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# One Mirror, Myriad Reflections: The Politics of Indigo Cultivation and its ‘Representation’ in Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nil Darpan, or The Indigo Planting Mirror*

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Before meditating on the ‘politics of representation’, let me begin my article with a well-known anecdote, which I find relevant to this topic. During the Second World War, a German officer once visited the cubist painter Pablo Picasso, in his Paris studio. There he saw *Guernica*, and being shocked by the explicit representation of the modernist “chaos” in the oil painting, he asked: “Did you do this?” To which Picasso calmly replied: “No, you did this!” Art has always been a discourse on the objects it represents. It attempts to represent the world and be authentic, gestural or emotional (*Guernica* was a response to the bombing of Guernica in 1937 by the Fascist forces, during the Spanish Civil War). However, the status of representation of objects in art had changed considerably during the twentieth century. ‘Modernist’ art increasingly abstracted objects from their social space and transformed them into signs which no longer directly referred back to moral, psychological or symbolic values that used to be ties to the social order (in fact the “avant-garde” artists attempted to throw pots of paint at the systematized world). Likewise, literature (due to its identificatory dimension with the subjective and objective qualities of the individual and the society) is also considered to conversely represent the society; and therefore, is

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often perceived naïvely, as a ‘mirror of the society and the people’ (from which it evolves). However, for its literal verisimilitude (mostly due to representational or mimetic nature), the genre of dramatic or performing arts can be considered as literature’s closest apparatus to function as a mirror of the society. “This emphasis is also reflected in the word ‘drama’ itself, which derives from the Greek “draein” (“to do,” “to act”), thereby referring to a performance or representation by actors” (Klarer 43). But in case of drama too, the representational process is a highly complex one, filled with multiple nuances. For example, the ‘external reality’ represented (in the text) through the dramatist’s perception of the ‘real’, may be ‘non-real’ for others. Moreover, when depicted on stage, the ‘performative reality’ of that ‘non-real’, attempts to replicate a microcosmic view of the reality, but the modified mirror image becomes more of a distortion, than an exact reflection. Also, it is impossible to expect exactitude from the ever-iterative ‘performative reality’. And if the text gets translated, there always remains a chance of it getting further removed from the ‘real’ (both from the text and the context). Thus, the representative quality of this art form (drama) seems to be ‘thrice removed’ from reality, in Platonic terms.

## I

Dinabandhu Mitra’s play *Nil-Darpan* (1860) has long been hailed by the nationalist critics and historians as a remarkably bold representation of the depredations of English planters in rural Bengal, and as a classic portrayal of the bravery and firm determination of the ryots, in their resistance to colonialism. *Nil-Darpan* heralded a tradition of *Darpan* (Mirror) plays in Bengali (depicting oppression and exploitation at different walks of life) like Prasanna Mukhopadhyay’s *Palligram Darpan* (Mirror of Rural Life, 1873), Mir Musharraf Hossain’s *Jamidar Darpan* (The Landowner’s Mirror, 1873), Jogendra Ghose’s *Kerani Darpan* ( The Clerk’s

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Mirror 1874), Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyay's *Chakar Durpan* (The Tea-Planters' Mirror, 1875) and *Jail Darpan* (Mirror of the Prison, 1876), Nagendra Nath Bandopadhyaya's *Gaekwar Durpan* (The Mirror of Baroda, 1875), Gopalkrishna Bandhopadhyaya's *Banga Darpan* (1885) and so on. "A class of dramatists was perhaps coming into existence which considered that a play should hold the 'Mirror' to social conditions" (Rangacharya 100). *Nil-Darpan* became a milestone in the history of Bengali theatre, and was so popular that even during the forties (1945 onwards), IPTA and other leftist groups (like Natchakra Natyadal, 1956), frequently performed *Nildarpan*.

