

Fall 11-12-2022

[Review of] *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings*, by Ananda Lal

Sukanya Chakrabarti
San Jose State University, sukanya.chakrabarti@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/faculty_rsca

Recommended Citation

Sukanya Chakrabarti. "[Review of] *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings*, by Ananda Lal" *Asian Theatre Journal* (2022): 428-432. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2022.0034>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings ed. by Ananda Lal
(review)

Sukanya Chakrabarti

Asian Theatre Journal, Volume 39, Number 2, Fall 2022, pp. 428-432
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2022.0034>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/869913>

power to create the world from their perspective” (p. 139). Simultaneously, Amal Allana’s post-Brechtian vision “challenged the Marxist interpretive system of Brecht by making the production more open-ended with her ingenious treatment of gender, casting a male actor (Manohar Singh) to play the role of Mother Courage” (p. 140). By tracing the “bends” (historical, social, political, and aesthetic) in Brechtian theatre in India, this chapter argues that Brechtian theatre does not allow for essentialism. It is nonlinear, favoring reimagination and aesthetic interpretations of Brecht.

The closing chapter critically sums up Prateek’s discourse on Brechtian theatre and particularly highlights the scope of his analysis of Brecht in India beyond a monolithic interpretation of Brecht. Prateek illustrates how this study can further the reader’s understanding of Brecht and Brechtian metamorphosis through culture, time, and socio-political systems through a multi-disciplinary approach.

Brecht in India: The Poetics and Politics of Transcultural Theatre can be a significant reference point for a broad readership in theatre studies and postcolonial studies, emphasizing Brechtian theatre and aesthetics. The book contextualizes the evolution of Brechtian theatre in India geopolitically through a global and comprehensive approach. The author generates a conversation on the transformation of Brecht in postcolonial India through a series of informative accounts, which can be further explored and explained considering the extensive political, cultural, and social developments of postcolonial India.

JASHODHARA SEN
University of Florida

INDIAN DRAMA IN ENGLISH: THE BEGINNINGS. Edited by Ananda Lal. Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2019. 243 pp. Hardcover, Rs. 450.00.

Ananda Lal’s *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings* fills a critical lacuna in the study of Indian theatre history while offering insights into the complexities and challenges of archiving book history in an Indian postcolonial context, as Lal notes the “absence of a culture of methodical library acquisition” (p. 9) in his introduction. Contrary to what a disorganized and sparsely recorded Indian theatre history had confirmed for so long, this meticulously researched anthology,

compiled, edited, and annotated by Lal, corrects some commonly held misconceptions, invalidating the erstwhile accepted theory that Indian theatre in English begins with the English translation of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's Bengali play *Ekei ki bale sabhyata?* (1871). As such, it is a key volume for scholars of South Asian Drama.

The book, divided into three parts, begins with a general introduction offering a detailed historical context as well as a rationale for the choice of the three plays in the anthology—*The Persecuted* (1831) by Krishna Mohana Banerjea, *Rizia* (1849) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and *Kaminee* (1874) by an anonymous playwright. Each play is preceded by an introduction, with an added note on the text, its discovery, and history of its publication. In addition, each section has an image of the title page from the original publication (in the case of *The Persecuted* and *Kaminee*) or from the original manuscript (in the case of *Rizia*). At the end of his general introduction, Lal argues for the need of reviving the three plays. “As a theatre director and theatre critic,” he says, “I regard the three plays in this volume worthy of revival because of their content, so relevant to contemporary times. I can visualize them done either in academic antiquarian mode, replicating the social history of their context, or, more easily, edited and revised to suit current stage style and viewing expectations. That would be perhaps the most fitting tribute to these long-forgotten pioneers” (p. 13). Lal performs his own argument asserting the need to revive the three plays because of their relevance in contemporary times by activating and enlivening the long-forgotten and neglected play texts, participating in a bibliographic performance, engaging in a textual dialogue with the playwrights through footnotes, endnotes, punctuations, insertions, and asides. He, quite methodically, corrects typographical errors, transcription errors, adds explanatory notes, and provides accepted modernized spellings within parentheses.

The first play in the anthology, *The Persecuted*, is inspired by real events. Krishna Mohana Banerjea, deeply inspired by Henry Derozio, a teacher in Hindoo College (present-day Presidency University), was one of the members of the Young Bengal Movement, which was instrumental in raising questions around orthodox rules and rituals of Hinduism and the hypocrisy of upper-caste, exploitative Brahmins. In their display of vehement protest against Hindu prejudices, Banerjea and his friends met at the former's house, on 23 August 1831, to unabashedly consume beef, while throwing the remainder at their neighbor's house, loudly declaring “there is beef!” (p. 18). Consequently, he was evicted from his childhood home, and later when he took shelter in his friend's place, was uprooted again by anti-Banerjea protestors, until he found refuge in the home of the Scottish

missionary, Alexander Duff, who later in 1832, converted Banerjea to Christianity.

The Persecuted, which follows a similar plotline, does not end with any conversions, but the protagonist, Bany Lal, along with his friends and supporters, who identify as “devoted servant to the cause of truth and Hindoo reformation” (p. 69), pledge to hold their ground against orthodoxies of religious beliefs. The exploration of such themes has acquired immediate and compelling meaning in the context of the current politicization of beef-eating and the recent beef ban in India by the ruling government supported by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Sathyamala 2019: 879).

