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'Eating the Yaban's Rice'¹: Socio-Cultural Transactions on the Mid-Colonial Bengali Stage

One of the most interesting socio-cultural traits in late-eighteenth-century South Asia was the interstitially-polysemic manner in which constitutive identities and “fields of belonging”² were fused, in an osmotically-creative and reflexive churning of literary-cultural texts, tropes, floating theatre-material and transactions. Beginning in 1795, when Gerasim Lebedev founded the Hindu Theatre in Calcutta, and had Jodrell’s *The Disguise* and Molière’s *Love is the Best Medicine* translated into Bengali and performed “in the Bengalee style”, one gets to see a growing percolation of Anglo-European dramaturgical and performative ideas and devices onto the Indian stage, which, in the early-nineteenth century, was heavily-dependent on logistical and financial support from the so-called “absentee landlord” gentry of Bengal. This deployment of socio-cultural networks in the furthering of early/mid-colonial theatre in Bengal and, by extension, the rest of India, is a phenomenon that needs to be studied in greater detail than it has hitherto been; and, in this context, through his translation of the *Nil Darpan* and his own plays, Michael Madhusudan Datta provides us with a prominent example of the transcultural affinities of Bengal’s early-modern proto-*Bhadralok* intellectual, who was the quintessential product of early/mid-colonial Bengal’s immersion in the Reason-discourse of the Enlightenment, as mediated through an intrinsically-Indic cultural socialisation. Initially, figures like him sought their discursive orientation in the texts and tropes of the various Anglo-European early modernities; however, as in the case of Datta, this led, after an initially-exuberant creative euphoria expressed in Anglophone terms, more often than not, to a renewed and somewhat zealous engagement with Indic tropes, as in Datta’s signal play, *Śarmīsthā* (spelt *Sermista* in English), which was based on a Sanskrit epic-narrative and was also the first Bengali text to use blank verse. The proposed paper will look at the cultural polysemy between a “local” Indic epic-narrative tradition, along with its socio-cultural affects, and the “cosmopolitan” acculturation of an Indo-European intersectional figure like Datta, through a comparativist analysis of *Śarmīsthā* and *Nil Darpan* and the search for archival sources; the attempt will be to theorise a possible narrative of intercultural liminality on the mid-colonial Indian stage.

End-Notes

1 Mitra, Dinabandhu, *Nil Darpan, or The Indigo Planting Mirror*, Calcutta: C. H. Manuel, 1861, p. 7.

2 Offord, Baden, “Mapping the Rainbow Region: Fields of Belonging and Sites of Confluence”, *Transformations* No. 2 (March 2002), p.1; <www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_02/pdf/offord.pdf>, retrieved on 02.07.2012.