the ground and proceeds to assault him physically, before being restrained by Nobin Madhab: “Now, Sir, where are your kicks with your shoes on, and your beating on the head?”¹³ Later on in the play, the Sadhu, a Hindu ascetic, commends Torap’s bravery, which heightens the physical conflict between the planters and the peasants, in these words: “Torapa was observing this from a distance: and, as soon as the men stood around the eldest Babu, he with violence rushed into this crowd, like an obstinate buffalo, took him up, and flew off.”¹⁴ Not only is Torap characterised as a brave protester, capable of and willing to deploy physical aggression against the oppressive planters, but he is also shown to be oblivious of the dehumanising aspects of the Hindu-Muslim divide in agrarian Bengal. In Act 2, scene 1, when his Hindu fellow-ryot, whom he addresses as his “uncle Prana,” declines his request to be carried on the latter’s shoulder as he is a Muslim, he, in a matter-of-fact way, carries the First Ryot on his shoulder.¹⁵ This exchange can be seen through quite a few interpretative prisms, foremost amongst which is that of inter-communal relations as a subordinated function of class conflict. It may, in fact, be rather useful to search for ideational parallels between the sociological formulations in the *Nil Darpan* and those in an ideological-programmatic text like *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

The Communist Manifesto, which was brought out in London, initially in German, with the title *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, by a group of German political émigrés, was largely written by Karl Marx (1818–1883), with significant contributions by his lifelong friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). The book, which was commissioned by the Communist League to serve as a charter of its policies and objectives, sought to categorise and interpret “class struggle,” both past and contemporaneous, through the prism of capitalist exploitation and degeneration, as perceived at the time, “rather than [make] a prediction of communism’s potential future forms.”¹⁶ It is needless to refer to the global acclaim and currency of this political charter: within a few years of its serialised publication in the *Deutsche Londoner Zeitung*,¹⁷ it was translated into

¹³ Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, p. 53.

¹⁴ P. 79.

¹⁵ P. 31.

¹⁶ Blurb to several editions of the *Communist Manifesto*, for instance, to: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto (Manifesto of the Communist Party)* (Mansfield: Martino Publishing, 2012).

¹⁷ Cf. Thomas Kuczynski, ed., *Das Kommunistische Manifest (Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei) von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels: von der Erstausgabe zur Leseausgabe, mit einem Editionsbericht* (Trier: Karl-Marx-Haus, 1995), pp. 134–147.

almost all major European and other languages, with the first-ever English translation, by Helen Macfarlane, coming out in 1850 and the first American edition being brought out by Stephen Pearl Andrews.¹⁸ If one can characterise, as Amit Sen does, the journalistic and juridical-legal efforts of the Calcutta-based educated elite to tame the indigo-planters as "bourgeois indignation,"¹⁹ one could argue that this bourgeois intelligentsia awakening was not the hallmark of a classic "comprador bourgeoisie" positional configuration but a genuine expansion of pre-revolutionary class-solidarity. This may seem rather heterodox from a strict Marxist standpoint but, interestingly, Marx himself has provided for a possible inversion of his interpretative paradigm when it comes to Indian class-divisions. If one inverts, as Chaturvedi Badrinath does, Marx's canonical statement in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—"philosophers have so far tried to interpret the world; the point, however, is to change it."—and seeks to turn the social reformers' quests to change India into an inward-looking journey of understanding,²⁰ one may be rewarded with an original and startling possibility of evolutionary class cooperation, not unlike Gandhi's notions of social trusteeship, between the bourgeois intellectuals of Calcutta and the agrarian proletariat, who collaborated in the Indigo Revolt against colonial exploitation.

The post-1857 history of the Bengal Presidency was characterised by what Amit Sen calls "a magnificent outburst of creative activity in literature. The flowering of the [Bengali] Renaissance began with the poetry of Madhusudan Datta, the drama of Dinabandhu Mitra and the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterji. The soul of educated Bengal had started to express itself in its own chosen medium."²¹ This mode of socio-cultural expression of human solidarity that cut across caste- and community-lines, an achievement that cannot always be taken for granted in the Indian context—to put it rather mildly—may or may not be an outcome of early exposure to texts like *The Communist Manifesto*, which, despite antedating the *Nil Darpan*, is unlikely to have been available to either Dinabandhu Mitra or Harish Chandra Mukherjee, the literary and journalistic torch-bearers of the

18 This reference has been taken from an article by Jeff Riggenbach, "Stephen Pearl Andrews's Fleeting Contribution to Anarchist Thought," *Mises Daily*, Mises Institute, 1 April, 2011, <http://mises.org/daily/5161/Stephen-Pearl-Andrewss-Fleeting-Contribution-to-Anarchist-Thought> (retrieved: 6 August 2014).

19 Amit Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1957), p. 39.

20 Cf. Lesslie Newbiggin, "Foreword," in: Chaturvedi Badrinath, *Dharma, India and the World Order: Twenty-One Essays* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press; Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1993), pp. ix–xiv, p. ix. Also, cf. Badrinath, "Understanding India: Key to Reform of Society" [1989], in: *Dharma, India and the World Order*, pp. 29–33, for the quotation, cf. p. 29.

21 Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*, p. 40.

indigo-farmers' struggles. Mukherjee, for one, was quite close to the British upper bureaucracy and his speeches and writings in the *Hindoo Patriot* were followed even by the Governor-General, Lord Canning (1812–1862). It was heard that “the day the *Patriot* would be printed, Lord Canning’s servant would wait in the *Patriot*-office and leave with the first few printed copies of the newspaper.”²² However, Mukherjee sided with the indigo-farmers during their legal struggles against the planter Raj and turned his newspaper office and residence into veritable revolutionary headquarters, with “oppressed peasants gathering [there] night and day[.]”²³ Sivanath Sastri looks at Mukherjee’s contribution to the indigo-farmers’ struggle as the latter’s time-defying act and gives us a glowing tribute to Mukherjee’s selfless devotion to and tireless efforts for the poor *ryots*. According to him, Mukherjee had devoted his body, mind, wealth and capabilities to the cause of the peasants, while writing articles and reports on their plight, and giving evidence to the so-called “Indigo Commission,” which was set up by the Government in 1860 to tour the districts and collect first-hand information on the tyrannical practices of the indigo-planters. The latter were so incensed by Mukherjee’s activism that they sued him in the Supreme Court and drove him to a premature death, at the age of thirty-seven; thereafter, they implicated his widow as a defendant and managed to extract a substantial sum of money from her.