Mitra published *Nil-Darpan* anonymously in 1860. In 1861, the governor John Grant asked for an English translation of *Nil-Darpan*, "[t]hinking this would be a good way of knowing how natives spoke of the indigo question among themselves when they had no European to please or to displease by opening their minds" (P. Chatterjee *Nation* 22-23). Seton-Karr (secretary) asked the Irish missionary Rev. James Long to supervise the translation "by a native" (Madhusudan Datta). The circulation of the translated version resulted in the prosecution of Long by the landholders and the Planters' Association, "for the publication of an indecent and scandalous libel" (Dutta 110). Long was "convicted with imprisonment for one month and a fine of one thousand rupees" (Das 4). "The white missionary" instantly came to be perceived as "a champion for the downtrodden" by the urban elite literati. For instance, many prominent Calcuttans opposed the prejudicial verdict and Long's fine was paid by Kaliprasanna Sinha. However, Long's interest in exposing the planters through *Nil-Darpan* was, to propagate Christianity among the natives by upholding "the missionary sense of justice as opposed to the injustice inflicted on ryots by planters and local magistrates" (Bhatia 28). Although Long

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became the epicentre of the on-going conflict, he was neither the author nor the translator of the impugned play and “it did not strike him that Dinabandhu Mitra, the author of the play, had not even been deemed worthy of being named in a suit of libel” (P. Chatterjee *Nation* 24). With the emergence of organized nationalism (during 1870), Bengali theatre escaped the confinements of ‘private realm’ (that is, performances in the homes of the wealthy) and the first public theatre (the National Theatre) opened on Saturday, 7 December 1872, with the performance of *Nildarpan*. A combination of the ‘realistic representation’ and political fervour: for instance, the violent scenes of torture on the ryots by the planters or Rogue’s attempt to sexually assault Khetromani, a married Bengali woman [which “recalled a similar true case of a native woman named Horomoni which was the subject of widespread discussion throughout the Indigo districts and was also sought to be carefully considered by the Indigo commission” (Dutta 105)], appealed strongly to national sentiment. The play was repeatedly performed onwards. Interestingly, the “National Theatre was invited to perform at the seventh session of the *Hindu Mela* [...] On 16 February 1873, a few scenes from *Nildarpan* were presented along with a dramatic spectacle” (Mukherjee 35).

Having pointed out the changing politics subtly operating behind these three representations of *Nil-Darpan*, I will now, analyse the incongruities within the text, to further elucidate the ‘politics of representation’.

## II

During the first half of the nineteenth Century, there existed no ‘original’ Bengali drama and apart from some indigenous folk-forms (like *Jatra*, *Kathakatha*, *Kabigan* etc.) and Sanskrit classics (which were mostly performed in translation). However, with the emergence of a nationalist consciousness (which insisted on pointing out the

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essential cultural and spiritual difference between the alien and the native) in the latter half of the nineteenth Century, a desire to search for a distinctive self-identity emerged mostly among the Bengali aristocracy and the Western educated middle class (although they, failed to shed off their admiration for the English literature and drama). Thus, being stuck between the influence of the *bilati* and the traditional Bengali culture, the ‘enlightened’ *babus* became the early patrons of the Bengali theatre (which were mostly Private theatres strictly for invited audiences). But, within this restricted arena of the ‘Private theatre’, bloomed the first original Bengali play *Kulinakulasarbaswa* (1857), by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. This protest play (against the polygamous practices of the ‘Kulin’ Brahmans) “launched a strong trend of social drama; it was followed by a host of playwrights appearing on the scene with plays on social issues. This predilection for social plays gradually slipped into making political statements through theatrical means” (S. Chatterjee 222).

While describing the *mise-en-scene* of the nineteenth Century Bengal, Partha Chatterjee observes: “[t]he great figures of literary nationalism in the late nineteenth – century Bengal – Hemchandra Bandhopadhyay, Dinabandhu Mitra, Nabinchandra Sen, Rameschandra Dutt, and above all Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay – all devoted their professional lives to careers in the colonial bureaucracy. In their literary lives, they were the first nationalists” (*Black Hole* 225). Dinabandhu Mitra too, worked as an employee in the British Post and Telegraphic Service. While in service, he toured the rural areas of Patna, Orissa and various districts of Bengal, witnessing the actual living and working condition of the peasants, their poverty and their exploitation by the British Indigo planters, who forced them to grow indigo against their will (being fully aware of its harmful effects on the fertile soil). The planters also brought

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false law suits against the native landowners and ryots, who refused to cooperate with them.

