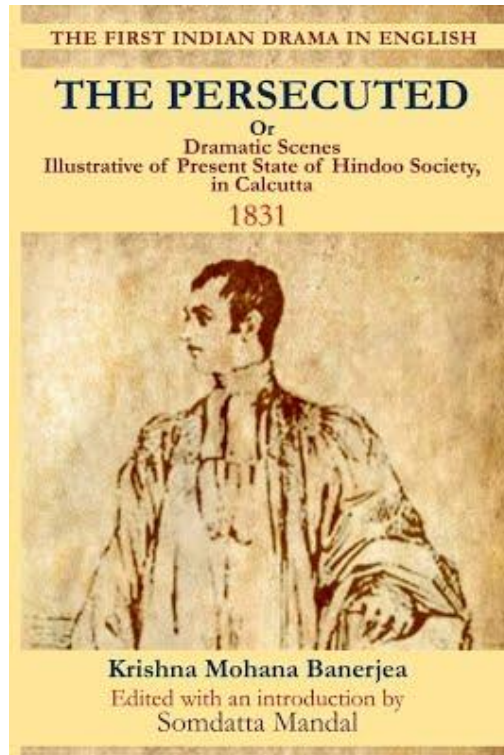


Somdatta Mandal, ed. *The Persecuted Or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of Present State of Hindoo Society, in Calcutta* [1831]. By Krishna Mohan Banerjea. Kolkata: Ebang Mushayera, 2018. 86 pp. ISBN 978-81-939770-1-9.



The difficulty of writing the early history of Indian English Literature lies partly in the fact that some of the early works remained either inaccessible for a long time or were difficult to procure even for a serious scholar. No copy of Kylas Chunder Dutt's *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* (1835), for example, was, available anywhere from the 1960s to 2005. Originally published in *Calcutta Literary Gazette, or Journal of Belles Lettres, Science, and the Arts* (Vol. III, New Series No. 75, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1835), it is the first fictional narrative in the history of Indian English Literature. His cousin Shoshee Chunder Dutt's *The Republic of Orissa: Annals from the Pages of Twentieth Century* (1845) is also not easily available even now. The same remained true for Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted Or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of Present State of Hindoo Society, in Calcutta* (1831), the book under review. It is the first Indian English drama. It precedes, as Somdatta Mandal maintains in her introduction to the book, the first Bengali dramas – *Bhadrarjun*

by Taracharan Sikdar (1852) and *Kirtibilas* (1852) by Jogendrachandra Gupta – by nineteen years (14 n1) – or should it be twenty-one? All these early writings, along with the first Indian English narrative – Dean Mohamet’s *Travels of Dean Mohamet* (1794) – are historically important texts. These need to be widely available to the historians and common readers alike. The late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century fictional and non-fictional works in Indian English should be widely read as historiographical materials. Mandal has now offered this scope to the readers by editing *The Persecuted* and providing a valuable introduction to it. Prior to this, she had also edited Kylas Chunder Dutt’s *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* in 2014.

The significance of *The Persecuted* edited by Mandal lies in the fact that it allows the common readers to form ideas about how the early nineteenth century Indian English creative writers viewed the political and social issues of the time. For literary historians too these are foundational texts for evaluating the historical significance of the early works in the context of the spread of English education and dissemination of colonial ideas both before and after the publication of Macaulay’s *Minute* (1835). These are invaluable materials for the formation of postcolonial historiographical imagination. Banerjea’s play focusses on the social and intellectual effects of English education on the young people, students and intellectuals, who now re-assess their religion, discover the unscientific nature of some socio-religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus, and participate in the reformatory activities which enrage the dogmatic and powerful sections of the Hindu society.