The play *Nil Darpan*, meanwhile, through its closed-door textual dissemination within British official circles, which landed an English missionary in prison, focused Bengali and British middle-class opinion on the brutal treatment of Indian farmers due to the high demand for blue dye in contemporary Europe. Sastri, in fact, writes that the play “had created a huge tumult in Bengali society”²⁴ and, from his account, one can gauge its pioneering role as a text of socio-political mobilisation. It appears that, despite people being unaware of the identity of the playwright, almost every Bengali household that could afford to do so staged scenes from the play. One must, here, note that the period between 1856 and 1861 could even be called one of the most significant turning points in Bengali history, with various reform initiatives and other upheavals, such as, for example, the widow-remarriage movement, the so-called Sepoy Mutiny, the Indigo Revolt, the coming of age of the vernacular press, the establishment of the native stage and quite a number of other transformative events and processes being set in motion. The *Nil Darpan* was almost crucial to the development of the Bengali stage and deeply influenced Girish Chandra Ghosh, who, in 1872, would go on to establish

²² Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 144.

²³ P. 147.

²⁴ P. 148.

The National Theatre in Calcutta (now Kolkata). It is significant that the first-ever play to be staged commercially there was none other than the *Nil Darpaṇ*. Earlier, as discussed previously, there was “a sort of excitement in the minds of people regarding the reappearance of verse-drama and the stage in Bengali society,”²⁵ which was one of the reasons for the popularity of the play. Before this staggering efflorescence of the native stage, theatre was predominantly low-profile, with a preponderance of folk-forms of dramatic entertainment, like “the *jātrā*, *kabigān* and *hāp-ākhdāi*,”²⁶ which were considered to be full of indecent and obscene themes.”²⁷ With the spread of Anglophone education, the above-mentioned forms of popular recreation came to be derided by the intellectual elite and many members of the so-called *bhadralok* felt very embarrassed to be present at performances of these “vulgar” genres. In fact, this distinction between high and low culture persists, to this day, in Bengali society and it was only in the mid-twentieth century that the *jātrā* “[...] returned to favour in urban areas [...] when the Communist Party employed it to win sympathetic support for its cause.”²⁸

25 Ibid.

26 These were the names of various genres of popular semi-dramatic performances, both music-based and plot-oriented, staged on both urban and rural, fixed and travelling bases. The *jātrā* is “[t]he most popular regional theatre form in the rural areas of Bengal and among Bengali-speaking people of neighbouring Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Tripura.” (James Rodger Brandon, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 89.) Bangladesh, where Bengali is the national language, is also in the performative locus of this genre, which, having originated, probably, in the Vaishnava hagiographical tradition of devotional performance in sixteenth-century Bengal, came to be secularised in mid-nineteenth-century Calcutta, when the scions of the city’s bourgeoisie used Western techniques of dramaturgy, staging and acting to engage with the challenges of colonialism and societal transformation. “*Kabig[ā]n* is a form of debate between two professional minstrels who improvise their verses and sing with musical and choral accompaniment. He who fails to answer the riddles or is outwitted by the logic of the opponent, loses the contest.” (Syed Jamil Ahmed, “Drama and Theatre,” in: Sirajul Islam, ed., *History of Bangladesh, 1704–1971*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. [Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997] vol. 3: *Social and Cultural History*, pp. 473–542, p. 503.) The *hāp* [“half”]-*ākhdāi* was the name given to a modified version of the *ākhdāi*, which was “a semi-classical style of singing that came into vogue in Calcutta” (Sujit Mukherjee, *A Dictionary of Indian Literature: Beginnings–1850* [New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998], p. 10) in the late eighteenth century. It contained three stanzas, which were addressed to a goddess, talked of amorous love and bemoaned the night of separation from the beloved respectively. Due to the lack of popularity of this form, a need was felt to make certain modifications, which came to characterise the so-called *hāp-ākhdāi*, mainly in terms of including various interfaces with popular forms of poetic duelling, as seen in *kabigān*-performances.

27 Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 148.

28 Brandon, *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, p. 89.

Back in the mid-nineteenth century, many educated drama enthusiasts would patronise the playhouses set up by the British and, in the Calcutta of 1856–57, there was at least one renowned English playhouse that was frequented by the educated and rich gentry of the city. According to Sastri, “after watching [the acting in this theatre, some of these people], would lament the absence of similar playhouses amongst [them].”²⁹ Consequently, some of the city’s leading gentlemen would take the initiative and, having cast educated British friends and acquaintances in the leading roles, attempt to stage English plays for the purpose of entertaining their friends and relatives. As Sastri notes, this practice was not completely new, as, quite some time back, the renowned Prasannakumar Tagore had staged a performance of Horace Hayman Wilson’s translation of the *Uttararāmacarita*. This trend, however, remained confined to the domain of private, individual patronage, often undertaken on a competitive basis, until, having gauged the demand and respect for English acting within the native gentry, the members of the English playhouses set up the “Oriental Theatre” in the building of the “Oriental Seminary” and started staging Shakespearean plays there. “This led to an effusion of English acting in native educated circles,”³⁰ with stage-acting becoming something of an obsession: even schoolboys were staging abridged versions of *Macbeth* and other plays with their own small groups. This trend, however, did not last very long as the wealthy patrons of drama realised that English plays are not the way to the average person’s heart. Hence, there was a gradual shift to Bengali plays, with the *Nil Darpan* having set a precedent by demonstrating the socio-political charge of theatre.

Dinabandhu Mitra’s play was also one of the first play-texts in Bengali to have been translated into English in mid-nineteenth century India. As L. S. S. O’Malley writes: “The *Nil Darpan*, literally, the mirror of indigo, the earliest and probably the finest play of the dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra. Its object was to expose the abuses of indigo planting and its preface explained that it depicted the fortunes of [...] [the] cultivator[s] [...]. The play created a great sensation.”³¹ What is significant in this context is the involved contribution of the Rev. James Long, an Anglo-Irish missionary known for his espousal of “native” causes. He is said to have helped Michael Madhusudan Datta (“A Native”) in translating the play into English and, along with the printer, was prosecuted for his pains

²⁹ Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 149.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lewis Sydney Steward O’Malley, *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under British Rule* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Depot, 1925), p. 436.

on the charge of libelling two European newspapers [...] and sentenced [...] to a month’s imprisonment in addition to a fine of Rs. 1,000 [the sum having being paid by Kaliprasanna Singha, the author of the social satire *Hutom Pyānchār Nakshā* (“Designs of the Barn-Owl,” 1862) and a famous philanthropist,] [...] [and] [t]he Secretary [to the Bengal Government,] who [had] circulated the translation was removed from his office by the Government of India.³²

One must, at this juncture, note that there is a certain amount of current scholarly disagreement about the identity of the translator of the *Nil Darpaṇ*. Whereas some historians of nineteenth century Calcutta’s cultural transactions, like Sumanta Banerjee, in his *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (1989), identify Michael Madhusudan Datta as the translator, others doubt the veracity of “the secondary sources and unverified facts”³³ that may have led Banerjee to this conclusion. Tapobijoy Ghosh, according to Anil Acharya, in his exhaustive review of Banerjee’s work, rejects, in his *Nil-Bidroher Caritra o Bāñālī-Buddhijibī* [“The Indigo Revolt and Bengali Intellectuals,” 1983], the unsubstantiated assumption that Datta had ever considered translating the play into English, let alone doing the work nearly overnight. As Acharya writes, “[Datta] might have been quite realistic in his farces, but he was never known for his empathy for the lower order culture.”³⁴