There was also the system of *dadān* (advanced payment), which the planters used to lure Indians to work for them. Unfortunately, many illiterate and impoverished villagers failed to realize that the *dadān* was a subtle form of exploitation. By accepting it, they faced terrifying consequences if they happened to offend the planters in any way or if they failed to cultivate sufficient indigo. The oppression had such an emotional impact on Dinabandhu Mitra that he was compelled to write a play about it: *Neel-Darpan*. (Bharucha 17)

In the play, Nabin Madhab, the eldest son of *Zamidar* Goluk Basu, championed the cause of the poor *ryots* in Swarpur village against the undue demands and oppression of the British planters. A false criminal case is instituted against Goluk by the planter Mr. Wood (resulting in his suicide). Nabin Madhab, with Torap, a Muslim *ryot*, attacks Mr. Rogue, the other planter, when he is about to violate the chastity of Khetromani (daughter of a *ryot*). Though fully aware of her pregnancy, Rogue kicks her in the belly. Khetromani is rescued, but dies soon after. Nabin kicks Mr. Rogue, but succumbs to injuries after Rogue fractures his skull (causing his death). Sabitri (Guluk's wife), is driven to madness and kills her younger daughter-in-law Saralota, in a fit of insanity. When she returns to her senses, the shock of her own deed kills her. Thus, the drama ends in a series of deaths (just like a regular English 'revenge tragedy').

Mitra's naming of the play *Nil Darpan* or *Nil-Darpanam Natakam* (literally, Indigo Mirror) can be traced back to the Sanskrit tradition of naming treatises with Darpan (Mirror) as suffix. For example, Nandikeshwara's third Century treatise on acting *Abhinaya-*

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*Darpanam* or Vishwanath Kaviraj's fourteenth Century treatise on rhetorics and dramaturgy *Sahitya Darpana*. In the classical context, the *darpan* (mirror) was a way of grasping the 'reality of the non-real', but the nineteenth Century English-educated Bengali intelligentsia perceived the term in a more Platonic way. "The function of the *darpan*/mirror had been inverted: in the nineteenth-century, it reflected the 'non-reality of the real', although it was based on certain social realities. However, at the surface level at least, the *babus* too were trying to elucidate reality, to educate. But the sameness of purpose is misleading. Especially so when we ask: whose reality and to educate whom?" (S. Chatterjee 231).

The play (which focuses on the total devastation of an Indian landowner's family and his *ryots* due to the indigo planters), in all possibilities was written for an elite literate intelligentsia (many of whom were landowners themselves). Hence, Mitra presented the subaltern (*ryots*) and the elite (landowners) as allies (bonded out of a shared fellow feeling), fighting side by side against a common self-proclaimed enemy: the indigo-planter. The play with some moving situations, sensational scenes of violence, madness, and a number of deaths under pathetic circumstances, "acts out a fantasy of middle-class liberalism and humanism" (224). However, this was a 'non-real' representation of the real, considering the socio-cultural scenario of the nineteenth Century Bengal. Marxist scholar Narahari Kaviraj, in his essay on the Peasant Uprisings notes the birth of a new social and political order during this time:

At the head of the village society there now stood a new set of zamindars, mostly recruited from unscrupulous gomoshthas or agents. Add to the picture, the Europeans who invested their capital in the indigo industry or in agricultural farms. At the head of it all, there was an alien government who not only extended protection to these blood-suckers

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but were themselves interested in draining away India's wealth as best as they could. (142)

The peasants therefore, became the victim of two-fold oppression – feudal and colonial.

