

Theatre of Class-Contradiction: A Comparative study of Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay's *The Persecuted* and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabbhyata*

Sib Sankar Majumder

I

On 3rd December 1831 *Samachar Darpan*, one of the most widely circulated vernacular news papers of 19th century Calcutta reported a furor, caused in some quarters of the city, by the publication of a play titled *The Persecuted: The Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831) ascribed to a certain Babu Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay (1813-85). The report stated:

...it is difficult to publish the substance of the play [i.e. *The Persecuted*] because at present the residents of Calcutta are divided in multiple rival camps (Mukherjee 128).

The furor reported by *Samachar Darpan* was caused by a series of controversial incidents ensuing with Henri Vivian Derozio's (1809-31) forced resignation from the position of a teacher at Hindu College on April 25, 1831. A few leading English news dailies of the city were continuously publishing reports about 'perceived excesses' committed by certain sections of the city's Hindu community which compelled Derozio to resign from his chair. As a reaction to this, members of the Young Bengal Association organized a protest meeting at the residence of Ramjay Bidyabhusan, Krishnamohan's maternal grandfather, to discuss the issue. During the meeting some of the Young Bengal enthusiasts (mostly belonging to upper caste Hindu) registered their protest by eating cow-meat and hurling a few pieces of meat and bone into the garden of an adjacent residence, which incidentally belonged to an upper-caste Brahmin. This provocative act detonated the pent up sentiments of the upper-caste Hindus which only subsided when Bidyabhusan ousted his grandson from his house. For a few days Krishnamohan took refuge in the residence of Raja Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee (1814-1898) and then in the dwellings of his Christian friends in the city. This sudden strike of misfortune has been recorded by Krishnamohan in the pages of *The Enquirer*:

Persecution has burst upon us so vehemently, that on Wednesday last at 12 o'clock we were left without a roof to cover our head. At last in spite of the bigot's rage and fanatic's fulminations, we have been able to be settled in a commodious place, through the exertions of two affectionate friends and warm advocates of truth. We were, however, so troubled in settling our domestic affairs that we have not been able to start

our present number to our satisfaction. If our readers conceive the difficulties we were placed in, without a house to lodge in, expecting nothing but the rage of bigots and foes, and suffering the greatest hardships for the sake of truth and liberation, they will undoubtedly excuse our present defects (Midday 124).

Three decades after the publication of Krishnamohan's *The Persecuted*, on a certain evening of 1865, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1824-73) *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata* (1860) was performed for a small private gathering in Shobhabazar Theatrical Society Hall. But this maiden production infuriated a section of the invited guests so much that plan for all subsequent productions was immediately withdrawn. An eyewitness's account of the prevailing situation in Belgachia theatre on that evening goes like this:

A few of the Young Bengal Class getting a scent of the farce and feeling that a caricature made in it touch them too closely, raised a hue and cry; and choosing for their leader a gentleman of position and influence who, they knew, had influence with the Rajahs, deputed him to dissuade them from producing the farce on the board of their theatre. This gentleman (also a Young Bengal) fought tooth and nail for the success of his mission (Bandyopadhyay 9).

No further production of this play was held in Belgachia Theatre during Michael's lifetime. Quite understandably the incident had a very depressing impact on the author, who was utterly vexed on receiving such a shoddy response from his class compatriots. Reminiscing the scandal and controversy generated by the play, many years after the death of Michael, Keshab Chandra Ganguly, revealed the exact reason behind the inability of Paikpara Rajas to organize subsequent productions of this play:

[When] Michael...pestered me with repeated enquiries why the farces [*Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?* and *Buro Shaliker Ghade Ron*] were not taken up in earnest by the Belgachia dramatic corps...I could only give him an evasive reply saying, that as one farce exposes the faults and failings of Young Bengal and the other those of the old Hindus, and as the Rajas were popular with both these classes, they did not wish to offend either class by having them acted in their theatre (Banerjee 182).

Both these plays which I have selected for the present discussion provide interestingly paradoxical dimensions of contemporary 'bhadralok' culture of 19th century Calcutta. Whereas Krishnamohan's *The Persecuted* illuminates the caste-rigidity and caste-polarization against which Young Bengal unleashed a phenomenal assault; Madhusudan's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata* is a quintessentially sarcastic portrayal of the oddities and eccentricities to which Young Bengal relapsed within a very short period of its formation. In this article, I have attempted to arrest, in brief, the essence of this paradox with a comparative analysis of the two texts.