In the process of studying the two cultures of the elite—the burgeoning *bhadralok*³⁵—and the so-called lower-order civility, Sumanta Banerjee, through his critical exploration of the underlying complexities of nineteenth-century Bengali culture, pinpoints a certain parting of ways between the two above-mentioned paradigms. As Paolo Freire points out, “[t]he dependent society is by definition a silent society. Its voice is not an authentic voice, but merely an echo of the voice of the metropolis—in every way, the metropolis speaks, the dependent society listens.”³⁶ Thus, as Banerjee also argues, the nineteenth-century Calcutta street undergoes a clearly defined relegation to the position of a subaltern who holds up a contrastive mirror image to the constructions of upper-class civility. As he

32 Ibid.

33 Anil Acharya, “Cultures of a Metropolis [Review of the book *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* by Sumanta Banerjee],” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46.25 (17 November, 1990), pp. 2541–2546, p. 2545.

34 Ibid.

35 A term (literally, “civilised people”) used, until quite recently, to connote the Bengali middle classes, which assiduously cultivated a stereotypical aura of eclectic cultural and intellectual tastes, despite their social conservatism; often, this leisured urbane sophistication was bought by economic prowess.

36 Paolo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 59, quoted in Acharya, “Cultures of a Metropolis,” p. 2541.

clarifies in his introduction, he aims to compare these two trajectories of cultural production as determined by the social and economic balance of contemporaneous Calcutta. Banerjee's "parlour," as well as his "street," seem to have undergone significant constitutive changes, especially through the configuration of their reactions to the socio-cultural equations of the time. The former is constituted by "the banians,³⁷ dewans,³⁸ absentee landlords (post-Permanent Settlement³⁹ phenomenon) and the Bengali middle class of Macaulay's description of 1835."⁴⁰ This links the socio-cultural role of the *bhadralok* to the "civilising" narrative of colonialism, which could, in turn, be linked to the reconstitution of capitalist enterprise. Thus, even the nascent nationalistic manoeuvres of the Calcutta-based elite could be said to have played, to a certain extent, into the hands of what Partha Chatterjee calls "the universalist urge of capital."⁴¹ *Nil Darpan* and, even more significantly, its reception in mid-nineteenth century Bengal, seem to thematise what Chatterjee calls "the conflict between capital and the people-nation,"⁴² which defies "forced resolution by nationalism"⁴³ and dents "the sovereign, tyrannical universality"⁴⁴ of Reason, the corollary to capitalist universalism.

The play depicts the total and progressive destruction of the idyllic domestic bliss and socio-economic standing of a prosperous Bengali *Kāyastha*,⁴⁵ named Goluk Chunder Basu, through the evil machinations of the British indigo-

37 *Banian/Benians* were Indian traders, merchant-princes, financiers and money-changers; the term comes from the Portuguese *banian*, which derives from the Sanskrit *vāṇijā* (earlier *vaṇij*, "merchant, trader"), through Gujarati and Arabic intermediaries.

38 *Dew[ā]n* or *diwān*, which is Persian in origin, was a common Hindustani socio-economic term used in South Asia for, among others, financial assistants or treasurers of industrialists and landlords or finance ministers.

39 The so-called "Permanent Settlement" of Bengal was a charter agreed upon by the English East India Company and the landlords of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa, in 1793, under the Governor-Generalship of Charles, Lord Cornwallis. It fixed land revenue levies, an act that had wide-ranging consequences upon agricultural techniques and output throughout the British Empire and rural Indian society and polity.

40 Acharya, "Cultures of a Metropolis," p. 2541.

41 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 168.

42 P. 169.

43 *Ibid.*

44 P. 168.

45 *Kāyastha* (also called *kāyasth* or *kāyet*) denotes a Hindu caste originating in India; it means "scribe" in Sanskrit, reflecting the caste's traditional role as record-keepers and administrators of the state. Cf. Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA/London: University of California Press, 1973), p. 231.

planters. The other main characters are Goluk’s wife, sons and daughter-in-law, two oppressive indigo-planters named Mr. Wood and Mr. Rogue, their *dewāns* and factory servants, the District Magistrate and an itinerant confectioner “who is also a procuress.”⁴⁶ At the outset, the planters come on stage and are shown to be violent, heartless, abusive and uncouth oppressors. Thereafter, viewers are acquainted with the forcible kidnapping/“arrest” of two brave *rāyats*, Sadhu Churn and Ray Churn, who are Golak Basu’s tenants: they are taken to the “*kuthi*” (the godown, or warehouse, of the planter), where they are physically brutalised for resisting *dādan*.⁴⁷ Then, the play describes the process through which fraudulent legal proceedings are initiated against the hapless villagers who refuse to grow indigo on their land; the collusion between the local judiciary and the planters and the horrid ravages suffered by the villagers, especially women, are also presented on the stage. Towards the end of the play, Goluk Basu, unable to hold up to the sustained pressure of the planter Raj, commits suicide, his son Nobin Madhab succumbs to a fractured skull, which was the result of the planter’s blows, and Goluk’s wife Sabitri, unable to face her double trauma, loses her mental balance and also dies. The message to the audience is that of all-pervasive tragedy caused by the depredations of the indigo-planters and their exploitation of the peasantry.

As far as its dramatic worth goes, “[...] strictly speaking, *Nildarpaṇ* is an insignificant production. It is neither well-written nor does it lend itself to successful production on the stage.”⁴⁸ In what was, arguably, the first well-researched survey of the Bengali-speaking stage, Prabhucharan Guha-Thakurta opined, quoting Aristotle and Kant, that, though “the author [of the *Nil Darpaṇ*] was inspired by a sincere desire to deal with real life and real incidents,”⁴⁹ the often graphic violence, as depicted in the play, does not manage to make the play transcend mere “literal truth [...] by a certain kind of imaginative verisimilitude.”⁵⁰ His chief critique of the play seems to be Dinabandhu Mitra’s inability to bring in a measure of detachment from his emotional identification with the plight of the indigo-farmers. The scenes of abject horror and callous dehumanisation, often culminating in literalist stage depictions of brutal physical assault, along with the rather

⁴⁶ Prabhucharan Guha-Thakurta, *The Bengali Drama: Its Origin and Development* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1930; repr. London: Routledge, 2000), p. 109.

⁴⁷ *Dādan* was an advance or loan given by the indigo-planters, often by means more foul than fair, to the farmers, on condition that they would cultivate indigo and, thereafter, sell the crop to the advance-giving planters at a fixed approved price.

⁴⁸ Guha-Thakurta, *The Bengali Drama*, p. 109.