The Bengali intelligentsia did not share a common opinion over the situation of indigo-plantation, since many of them were planters themselves (mostly during the first half on the nineteenth Century). For example, in a meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall on 15 December 1829, “Ram Mohan said: ‘As to the indigo planters, I beg to observe that I have travelled through several districts in Bengal and Bihar, and I found the natives residing in the neighbourhood of indigo plantations evidently better-clothed and better-conditioned than those who live at a distance from such stations’.” A similar opinion is evident in Dwarakanath Tagore speech: “I have several zamindaris in various districts and I found the cultivation of indigo and the residence of Europeans have considerably benefited the country and the community at large” (qtd. in Bhattacharya 58). However, a few decades later, the Bengali intelligentsia started entertaining liberal and humanitarian views and displayed sympathies for the peasants but from within the framework of colonial subjectivity. This inconsistency within the native intelligentsia has been pointed out by Ranajit Guha, in his essay ‘Neel-Darpan: The Image of Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror’. “Guha shows the innately liberal-humanitarian assumptions underlying Dinabandhu's criticism of the planters, assumptions he shared with virtually the entire new intelligentsia of the nineteenth century. Thus, underlying the criticism of the lawlessness of the planters and of the actions of a few foolish and inconsiderate English officials, there was an abiding faith in the rationality and impartiality of English law and in the good intentions of the colonial administration taken as a whole” (P. Chatterjee *History of West Bengal* 12). For example,



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in the First Act (fourth Scene), when Reboti (wife of Sadhucharan, a ryot) reports to Sabitri (zamindar Goluk's wife) about Rogue's ill intentions regarding her daughter-in-law Khetromani, Sabitri proclaims:

What more in the Burmese (Mug) power? Can anyone  
take away a woman from a house in the British Dominion?  
(*Nil Darpan* 24)

A little later, she assures Reboti by saying :

Very well, I shall make this known to Sadhu, through my husband; you need not say anything. What misfortune is this! The Indigo Planters can do anything. Then why do I hear it generally said, that the Sahebs are strict in dispensing justice. Again, my son Bindu Madhab speaks much in praise of them. Therefore I think that *these are not Sahebs; no, they are the dregs, (Chandal) of Sahebs.* (24)

Not only that; in the Second Act (first scene) too, we can observe a similar elitist belief in the myth of benevolent British rule from the on-going conversation among the ryots.

*Second Ryot.* I went to that Andarabad once or twice; as also to that Factory of Bhabnapore, every one speaks good of the Saheb of that place; that Saheb once sent me to the Court, then I saw many things pleasant in that place.

*Torapa.* Did he find any fault with you? The Saheb of Bhabnapore never raises a false disturbance. "*By speaking the truth, we shall ride on horseback.*" Had all Sahebs been of the same character with him, then none would have spoken ill of the Sahebs. (27)

So, from these few instances we can see that Mitra not only distinguishes between the 'good' Sahebs (the colonial administrators) and the 'bad' (indigo-planters), but also emphasises

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on the fact that all planters are not the same, making the exploitation a highly localized event (with spatial variations). Though Mitra was critical of the planters and their subordinates in the interior, he blatantly extolled the virtues and wisdom of the colonial administration in the Author's Preface (regardless of the fact that it was published anonymously):

The most kind-hearted Queen Victoria, the mother of the people, thinking it inadvisable to suckle her children through maid-servants, has now taken them on her own lap to nourish them. The most learned, intelligent, brave, and open-hearted Lord Canning is now the Governor-General of India; Mr. Grant, who always suffers in the sufferings of his people, and is happy when they are happy, who punishes the wicked and supports the good, has taken charge of the Lieutenant-Governorship, [...] these great men will very soon take hold of the rod of justice in order to stop the sufferings which the ryots are enduring from the great giant *Rahu*, the Indigo Planter. (*Nil-Darpan 2*)

Sadly, Mitra and the newly 'enlightened' babus (despite their fondness for justice and liberty), never pondered over the legitimacy of British rule in India. Partha Chatterjee rightly observes that;

the image of the resolute peasant defending his rights against the predatory planter, as represented in elite accounts such as Dinabandhu's play, is that of an enlightened liberal, conscious of his rights against recalcitrant officials, even succumbing to 'brief, intermittent bursts' of violence, but all the while believing in the fundamental legitimacy of the social order. This was a far cry from any truly revolutionary appreciation by a progressive intelligentsia of the strength of peasant resistance to colonialism and of its potentials for the

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construction of a new ‘national-popular’ consciousness.  
(*History of West Bengal* 12).