II

The Young Bengal Movement in 19th century Calcutta was a manifestation of the radical currents of an Elite-Middle class cultural revival popularly known as the Bengal Renaissance. A couple of issues which are very vital in understanding and analyzing the literary-cultural phenomenon called Bengal Renaissance are - (a) the rise of an influential 'Westernised' middle class, (b) the role played in disseminating a peculiarly hybridized cultural consciousness that placed a heavy premise on the art and philosophy of the West. In most cultural matters, however, the middle class kept a safe distance from the masses (or the working class) by accepting "high caste prescriptions...sharing a pride in its language, its literature culture, and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex structure that it had proved remarkably able to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities" (Forbes 14).

Quintessentially drenched in the radical philosophical and scientific tradition of western modernity, the Young Bengal Association (alternatively referred to as Derozians) epitomized extreme free thinking hitherto unknown in the Bengal province. It was this spirit of radicalism, often manifest in the writings, speech and behavior of its members, which distinguished Derozians from the two other influential trends of contemporary 'bhadralok' culture - the 'reformist' led by Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar etc. and the 'revivalist' symbolized by Ramakrishna and others. On his appointment as a teacher of Hindu College in 1826, Derozio inspired a host of young men belonging to the upper class section of Calcutta society to drink deep in the fountain of free thought. The Young Bengal started its journey in 1831 with the publication of two news papers - *The Enquirer* and *Jnananvesan* and soon seized the attention of the nationalist segment of Bengal's petty bourgeois with the establishment of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge in 1838, the Bengal British India Society (1843) and the British Indian Association (1851). The defense of the Black Acts throughout late 1840s and early 1850s and organizing lectures on anti-slavery issue remains two other very crucial reformist initiatives by Derozians.

Much of the radicalism in Young Bengal's political agenda emanated from a sharp reaction to the contradictions in the 'politics of synthesis' as practiced by Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and his fellow reformers. The Derozians insisted that though the Rammohanite reformists understood and accepted humanist principles of Western Enlightenment but they did not dare to denounce a good deal of orthodox cultural practices. For Young Bengal this methodology of social reform without political interference and intervention was 'equitable' with hypocrisy and it is for this reason that they branded the Rammohanite reformers as "unscrupulous half liberals" (Nag 430).

On the other hand, both the Hindu upper caste as well as the moderate reformers of contemporary Calcutta reacted very censoriously to the reports of unrestrained drinking and beef-eating which the Derozians practiced as a symbol of cultural emancipation. Soon their feeling of surprise was replaced by shock and disgust at the blatant declaration of hatred for Hinduism by a few members of Young

Bengal like Madhav Chandra Mallik and others. Matters turned hard when a couple of Young Bengal members - Mahesh Chandra Ghosh and Krishnamohan Banerji announced their conversion to Christianity in 1832, followed by Madhusudan Datta and Jnanendra Mohan Tagore.

However, Young Bengal withered without contributing any concrete political vision and much of its influence seldom penetrated beyond its membership. Worldly occupations and private interests claimed the attention of the individual members, the majority of whom came from middle-class homes and had, therefore, a living to earn. Radical politics of the type that the Derozians had envisioned was hardly possible in Bengal during at the 19th century and this is the reason why most of their socio-political initiatives never consolidated. The only Young Bengal trait which was widely copied by some sections within the contemporary society was a spirit of 'escapism'. It was a lack of internal cohesion which restricted it from developing as a formidable progressive political force. The lack of a concrete vision to spread the message outside a minuscule circle restricted it from attracting new adherents and within less than a decade and half from the time of its formation it faded out.