⁴⁹ P. 110.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

exaggerated and heavy dialogue and both prose and verse descriptions, fail to pull the play above the Kantian “purposiveness without purpose.” In a nutshell, one may say that the acutely descriptive realism and even literalism of the *Nil Darpaṇ* does, according to a more traditional critical trajectory, impinge upon its capacity to produce a strong dramatic effect. However, this need not, necessarily, detract from its function as a mirror of socio-cultural transactions, as they were unfolding across the variegated backdrop of early colonial India. It is herein that one may seek to look at this play, both in theme and treatment, as a “telescopic”⁵¹ precursor to the late-nineteenth century practices of social-realistic critique and naturalist discourses, following Émile Zola, whose renowned article “*J'accuse*,”⁵² which is generally accepted in France as the most significant articulation of the newly growing influence of the intellectuals, writers, artists and social workers in moulding public opinion, the media and the state, stood as a testament to the power of the journalist-writer’s pen over *étatiste* hegemony.

Émile Zola, along with other renowned European and Russian Naturalists, like Stéphane (Étienne) Mallarmé and Maksim Gorky, seem so well-placed, both ideationally and thematically, to serve as reference points, even indices, of nineteenth-century Indian approaches to realist narratives, both on and off the stage, that one is tempted to engage with them even in a discussion of texts and events predating them. Though Dinabandhu Mitra’s work antedates Zola’s and operates within a referential socio-cultural framework that is quite different from that of Zola’s Paris, one cannot but observe that there are various possibilities for comparative analysis, in terms of narrational focus and descriptive-mimetic strategies, between the *Nil Darpaṇ* and, for example, Zola’s famous series of twenty works, which comprised more than half of his novels, collectively known as *Les Rougon-Macquart* and, specifically, the thirteenth novel in this series, *Germinal* (1885). In contrast to Balzac, who in the prime of his literary career reconfigured his work as *La Comédie Humaine*, Zola, from when he began at the age of twenty-eight, had prefabricated the whole structure of the Rougon-Macquart-series. Set against the variegated backdrop of the *Second Empire* (1852–1870) of Napoleon III, the so-called “Pretender” and “Sphinx of the Tuileries,” which has been

51 “Telescopic philanthropy,” connoting the self-imposed obligation of conducting notionally idealistic philanthropic activity from a distance, is the title of Chapter 4 of Sir Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852–1853); in the present context, the implication is that of a precursor: perhaps related, perhaps not.

52 “*J'accuse*” [“I Accuse”] was published, in response to the false charges, motivated by anti-semitism, against Captain Alfred Dreyfus, on the front page of the French daily *L'Aurore*, on 13 January, 1898.

called an "extravaganza" by David Baguley,⁵³ the series delineates the "environmental" impact of both domestic and societal violence, alcoholism, prostitution and the general moral decay that seemed to characterise the second and later phases of the Industrial Revolution in continental Europe. The series takes a wry look at two branches of a family, the reputable—since legitimate—Rougons and the disreputable—since illegitimate—Macquarts through a span of five generations.

Germinal is usually regarded as Zola's *magnum opus*, his best-selling work, which struck a nerve upon publication and is one of the most important French novels ever; it has been published and translated in more than a hundred countries, besides inspiring five films and two television series. In it, there is a resolutely and tangibly stark realist portrayal of the struggles of striking coal-miners in northern France in the 1860s, a period almost contemporaneous with the Indigo Revolt in Bengal. The title of the novel itself suggests revolutionary sympathies and, perhaps, even intent, being also the name of the first Spring month in the *Calendrier Révolutionnaire Français* ["French Revolutionary Calendar"], which was used by the French State between 1793 and 1805 and also for almost three weeks by the Paris Commune in 1871. The "seed" metaphor embedded in the word "*Germinal*" also resonates well with the agrarian orientation of the *Nil Darpaṇ*, despite the contextual differences between what was, essentially, a narrative of early industrial exploitation and the workers' reaction to it and an agriculturalists' struggle against near-slavery conditions. It may be argued, given the strong undercurrent of hope implied in the title *Germinal*, which indicated regeneration, perhaps even rebirth, and fertility, that the tragic and highly disturbing conclusion of the *Nil Darpaṇ* does not allow for a fully comparative analysis of these two texts. However, the fact that Zola ends his novel on an almost jaunty, optimistic note, which has inspired socialist mobilisation ever since the first publication of the novel—"In the fiery rays of the sun on this youthful morning the country seemed full of that sound. Men were springing forth, a black avenging army, germinating slowly in the furrows, growing towards the harvests of the next century, and their germination would soon overturn the earth."⁵⁴—should not blur the

53 Cf. David Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Empire: An Extravaganza* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

54 Émile Zola, *Germinal* [1885], trans. Havelock Ellis [e-book] (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide, eBooks@Adelaide, 2012), <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/z/zola/emile/germinal/part7.6.html> (retrieved: 7 August 2014). ("Aux rayons enflammés de l'astre, par cette matinée de jeunesse, c'était de cette rumeur que la campagne était grosse. Des hommes poussaient, une armée noire, vengeresse, qui germait lentement dans les sillons, grandissant pour les récoltes du siècle futur, et dont la germination allait faire bientôt éclater la terre." [p. 591]).

vivid pain and disturbing pathos of the depictions in much of the novel, especially the mine scenes. The latter were the outcome of Zola's characteristically thorough and prolonged study tours of northern French mining areas in 1884. He was especially influenced by his first-hand observation of the most debilitating consequences of the miners' strike at Anzin and his actual descent into a functioning coal pit at Denain.

The main character of *Germinal*, Étienne Lantier, a young migrant worker, who, having worked as an engine-man, arrives at the grim and bleak coal mining town of Montsou, which lies in a desolate stretch of northern France, seeking work as a miner, is a study both in contrast and comparability to Nobin Madhab, the young son of Goluk Basu, the main character of the *Nil Darpan*. Nobin Madhab is characterised as a young man of moral and physical vigour and integrity from the very beginning of the play, when he tells his father to "bring an action [against the indigo-planters] into Court."⁵⁵ He is consistently portrayed as the moral voice and ideological anchor of the agrarian angst, often trying to protect his father and other farmers, irrespective of their social position and religious identity. He upholds a humane code of conduct and disapproves of violence against even the brutal planters: in Act 2, scene 3, when the Muslim peasant Torap beats up Planter Rose, he tells the former, "[w]e ought not to be cruel, because they are so."⁵⁶ Zola's Étienne is also a spirited and industrious idealist, if a tad gullible, not unlike Nobin Madhab. The former had lost his earlier job with the railways after having assaulted a superior; he befriends the grimly named Bonnemort, an old-timer at the mines who had survived all kinds of accidents in the pits, and finds, through his good offices, lodgings and a job pushing carts down one of the pits. Where Étienne differs from Nobin Madhab is in his presumed Macquart typological inheritance of temperamental impetuosity and a choleric disposition, especially when under the influence of alcoholic beverages or intensely passionate feelings. Although such a characterisation is in keeping with Zola's theories of genetic typologies, he does seem to limit, in *Germinal*, characteral theorisation to the narrative backdrop. Consequently, Étienne's character is able to develop according to the demands of the *dénouement*, in a way Nobin Madhab's cannot, given the near total subordination of characterisation and plot, in the *Nil Darpan*, to the demands of ideological didacticism. Here, one could remind oneself that, as Richard Lehan puts it, "Zola's world is one of limits; if one is to have great wealth, then there must be poverty."⁵⁷ Later in *Germinal*, in a manner reflective of

⁵⁵ Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ P. 53.