This section ends with “Notes and Illustrations” (p. 71) compiled by Banerjea himself. Besides explicit references to Shakespearean characters (p. 73), the play adopts a highly stylized and melodramatic form, influenced by Victorian melodrama, forms to which 19th c. Bengali playwrights were likely exposed, especially with Macaulay’s infamous Minutes on Education (Macaulay 1835). Even though the date of the play (1831) precedes the date of the imposition of these minutes (1835), which also leads to Lal’s claims that “many Indians chose English for their literary excursions prior to that date” (p. 11), we might need to be circumspect about how we interpret *choice* in the context of a colonial situation.

In the introduction to the second play in the anthology, *Rizia*, Lal fills in significant gaps in history. He takes us through the development of this play—from a nascent idea, to a dramatic serialized poem in a weekly titled *The Eurasian* (November 1849–January 1850), to the synopsis of a proposed staged version (sent to the Rajas of Paikpara with hopes of it being produced in Belgatchia Theatre), to unfinished excerpts in later posthumous publications (in 1921 by Nagendranath Som, and in 1973 by Sureshprasad Niyogi), to the serendipitous discovery of the tattered manuscript in Dutt’s handwriting from one of his students, Pramantha Mohun Tagore, which Lal reconstructs and collates from the three versions that survive. This is what is presented to us in this anthology, a version that bears the trace of years of edits, revisions, and collation.

Rizia is a play about a Muslim empress in love with her Abyssian slave, Jammal, losing her empire and life to patriarchy and misogyny. Even after his first proposal to stage the play was denied by the Rajas, Dutt continued to insist, “We ought to take up Indo-Mussalman subjects . . . The prejudice against Moslem names must be given up” (pp. 83–84). At a time when Islamophobia, misogyny, and oppressive extremist Hindu nationalism threaten India’s democracy, the reemergence of such a play is of exceptional value, and, paradoxically, quite

timely. As Lal reminds us, “Dutt consciously made her a fourfold ‘captive ladie’: as a woman, a Muslim for 19th-century Indian audiences, one who assumed power above her gender role, and one who loved below her socio-racial station” (p. 85).

The final play in this anthology, *Kaminee*, published anonymously in 1874, also deals with socio-political issues—widow remarriage and conversion to Christianity. Lal, in his characteristic investigative style, unearths the various possibilities of authorship. Even though the Bengal Library Catalogue of Books, as Lal discovers through his rigorous research, lists the author as “G. Ritchie” (p. 197), and the copyright holder as J. Belmont Gomes (p. 198), ultimately, it remains unclear as to who the playwright is. The plot bears remarkable resemblance to an actual case of Gunesh Soondery Dabee Sen, a teenage widow, who converted to Christianity, which became a controversial topic of discussion in 1870.

Unlike Gunesh Soondery Dabee, whose choice in the matter of conversion was questionable, *Kaminee* has been portrayed as an intelligent woman with agency. A nineteenth century play set in Calcutta, where the protagonist and the titular character, *Kaminee*, a virgin widow, is courted by two men (a native Bengali and a British) but left for more conventionally accepted women at the end. With *Kaminee* leaving her paternal house to avoid rigorous restrictions and staying with an uncle in the same city, the play was unquestionably progressive and ahead of its times. In the context of world theater, Lal considers it “as unthinkable a step in her society as Nora’s slamming the door behind her in *A Doll’s House*, five years later” (p. 204).

All the three plays in the anthology, despite dealing with varied subjects such as persecution, religious orthodoxy, misogyny, power, love, and family, are bound by the common thematic thread of social justice and equal rights for women against the backdrop of a patriarchal, oppressive, 19th c Indian society. Another factor that unites the plays is their Indianness, as the title of the anthology indicates. Lal indicates that *Kaminee* was published by a Brahma Samaj periodical, *Indian Mirror*, owned by K. C. Sen, who had transformed it into a “widely-read daily” (p. 200), which is, for him, “[a]ll the more reason to regard *Kaminee* as an Indian drama, whether written pseudonymously, singly by Ritchie, a British national, or Laurence, or cowritten by either one and an Indian (Gomes?)” (p. 200). However, earlier in his introduction, Lal had reasoned the exclusion of the play *The Spirits of the East: A Lyrical Drama* anonymously authored by “A Bengal Civilian” in 1844, since it “exemplifies works by British temporary residents exclusively about their life in India, which does not fall within our purview, strictly speaking” (p. 11). If the anonymity

of the author in the case of *Kaminee* does not seem to matter, since the play was published in a Brahma Samaj daily, does the publishing agency determine the play's Indianness? Or, do the themes determine what constitutes "Indian," since the experience of British temporary residents were not considered to be within the purview of this anthology? Does the term "Indian" then refer to those who were natives in British-ruled India, excluding the experiences of British characters in the plays? But in that case, *Kaminee* does not seem to make the cut, since two of the primary characters in the play are British (Alice Thornhill and Harry Wilton). Stylistically, these plays have been inspired and influenced by Shakespearean forms and Victorian melodrama, which, again, complicates this category of the "Indian."

Instead of accepting "Indian" as a self-evident category, a critical discourse on "Indianness" would have further enriched this important collection of topical and timely plays, since the category, especially against a colonial topology, includes a range of heterogeneous possibilities. This anthology, however, is undoubtedly a necessary study of theatre in English in nineteenth century India, which Lal approaches fastidiously.

SUKANYA CHAKRABARTI
San Jose State University

REFERENCES

- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. 1835.
"Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835."
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html, accessed 15 June 2021.
- Sathyamala, C. 2019.
"Meat-Eating in India: Whose Food, Whose Politics, and Whose Rights?" *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no. 7: 879.