III

Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay, better known as Reverend Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay, who is chiefly remembered today as the author of the first modern play in Bengal (imitating a foreign form in a foreign tongue) had been an erudite scholar, a sympathetic administrator and an eminent social reformer. The propagandistic objective of the author of *The Persecuted* becomes obvious in the preface which he has appended to the play in which he articulates that the purpose behind writing this play had neither been to achieve "dramatic excellence" nor "to invent a story" but to compute its excellence:

"by measuring the effects it will produce upon the minds of the rising generation. The inconsistencies and the darker side of the influential members of the Hindoo [sic] community have been depicted before their [i.e. young and impressionable Hindu youth] eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and the tricks of the Brahmins and thereby be able to guard themselves against them" (Midday 129).

That Krishnamohan prioritized his reformist objective over aesthetic acumen in this play becomes obvious to us in its dedicatory passage addressed the reformist youth of Hindu community:

The following pages are inscribed to them with sentiments of affectation, and strong hopes of their appreciating those virtues and mental energies which elevate men in the estimation of a philosopher (Midday 127).

The plot of *The Persecuted* is divided into five acts and there are twenty three characters in total. Its characters have been very scrupulously selected by the playwright to represent three broad divisions of contemporary Hindu Bengali

society – the traditionalists or the conservatives, the progressive liberals and the neutrals. The conservatives are represented by three old men Kamdev, Debnath and Ramlochan, Lalchand, the owner of a news paper and two representatives of Brahmins Tarkalankar and Bidyabagish. The progressives are represented by four young men and the neutrals are represented by five other young men. What is remarkably ingenious about Krishnamohan's art of characterization is that he has introduced a pair of subaltern characters in the persona of domestic servants, one young and the other old, both of who follow the radical and the conservative ideology, respectively.

The play opens with a conversation between these two characters (both of them unnamed) and presents a significant point of contrast on the issue of religious orthodoxy as existed in both the upper and lower section of the Hindu community. But we are also equally surprised to witness an unholy alliance between Tarkalankar and Bidyabagish, the two self styled guardians of Sanatan Dharma from the Brahminical stock and Lalchand, the mischievous proprietor of a news paper, who all are very 'concerned' about the sunken status of Hinduism. In fact, Lalchand has already planned a detailed strategy to counter the force of the irreligious:

Why raise false reports against these fellows – exaggerate the least cause you may get – prejudice the people against them. Utter their names with the most abusive epithets – Do [Sic] all these nay more...While you cry out in the roads against them, abuse them at home;...Go nowhere but speak ill of them. Alarm the natives; let every street, every road, ring with invectives against them (Midday 142).

These two pusillanimous brahmins thrive in Lalchand's protection as he assures them full protection – "Do all these and fear not; I will support you as long as I breathe" (Midday 142). Moreover, he has decided to summon a meeting of "all rich men" (presumably of the city) for ostracizing Banylal, Mohadeb's son (142). What is very interesting, however, is to note that it is not upper-caste Brahmins but a wealthy 'baniya' (Lalchand is a very characteristic name for a Hindi speaking northerner from the city's thriving business community) who calls the shots in this controversy and upper caste (represented by the Brahmins) are only playing the second fiddle. Further, Lall Chund's decision to invite "rich men" (in contrast to either common men or religious scholars) of the city to deliberate and decide on a religious issue is very suggestive of the hegemonic control that the wealthy, influential elites had over such matters.

Most of Krishnamohan's characters in *The Persecuted* are type characters as a result of which they appear flat and dull and more importantly the negative characters are drawn without the slightest hint of any possible redemption. But we need to understand that the nature of the times was such that for many of his contemporaries, invectiveness if not outright philistinism in ideological matters, appeared to be the order of the day. A small article published by Krishnamohan in *The Enquirer* during June, 1831 may clarify the viciousness of the situation:

The angry conglomerates of conservatives are firing cannon balls of criticism at the youth. The heat of 'Gudum Sabha' [was a derogatory code name for fundamentalist Hindu Dharamasabha] is becoming increasingly unbearable aggressive. They are threatening that the youth would be ostracized. Then let the drum of ostracization be beaten in the household of each and every Hindu. (Midday 74)

IV

Unlike *The Persecuted*, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?* has been a very conspicuous text in the canon of early modern Bengali theatre. It has an element of robust earthy humour which might appear a little offensive to civilized sensibilities, but we have to keep in mind the fact Dutt's primary objective in this play had been to expose the hypocrisy and degeneration which characterized the Young Bengal Association by the end of 1840s.