⁵⁷ Richard Lehan, "Urban Signs and Urban Literature: Literary Form and Historical Process," *New Literary History* 18.1 (1986), pp. 99–113, p. 108.

this typological binary, Étienne takes to socialism in a gung-ho manner, studying many texts dealing with working-class mobilisation and keeping the company of Souvarine, an *émigré* Russian anarchist who had come to earn a livelihood in the coal pits of Montsou. However, Étienne's engagement with radical socialist politics remains relegated to the level of formulaic over-simplification and does not hinder his romantic entanglement with Catherine, who also pushes carts in the pits, thus embroiling him in her torturous relationship with Chaval, her rather bestial lover, characterised almost typologically, with more than occasional derision.

Meanwhile, the complicated vicissitudes of life in the coal mines are further accentuated against the felt realities of debilitating poverty and burgeoning capitalist oppression, with the professional and personal lives of the miners deteriorating as the novel progresses. Things reach such a point of unbearable suffering that they decide to strike and the mantle of leadership falls upon Étienne, who had, by that point, acquired a substantial following in the community through his idealist politics. This, again, reminds one of Nobin Madhab who had become a rallying point for the other characters in Mitra's play, so much so that his presence, even after death, animates the *Nil Darpan*; the play, tellingly, ends with the following exclamation: "Ah! how very terrible, the last scene of the drama of the lion-like Nobin Madhab is?"⁵⁸ In *Germinal*, the miners desist from violent action, which Souvarine constantly urges them towards, until the last desperate moment of impoverishment, following which they erupt into furious rioting. Zola's descriptions of the resultant mob fury count amongst his most intensely evocative crowd scenes and cannot be compared to the meagre attempts at portraying protest action in Mitra's play. The suppression of the riots by the police and the army are much more thorough and heavy-handed than that in the context of the Indigo Revolt, and Étienne, by no means the instigator of the violence, stands discredited in the eyes of the miners, who return to work quite disillusioned with radical idealism. Souvarine sabotages the entrance shaft of a pit, trapping Étienne, Catherine and Chaval, and causing a long and tantalising rescue episode that ends with Étienne's survival. The novel ends with his services being terminated and him moving to Paris, turning a full circle, of sorts, in terms of the disillusionment with the inevitability and/or pace of progress. Zola had almost unmixed pride in what the novel stood for, in ideational terms, and fended off accusations from both extremes of the political spectrum. Towards the end of his life, *Germinal* came to be regarded as not only his undeniable masterpiece but also an evocative testament to working-class mobilisation and an exploration of

58 Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, p. 102.

the industrial-era subjugation of rural Nature to the dictates of urban capital. As Lehan notes: “While *Germinal* and *La Débâcle* are not city novels, they show how the city controls what goes on in the coal mines of the north or in the intrigue that leads to war.”⁵⁹ As Joachim Küpper outlines in a study on the evolution of French novels,⁶⁰ there are “inherent paradoxes [in] Zola’s approach”⁶¹ to categorisations of fiction and reality, which seem to fall prey to a “failure to appreciate the categorial differences”⁶² between the two. These, in turn “just do not allow any experiment with reality in fiction.”⁶³ This developing shadow-boxing between reality and fiction is at the heart of Zola’s depictions of the travails of a world torn asunder between the aggression of metropolitan industrial capitalism and the rustic, even bucolic, values that define older structures of kinship.

In Zola’s words, describing the *Rougon-Macquart* novels: “I want to portray, at the outset of a century of liberty and truth, a family that cannot restrain itself in its rush to possess all the good things that progress is making available and is derailed by its own momentum, the fatal convulsions that accompany the birth of a new world.”⁶⁴ It is these “fatal convulsions” that constitute the historically figurative and societally representative backdrop of the *Nil Darpan*, too. In this case, the convulsions are those imposed by a colonialism-dictated system of exploitative economic relations and the resultant dehumanisation of both victim and perpetrator: the former through the piteous brutalisation inflicted upon her/him by the indigo-planters and the latter through the dissociation of human sensibility from the lust for economic profit. As Kaliprasanna Singha observes, in his inimitably earthy style, in *Hutom Pyānchār Nakṣā*, “Even ghosts are scared off by the

⁵⁹ Lehan, “Urban Signs and Urban Literature,” p. 108.

⁶⁰ Joachim Küpper, *Ästhetik der Wirklichkeitsdarstellung und Evolution des Romans von der französischen Spätaufklärung bis zu Robbe-Grillet: Ausgewählte Probleme zum Verhältnis von Poetologie und literarischer Praxis* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1987).

⁶¹ Andreas Kablitz, “Rezension von [Book Review]: Joachim Küpper, *Ästhetik der Wirklichkeitsdarstellung und Evolution des Romans von der französischen Spätaufklärung bis zu Robbe-Grillet*,” *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 99 (1989), pp. 80–86, p. 84. (“[J. Küpper skizziert] die immanenten Aporien von Zolas Ansatz.”)

⁶² Ibid. (“Verkennung der kategorialen Differenzen von Fiktion und Realität.”)

⁶³ Ibid. (“[...] eben in der Fiktion kein Experiment über die Wirklichkeit zulassen.”)

⁶⁴ This is sourced from a write-up on Zola’s oeuvre that accompanies a web-archive of his works, hosted by the Library of the University of Adelaide: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/z/zola/emile/index.html> (retrieved: 7 August 2014). (“Pour résumer mon œuvre en une phrase, je veux peindre, au début d’un siècle de vérité et de liberté, une famille qui s’élance vers les biens prochains et qui roule, détraquée par son élan lui-même, justement à cause des lueurs troubles du moment, des convulsions fatales de l’enfantement d’un monde.” Printed in: Henri Massis, *Comment Émile Zola composait ses romans: d’après ses notes personnelles et inédites* [Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1906], p. 17.)

shāmcānd,⁶⁵ what news is it that the subjects would go crazy!"⁶⁶ Singha, according to Dinabandhu Mitra's son, Lalit Chandra Mitra, had assured the writer of the *Nil Darpaṇ* that he could be sure of financial support for the latter's legal defence. He had also, at his own expense, arranged the printing of a second edition of the play and its free distribution to, among others, the subscribers of the *Hindoo Patriot*. "Amulyachandra Sen says that it is at the request of Kaliprasanna that [Rev.] Long had translated the *Nil Darpaṇ* into English and, hence, he had paid Long's fine."⁶⁷