With the renewal of the Charter Act in 1833 (for Laissez faire or free trade), all restrictions on the settlement of British nationals were withdrawn and the British capitalists were free to invest capital in plantation crops. It also granted the indigo-planters the right to own land.

So, a legal relationship was established between the planters and the cultivators and the planters used coercion on peasants to impose indigo cultivation. In the beginning the peasants sought to draw the attention of the Government through mass petitions. But when this failed, they took to combination and organised a non-co-operation movement on a gigantic scale which reached

an explosive state in 1857. Then came Act X, which restricted the rights of landlords and planters. But, the “instantaneous opposition of planters to Act X led to a ruthless use of Act XI of 1860 which made cultivators completely vulnerable to planters through legal procedure. Only when the resulting resistance of cultivators in Bengal was even more violent, and threatened the British order, was it proclaimed at the end of 1860 that growing of indigo could not be imposed against the will of the cultivators” (Sah 71). The rebellion became so formidable that it led Lord Canning to declare that “for about a week it caused me more anxiety than I have had since the days of Delhi”, and “from that day I felt that a shot fired in anger or fear by one foolish planter might put every factory in Lower Bengal in flames” (qtd. in Kaviraj 149).

Although, the peasants were drawn into a war against the oppressive planters, they had no clear idea about the working and nature of the Colonial order. However, “[t]hey knew fairly well about their immediate enemies, viz., the zamindars and the indigo planters: and

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they felt they were sufficiently prepared to fight against them” (151). While Mitra’s represented “reality” talks about the unity between the landlords and the ryots, or the knowledge of the common masses about the colonial administrative system, the socio-historical ‘reality’ states otherwise. Mitra, was a part of that middle-class intelligentsia (having supreme faith in the righteousness of the British government and its justice system), who “sought to establish themselves as the true friends of the peasants and thus their legitimate political representatives” (Das Gupta 71). However, in their attempt to legitimise the representation, the peasant’s own voice was largely ignored. “To Guha, middle-class attitudes towards peasants were ‘a curious concoction of an inherited, Indian-style paternalism and an acquired western-style humanism’” (71).

Although *Nil-Darpan* is championed as a phenomenal ‘protest’ play in nationalist circles and critics like Rustom Bharucha perceives it as “the first instance of theater as a political force confronting the British government, the first attack on the Raj’s commercial exploitation and, indirectly, its political tyranny and disregard of human rights” (17). Contrary to popular belief, this ‘myth’ was created during the era of political nationalism, “in the perceptions of those who staged it and of those who saw it” (Dasi 169). As the distinction between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Englishmen blurred, the violation of Khetromani became “symptomatic of the violation of a country” and Torap’s beating up the exploitative ‘Nil’ Saheb, began to be perceived on a symbolic level (where Torap represented the resistance of colonized against the colonizers).

The poetics and politics of the representations in these cultural texts (works of literature, and other art forms), are a major preoccupation of the Cultural Materialists and New Historicists.

The essential difference between the textual and performative representation of *Nil-Darpan* can be seen as that of aesthetic vs.

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political. As the play's aesthetics makes clear that the representation of the "real" is a *removal* from "reality", therefore, a critical perspective on it and within it, is necessary. While the aesthetic representation tends to foreground its status as a 're-presentation' of the 'real' social scenario, but it ceases to correspond with the 'original', and becomes only as 'real' as perceived by the early nineteenth century pro-British sycophantic Bengali intelligentsia. And although, the later political representation in the form of onstage performances (propagating mostly an anti-imperialistic sentiment and not an anti-feudal one), denies this earlier mode of 're-presentation', it too is further removed from "reality". Thus, though the myriad reflections (in the form of vernacular drama, its English translation and its multiple stage adaptations) of the Indigo-cultivation in Bengal, emerges from one 'Darpan' (*Indigo Mirror*), but the 'cracked' Mirror, seems to reflect only a distorted image of the 'reality'.

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