That Michael started receiving encouragement in the form of patronage from the Rajas of Paikpara (especially Ishwar Chandra Sinha, the younger brother of Raja Pratap Chandra Sinha) becomes obvious to us from a laudatory 'note' which Sriram Chattopadhyay, manager of the Paikpara Rajas sent to him on 9th October 1858 as a token of appreciation recognizing his contribution in the translation of *Ratnavali*:

I have much pleasure in sending by the bearer Bank of Bengal Notes for Rupees five hundred which I beg you to accept as a slight recognition on the point of the Rajahs of the ability and the masterly skill you have displayed in investing our Rutnavally with an English garb (Kundu 189).

The confidence vested in him by the rajas inspired Madhusudan to write a couple of light satirical comedies *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?* and *Buro Shaliker Ghade Ron*. A few parallels, literary as well as performative, in the form of Kali Prasanna Sinha's (1840-70) *Houtum Penchar Naksha* (1864) and numerous popular motifs used by lower class 'khemta' and 'swang' performers were available to the dramatist. But, as is very characteristic with Madhusudan, the primary source of his inspiration must have been European Anglophone dramatists. However, the use of an 'adkhemta' song and dance in Act II, Sc. I is a firm indicator of the fact that as far as the choice of motif is concerned Madhusudan was rather eclectic and open. It is also very intriguing to note that Michael remained blinded to the fact that thematically the play bore such an obvious parallel with the life of the author. By the time of the publication of this play Michael had attained considerable notoriety by his conversion to Christianity, by his marriage with an Anglo-Indian lady and by his 'unscrupulous' life-style which soon forced his circumstances on the edge of a financial catastrophe. The anecdotes of his excessive drinking habits were spread thick and fast in the upper echelons of contemporary Calcutta society. Another factor which significantly contributed towards a general feeling of hatred and abomination against him originated from a range of outrageous opinions against Hindu Gods and Goddesses which he expressed in

numerous texts. This thought-pattern, though often supposed to be characteristic of youthful exuberance and naïveté, had been an integral part of Madhusudan's consciousness during the formative period of his artistic career. And it is opinions like these which were later increasingly upheld by a section of his Hindu compatriots to brand him as an 'anti-national' author.

Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? is a comedy of manners and stylistically very close to Moliere's (1622-73) plays. Its plot is divided into two acts in which four different scenes offer a succinct juxtaposition of the private and public domain of the middle class life in 19th century Calcutta. Its protagonist Nabababu, who is a member of Gyantarangini Sabha (a caricature of the Young Bengal Association), takes pride in his social superiority and in a spree of drunken revelry swears to reform his domestic servant. However, the conversation between Babaji, a vaishnav and Nabababu and Nrityakali in Act I, Sc II of the play provides ample proof of rampant prostitution and other profligate activities which penetrated deep inside the inner core of middle class life in Calcutta:

Nrityakali: Let's catch the vaishnav vermin and stuff him with some foul cutlet or mutton chop so that his present life is accomplished.

Nabababu: Hush, hush. (advances towards Babaji). Ho isn't it Babaji? So, why are you here?

Babaji: No, nothing significant, just thought of visiting the meeting hall of Nababu and his friends on way to work.

Nabababu: Indeed, indeed? Let's go inside then.

Nrityakali: (aside) What are you up to mad-man? What will happen if he is taken inside? After all we are not going to organize a Haribasara.

Nabababu: (aside) Oh, keep quiet. (loudly to Babaji) Babaji, won't it be good if you step inside once.

Babaji: No babu, I have a work to do somewhere else, you proceed
(Das 135).

The affected mannerisms of the western educated Bengali youth found expression in its frequent mixture of English phrases and words (and also English slang) even in routine conversations. It has been very comically treated in this play by Michael as some of the expressions of Nabababu appear unintelligible to Bode, the domestic servant, but, nevertheless insists on the latter's reformation.

The play, however reaches its satirical climax at Act II Sc. II. during a musical extravaganza organized in the meeting hall of Gyantarangini Sabha, where members are shown freely throwing themselves at the arms of the 'nautch' girls at the height of intoxication, when Nabababu is caught with a sudden reformist frenzy. He makes a passionately patriotic appeal to his comrades:

Gentlemen, educate your women - give them liberty - abolish casteism - and allow remarriage of widows - it is then and then only our dear motherland would be able to contest with civilized states like England etc. - not otherwise (Das 140).