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Rev. James Long's (1814–87) participation in the indigo farmers' struggle is that of the apparently intriguing relationship between a British Evangelist and what could be looked at as a "proto-nationalist" rebellion. Geoffrey A. Oddie, in his *Missionaries, Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism: James Long of Bengal 1814–87*, studies Long's life and work in the Bengal Presidency quite thoroughly and, according to Julius Lipner,

[t]he point [...] is that by his eventual if brief imprisonment in the ryots' cause, Long not only rebelled with important symbolic undertones against many government officials' and other colonials' expectations of how a missionary should behave, but also became himself something of a rallying point for "proto-nationalist" sentiment among westernised Indians.⁶⁸

By the time he was tried *apropos* the indigo-planters' accusations, Long had, equipped with "an excellent education, rich in the classical and biblical languages, and a conversion to evangelicalism,"⁶⁹ made a seemingly smooth transition from his gentrified southern Irish family background to that of a humble missionary in Calcutta, the epicentre of the Raj, in 1840 and was to remain there until 1872. In these three decades and more, as noted by Oddie, Long learns Bengali with a considerable degree of skill. If, indeed, parts of the *Nil Darpaṇ* are translated by him, he seems to have had a thorough, if literalist and rather stiff, grasp of the language. What is of equal if not more import is that he concentrated his evangelical zeal on attempting to get to know rural Bengal and bring

65 "An instrument of physical torture used against the indigo-farmers" (Kaliprasanna Singha, *Satik Hutom Pyāñchār Nakṣā* ["Annotated 'Designs of the Barn-Owl'," 1862], ed. Arun Nag [Calcutta: Ananda, 2012], p. 253), which was made up of a stick that had either a thick, two-feet-long and one-foot-wide leather strap or a bunch of knotted leather strands attached to its front part; it inflicted ten times as much pain as a cane and had become an evocative metaphor for the brutality of indigo cultivation in Bengal.

66 Singha, *Satik Hutom Pyāñchār Nakṣā*, p. 106.

67 Pp. 258 f.

68 Julius Lipner, "Book Review: Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Missionaries, Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism: James Long of Bengal 1814–87*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 15 (2002), pp. 58–59, p. 58.

69 Ibid.

about its socio-cultural and, eventually, religious transformation. This, in Long's understanding, necessitated a special focus on vernacular education, which, after Thomas Babington Macaulay's (in)famous *Minute on Education* (1835), had been relegated to the back-burner of educational governmentality. Thereafter, he became a pioneer of sorts in this arena and combined his abiding interest in vernacular education with that in socio-linguistic enquiries. Long's considerable oeuvre in this area gave the much needed impetus to a burgeoning archive of sociological and anthropological knowledge about Bengali life and culture and led to a growing missionary emphasis, through his pioneering agency, on "*local context* for success in propagating a message."⁷⁰

Long was an honest and industrious missionary, with an abiding empathy for the Bengali peasantry and the rest of the peripheral underclass and an unflinching opposition to the dehumanising brutalities of the indigo-planters. However, as also brought out in Oddie's work and Lipner's review of the same, he did have the basic and inalienable goal of converting rural Bengal to Christianity:

the subjection of all his endeavours to the goal of ultimate conversion of the non-Christians (Hindu and Muslim) among whom he worked, and the undermining of their ancestral faith (first drain the swamp, he said memorably, referring thus unfavourably to non-Christian religion, before you sow the good seed in it).⁷¹

Even in the translation of the *Nil Darpan*, otherwise a faithfully and often hilariously literalist one, there is a sense of the inevitability of the old order changing, in more a socio-cultural than political sense, and the oppression of the indigo-planters, though a negative aspect of the new system, is not its defining picture. The lyrical descriptions of the pathetic sufferings of the almost emasculated peasantry seem to suggest a new solution to the new evil of indigo: a new religion that preached and promised an apparently egalitarian social code, thus enabling the peasantry to break free from the shackles of generational oppression, which would enable them to resist the indigo-planters' depredations. "This," as Lipner notes,

introduced a note of spiritual calculation in all he did. [...] Long's ulterior motive applied equally to his visits to Russia in later life. He wanted Russian British co-operation to check the growth of Islam in their Asian empires so that the expansion of Christianity might be the more unopposed. Islam or Hinduism, for that matter, had not much salvific or humanising worth in their own right.⁷²

⁷⁰ P. 59; italics in the original.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

At this juncture, one could, as suggested by Lipner, return to Oddie, who posits that, in the case of Orientalism being “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority”⁷³ over it, one could argue for missionary witness not being, *per se*, Orientalist, for “the dichotomy of ultimate importance” for Evangelicals and other Euro-American agencies with a pervasively Christian *Weltanschauung*, “was not Europe versus the Orient, but the saved versus the damned,”⁷⁴ and this distinction transcended socio-cultural specificities. However, given that Long, as noted above, viewed the non-Christian, local faith-systems as drainable marshland, it is not inconceivable that this tallied with a certain equalisation between the recalcitrant *ryot* and their irrepressible and “infidel” belief-systems. In general, this appears to have led to a missionary self-identification with the Raj and its political-economic interests: a textbook case for Orientalist frames-of-reference to come to play. In fact, in one of Kaliprasanna Singha’s sketches, he notes that the “Christian fashion, like a functioning street-lamp, illuminated its surroundings at first but, then, left throwing things into darkness.”⁷⁵ This would suggest that the evangelical process, in Bengal, had foundered on the very rock it had sought to base itself upon: the much-vaunted civilising and enlightening mission of the new faith. This, already in the mid-nineteenth century, became progressively more identified with the socio-economic needs of the colonial administration, which was now demanding increased levels of loyalty from its compatriots, of the cloth or otherwise. Thus it follows, not without the recourse to the Orientalist framework, that “the reason [behind the opposition, by lower-order missionaries, to the depredations of the indigo-planters] was their apprehension that such non-Christian behaviour on the part of Christians would hinder the preaching and spread of Christianity in this country.”⁷⁶ As noted in the *Som Prakāś*, in its issue dated 16.12.1270 (Bengali Era), “in fear of the commander-in-chief, the padres do not utter a word”⁷⁷ against the indigo-planters’ exploitation of the peasantry; lines had, thus, been drawn for, at least, the rest of the colonial period.

It is interesting that the “Introduction” to the *Nil Darpan* highlights the fact that “[t]he Bengali Drama imitates in th[e] respect [of] [describing certain states of society, manners, customs] its Sanskrit parent.”⁷⁸ By stressing the respect the

⁷³ Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Missionaries, Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism: James Long of Bengal 1814–87* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), p. 180.

⁷⁴ P. 181.