But the very next sentence that he speaks is even more dramatic, given the fact that he compares the present state of his country with a 'jail' in which the meeting hall of Gyantarangini Sabha is the only centre of true 'freedom' and 'emancipation'. And then he invites his dear comrades to do whatever pleases them - "Gentlemen, in the name of freedom, let us enjoy ourselves" (Das 140).

Like Krishnamohan, Mahusudan's characters are also type characters drawn to serve a specific 'plan'. But they appear more fallible, humane and as a consequence, more credible than Krishnamohan's unmitigated villains. Stylistically, however, both these plays are rather deficient. Neither Krishnamohan in *The Persecuted* nor Madhusudan in *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?* pay any serious attempt to build up to structural climax in their plays and are rather episodic as far as the plots are concerned.

V

The introduction of western modernity in colonial Bengal and its influence in reshaping a two thousand year old civilization was bound to provoke anxious reactions amongst sections of the natives. Earlier, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore had warned his fellow compatriots in the Brahmo Samaj that "proceeding too fast in matters of social change" may have a long term degenerative impact on Indian society and his chief concern was that the Samaj could "be separated from the greater body whom we would guide and uplift" (Chandra 2004). When western modernity collaborated with colonialists, missionaries and social reformers, the elite and the upper middle class sections of Bengali society (predominantly Hindu) launched a vigorous campaign to assert and 'manufacture' a Hindu identity for the Indians. One of the distinguished aspects of this Hindu revivalism was the glorification of a Hindu past. In essence this Hindu revivalism was an "outburst of an injured Hindu masculinity or pride which had to come to terms simultaneously with political subordination and threats to its cultural survival" (Sen 3). Both the texts with which I'm concerned in this article (i.e. Krishnamohan's *The Persecuted* and Madhusudan's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?*) are resistance texts, epitomizing a particular kind of counter-hegemonic discourse.

The Derozians' preoccupation with Western modernity in Bengal was essentially based on the conviction that it could neither be piecemeal nor merely a set of tokenisms rather it had to be based on a 'holistic praxis' (Nag 431). For the majority of their influential contemporaries in Calcutta, however, most of such praxis seemed to be manifestations of some extreme forms of Anglicism. To a considerable extent, the elite and upper-middle class failed to recognize these praxes as an integral element of Young Bengal's politics - "this was mainly the means of asserting the right of individual judgment in matters of established customs, not unusual at a critical point of development" (431). So, we can see that as late as in 1941 when the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* published a volume of *The Persecuted*, Brajendranath Banerjea commented in his brief introduction to this play that Krishnamohan's community i.e. the Young Bengal was "especially indignant" for a couple of reasons - (a) as editor of *The Enquirer* "he

[Krishnamohan] poured venom on them every week” and (b) his house in Guruprasad Choudhury Lane, Calcutta, where he and his friends used to meet, “became the centre not only of intellectual discussions but also of the taking of [sic] forbidden food” (Midday 141)

If Krishnamohan remained a victim of the fundamentalist forces throughout his life, Madhusudan’s case is even more intriguing given the fact that in his case it was not any ‘outside force’ but his own class compatriots who reacted violently against his play and tried to suppress it. His robust faith in that portion of his countrymen, whose minds he believed were “imbued with Western ideas and modes of thinking” proved to be squarely unfounded (Mee 57). On his death, a Calcutta based newspaper called Sadharani published an article which advised the Bengali youth to take lesson from Madhusudan’s life on the effect of excessive alcohol consumption. Rajnarayan Basu, and a childhood friend of Madhusudan, radically altered his views (from appreciation to outright condemnation) on the latter’s literary accomplishments (after Madhusudan’s death) on the pretext that most of these poems and plays lacked “nationalist elements” (Nag 434). Both Krishnamohan and Michael were considered to be miserable misfits in a new cultural politics which started characterizing Bengal during the mid part of 19th century, inseparably, as it seemed to be associated with a militant Hindu ideology. Both of them were ostracized from their native society at the behest of powerful sections within their community.

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