⁷⁵ Singha, *Satik Hutom Pyānchār Nakṣā*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ P. 255.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ [Rev. John Long,] “Introduction,” in: Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, pp. iii f., p. iii.

latter had in the contemporary European critical idiom, Rev. Long, who is generally credited with its authorship, seeks to connect nineteenth-century Indian drama more to its Sanskrit precursor than to the early modern Anglo-European tradition. It is said to lack “marvellous or very tragic scenes,”⁷⁹ though, in the Bengali literary-dramatic tradition, this play is supposed to be a work of considerable tragic significance. Here, one may venture the question if this dichotomy points towards a differential understanding of tragedy and/or its Indian form in the Anglo-European critical imagination? One purpose of this text and, especially, its translator’s preface, is to hint at, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the so-called “white man’s burden.” It hopes “that the European may be in the Mofussil the protecting Aegis of the peasants, who may be able ‘to sit each man under his mango and tamarind tree, none daring to make him afraid.’”⁸⁰ The author’s preface, written by Mitra himself, is a quaint mix of Anglophone rhetorical constructions—“Oh, ye Indigo Planters”—and occasionally comic literal translations of Bengali idioms into English: “place on [his forehead] the sandal powder of beneficence,” “making holes like rust,” “the application of the shoe for the destruction of a milk cow,” “mixing the inspissated milk in the cup of poison,” “the terrible grasp of your mouths,” “*misery and happiness revolve like a wheel*,” “are continually expanding themselves lotus-like on the surface of the lake,” “the great giant *Rahu*” et al.⁸¹ In what may be seen as a telling comment on the civil-representational mode of the time, the author’s attempt is to petition British officialdom on the plight of the indigo-farmers, who were suffering at the hands of the supposedly uncharacteristic British planters; thus, the latter were seen as deviations from an assumed and projected norm.

This valorisation of the ideal of British justice would, in time, of course, change to more confrontationist modes of civil and extremist agitation, after the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. This was, however, at odds with the tone and tenor of the peasant movement itself, which was quite aggressive, in response to near-slavery conditions. The so-called Indigo Revolt (Bengali: *nil bidrōhō*) was a post-1857 rebellion that saw an occasionally violent uprising of indigo farmers against the British planters in Bengal in 1859. The seeds of the revolt could be said to have been sown half a century earlier, when the Indigo Plantation Act was passed, though actual cultivation of the plant commercially dates back to 1777. With the expansion of British control over the Nawābate of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa, this cultivation spread all over southern Bengal, with British

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ P. iv.

⁸¹ Mitra, “The Author’s Preface,” in: Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, pp. 1 f.; italics in the original.

planters often tricking and forcing farmers into cultivating it, for a fraction of the real cost, to the detriment of their normal crop-cycles. The loans, with exorbitant interest-rates, advanced by the planters, called *dādans*, trapped families and entire communities in lifelong bondage, reducing them to penury; to add insult to injury, an Act in 1833 gave the planters free rein over their *ryots*. Emboldened by the so-called Sepoy Mutiny in 1857–58, in February–March 1859 the farmers effected a collective refusal to plant indigo and the planters were caught unawares by their steadfast unity and resolve. What is very significant is the inter-religious unity amongst the farmers: it is worth noting that Haji Molla of Nischindipur said that he would “‘rather beg than sow indigo’.”⁸²

One of the first things that strikes the reader of the *Nil Darpan*, apart from the rather Bengali-inflected literalist English used in the translation, is the preponderance of Indian life-style markers, despite the text being addressed, fundamentally, to Anglo-Indian officialdom and the Bengali *bourgeoisie*. A few examples are the centrality of rice as a metaphor for life and wealth, “marking off” the agricultural land as a metaphor for dis-appropriation (“*thrust burnt sticks into my breast*”⁸³), the importance of not refusing water as a social demand (“gone [in] both [...] life and money”⁸⁴), the sanctification of the Christian missionary, the proliferation of schools, teachers, courts and enlightened gentry who cared for the peasants, like Nobin Madhab and his father, the observance of a modified *purdah*-system among the upper-caste Hindu women like Sabitri, Soirindri and Saralota, kinship and filial ties, both among women and men, that weave ethnocentrically naturalistic and acculturated psycholinguistic memes into the socio-cultural tapestry and so on. There already seems to be an articulation of the irreducible differences between British political-economic goals and socio-cultural mores, which seemed to be driven by the motive of agrarian exploitation, and the aspirational inflection of Indian social and political goals. One may even venture to argue that the *Nil Darpan*, through its concerted attempt to be what could be construed as modern India’s first political tract, attempts to showcase the unvoiced but radical disembodiments of modernity and chaos, and how one can even theorise this tussle. One may attempt, as has been done some pages earlier, to view the play-text as a coming-of-age testament to the engagement of mid-nineteenth-century India with the multi-dimensional and often unsettling effect of colonial cultural dominance. This dominance was inscribed both through literary-pedagogical prescriptivism, as an inalienable—especially after

⁸² Cf. Subhas Bhattacharya, “The Indigo Revolt of Bengal,” *Social Scientist* 60 (1977), pp. 13–23, p. 14.

⁸³ Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, pp. 9 f.; italics in the original.

⁸⁴ P. 11.

the so-called Macaulay's Minute—component of the socio-cultural programme of the East India Company, and through the internally contested readiness of many sections of the Bengali bourgeois intelligentsia to open their society up to English educational paradigms. This drive for selective westernisation, which was viewed as axiomatic to the very process of bringing about a societal and cultural renaissance, was by no means, except perhaps in the tumultuous pronouncements of the Derozians,⁸⁵ a call to total revolution. Even with the latter, it was, more often than not, an ideational transformation of Indian society that was being put forward, one that, through its outspoken and often notional radicalism, sought to emphasise the lapse that Indian civilisation had suffered from. This is, of course, not to equate this somewhat iconoclastic socio-cultural movement with the later revivalist debates, which sought to locate the political-economic decline of the Indian Subcontinent in perceived societal and cultural lapses from the Hindu/Indic tradition, but to underline the basic situation—by itself—of the “Young Bengal” as not very far from the intellectual loci of the parent tradition/s. Anglophone ideas, even if their cultivation led to a climacteric conversion to Christianity, as in the cases of Krishna Mohan Banerji (1813–1885) and Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873), were, clearly, crucial to the Derozian *Weltanschauung*, but not, necessarily, contrapuntal to the basic assumptions and moral-ethical structures of Indian civilisation that almost all of the Derozians seem to have accepted and even cherished as the bases of their self-image. The Academic Association of the Hindu College, under Derozio's tutelage, organised spirited debates and other public discussions on themes like

[...] free will, free ordination, fate, faith, the sacredness of truth, the high duty of cultivating virtue, and the meanness of vice, the nobility of patriotism, the attributes of God, and the

85 The Derozian, also known as the Young Bengal, movement crystallised around the reformist and ideologically iconoclastic tendencies, pronouncements, writings and other activities of a radical group of young students, beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, after the appointment of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831), a Luso-Indian poet and educationist, as their teacher at the Hindu College, Calcutta, in 1828. Having a charismatic, even firebrand, personality, Derozio soon attracted a number of intelligent and enthusiastic young students, who were encouraged to critique and even rebel against the perceived and actual social and intellectual stagnation in Hindu society. They were fired by the promise of a new dispensation in Bengali society and, despite their later compromise with Hindu Unitarianism, as advanced by the Brahmo Samaj, sought to bring about a decisive break with social normativity and religious-metaphysical certainty: “The Young Bengal movement was like a mighty storm that tried to sweep away everything before it. It was a storm that lashed society with a violent force causing much good and, perhaps naturally, some discomfort and distress.” (Nemai Sadhan Bose, *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* [Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1960], p. 54).

arguments for and against the existence of the deity as these have been set forth by Hume [...] the hollowness of idolatry and the shames of priesthood.⁸⁶

Derozio, as noted by Sivanath Sastri, who quotes a Clerk of the Hindu College, Haramohan Chatterjee, "fostered [his students'] taste in literature; taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition; and so far formed their moral conceptions and feelings, as to place them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age."⁸⁷ After Derozio's death, the Association was patronised by David Hare⁸⁸ and functioned until around 1839, leading to the establishment of The Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, which considered the development of a rationalist and progressive sensibility as its chief goal and led, ultimately, to the formation of a number of prototypes of later political platforms, such as the British Indian Association.

Thus, one can almost trace an interpretative pattern, which one may associate with the cultural historiography of nineteenth-century India in general. This framework may be used to delineate the interweaving of mimetic cultural modes and socio-political concerns, both long-term and articulated through exigencies, in the history of the early colonial Bengali stage. This stage was not a stand-alone cultural phenomenon that was devoid of any referentiality *apropos* the societal, economic and political currents of the time. It was both rooted in the quotidian life of aristocratic and suburban Bengal-Bihar-Orissa and aspired to deploy Anglophone literary and cultural presumptions in the configuration and transmission of meaning and value. It is of little wonder, then, that many of those who set the tone for this impressive cultural and societal efflorescence, irrespective of whether it deserves the appellation of "Bengal Renaissance" or not, were also the products of the pedagogical system evolved and enriched by figures like Hare and Derozio. As Nitish Sengupta shows, the long nineteenth century in Bengal was impacted upon, in the fields of education, law, administration, literature and

⁸⁶ Nitish Kumar Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-Speaking People* (New Delhi: UBS, 2001), p. 282.

⁸⁷ Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 70.

⁸⁸ David Hare (1775–1842) was a Scottish watchmaker, educationist and philanthropist who had made Calcutta his home ever since he had reached India in 1800; "despite not being from a highly educated background himself, he had realised that, without the spread of English education in this country [India], there could be no change in the condition of its people." (Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, p. 31) Hare had been instrumental, with the help and collaboration of both Indian and British dignitaries, in the establishment of the School Society in 1818 and the Hindu College in 1820. His philanthropy seems to have had no missionary motivation and his caring affection for his Indian students and other wards was legendary, inspiring people like Derozio to reach out to their students as friends.

culture, medicine, philosophy, political organisation and social activism, by a number of luminaries, who were the products of those heady days of rebellion, in the company of the likes of Hare and Derozio. From Ramtanu Lahiri (1813–1898), a prominent and much-loved progressive educationist, who had publicly renounced Brahminical orthodoxy, to Peary Chand Mitra (1814–1883), who had founded the *Monthly Magazine*, which set down linguistic markers for an accessible non-journalistic style,⁸⁹ these Derozians created the objective conditions that would sustain the successful dramatic articulation of social-realistic protest, which the *Nil Darpaṇ* really was. The societal investment of the early reformers had, with Mitra's play, begun taking the discourse of progress and socio-political change to the masses.

The tone and tenor of the various dialogic trajectories in this play suggest an almost nativistic cultivation of ethno-linguistic difference. In other words, there seems to be a tentative attempt to form a nebulous Bengali/Indian socio-ideological sensibility that could serve as a germinal bulwark for the evolution of the national movement in the late nineteenth century. This play, thus, may be studied, with even more validity than that accorded by the dialogic-descriptive fabric, as a testament to the progressive crystallisation and deployment of markers of socio-cultural alterity in early and mid-colonial India. These seem to have facilitated or, at least, pointed towards the creation of a bourgeois intelligentsia constellation that was at the core of the National Movement, which was to crystallise at the turn of the century. When one adds to this thematic constellation the element of intersection between this text and its context, one observes an interesting, almost Foucauldian admixture between the “floating material” of early modern European drama and the socio-political context/s of Victorian India and nineteenth-century Europe. Here, what turns out to be of considerable significance is the question of canon formation and that of the recreation of spatio-temporal functionalities in hetero-topical and even fictional contexts. The invocation of the benign, even philanthropic coloniser, as effected through the image of “[t]he most kind-hearted Queen Victoria, the mother of the people,”⁹⁰ is juxtaposed with a scathing denunciation of the solicitous brutality of the indigo-planters. Thus, there is an attempt to appeal to what was, at the time, seen to be the noble core of “British” values: an attempt that both Dinabandhu Mitra

⁸⁹ Mitra had written one of the first Bengali novels, *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* [“The Spoilt Child”], in the style developed by him, was instrumental in the establishment of the Calcutta Public Library in 1831 and involved with a number of social and cultural causes; his work resonates till today.

⁹⁰ Mitra, “The Author’s Preface,” p. 2.

and his friends and supporters in the “native”⁹¹ press made often and consistently. In fact, this belief in the underlying nobility of the British persisted for quite a long time amongst the denizens of India’s early colonial modernity. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was to observe in a letter, written in 1842, to “The Editor of *Bentley’s Miscellany*,” “I have a strong conviction that a Public like the British—discerning, generous and magnanimous will not damp the spirit of a poor foreigner.”⁹² Though Dutt was only invoking his version of the coloniser’s generosity for some of his teenage poems, the fact that most of colonial Bengal’s leading figures relied on the support of British governmental support to drive their reform programme forward cannot be gainsaid. Thus, Mitra’s play, while being primarily a tool of public advocacy and the petitioning of the Raj’s upper bureaucracy, still indicated the formation of a seemingly naïve but concrete framework of cultural choices and their socio-political applications. The majestic Mother-Queen had fused with the virtuous Motherland and created a bridge between the call of reform and the pole of sentiment.

⁹¹ Not necessarily connoting “vernacular”: many contemporaneous English newspapers run by Indians, viz., *Hindu Intelligencer*, *The Bengal Recorder* et al., were in English. Harish Chandra Mukherjee (1824–1861), who had edited the *Hindoo Patriot*, was the first Calcutta-based intellectual to take up the cudgels for the indigo-farmers. It was his fiery writing in this newspaper that roused Mitra to write the *Nil Darpaṇ* and, finally, through the deliberations of the Indigo Enquiry Commission set up by the Government, effected some checks, though not enough, upon the planters. Cf. Sastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi*, pp. 144–148.

⁹² Michael Madhusudan Datta, *Madhusudan Racanābali* [“Collected Works of Madhusudan”], ed. Kshetra Gupta (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 2012), p. 500.