The play, as Mandal observes, is based on autobiographical elements. Banerjea himself was a member of the Young Bengal school, founded and patronised by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, and was excommunicated by his own family, under the pressure of the influential Hindu leaders, for violating socio-religious codes of the Hindu society. Bany Lal is the protagonist of *The Persecuted*, a five-act play. He is created in the image of the playwright himself. He and his friends ate forbidden meat (beef) and drank wine in his father Mohadeb’s house, thereby “polluting” the household. One of the servants – and servants play an important role in the play – spied on them through the keyhole of the closed door and informed Mohadeb, a person who observed religious rites and rituals regularly. Hearing the news, he was naturally shell-shocked. In the early nineteenth century social context it was an unpardonable offence. As the news spread like wildfire, religious and social leaders joined hands to denigrate Bany Lal and his friends. They put pressure on Mohadeb to excommunicate his son. Despite the father’s passionate requests, the son refused to deny the fact that they had consumed the forbidden food and drinks. Pushed to the wall, Bany Lal’s father bribed the two Brahmins who approached him (the bribe that he gave triggered a quarrel among them). As the pressure mounted, he had to excommunicate Bany Lal. Bany Lal now took shelter in a friend’s house and

began to organise a bigger movement for the reformation of the society. All like-minded young people joined hands and pledged their support. Bany Lal himself asserts his agenda: “When knowledge has begun its march, Hindooism must fall and must fall with noise” (35). This may be interpreted as a conflict between Western modernity that arrived with English education based on rational thinking and scientific temperament and the Indian “backwardness” represented by a society mired in caste hierarchy and religious superstitions. His friends did not lag behind. Bhyrub, for instance, wanted “Hindoos [to be] liberated from the shackles of prejudice” (75) and declared, “I will be a devoted servant to the cause of truth and Hindoo reformation” (76).

Banerjea dedicated his play to “Hindoo youths” and in the “Preface” he asserted that his purpose was to “produce” effects “upon the minds of the rising generation” (27). Obviously, the play was written with the express desire of influencing the new generation by sensitising them to the existing corruption in the society and to religious superstitions. Common people were vulnerable to “the wiles and the tricks of the Brahmins” (27) because they had blind faith in the latter for the interpretation of religion and were not ready to exercise their own critical faculty. In the play proper, Banerjea also unravels the hypocrisy of the Brahmins and how they carry out corrupt practices. Bydhabagis, for example, expresses his satisfaction at the privileges he enjoys as a Brahmin in a caste-ridden, prejudice-stricken society: “The Brahmin is a blessed man. He tramples upon the very persons whose bounty feeds him” (39). All the Brahmin characters in the play in fact relish the fact that through their wiles and guiles they exploit their unsuspecting disciples and maintain their sway over the society. The playwright reveals how the influential figures in the play, including the proprietor of a newspaper (Lall Chand), who claimed themselves to be guardians of the society, were in fact self-seekers. They came together only to preserve their power base to which the English educated young men, the “rising” generation, posed a threat. They were all hypocrites who themselves consumed beef and drank wine secretly but flaunted their “purity” in public. They made noises only because they felt threatened (or had personal grudge against individuals) and organised meetings to combat the forces of enlightenment. Banerjea shows that they were, in fact a riven lot, driven as they were by conflicting self-interests.

In the “Preface” Banerjea expresses his diffidence about the dramatic quality of the work and his possible linguistic incompetence in the language of the colonisers – he thus offers “apology for the imperfections in style and English composition” (27). He maintains that he is quite immature as he is yet to reach twenty, that he has not taken guidance from anybody for writing the play, and that as an Indian he does not have enough exposure to the foreigner’s language. As a play it indeed has several “imperfections.” And his anxiety to project the social message is so pronounced that it made him underplay the role of the dramatic techniques. Yet as the first Indian English play it certainly deserves

praise. When we look back, we recognise the fact that this five-act play provided a model of how to represent a theme that is Indian in a language that is foreign.

Somdatta Mandal's effort to present this play which is "more heard about than read" (18) is laudable for obvious reasons. Dipendu Chakrabarti rightly points out in his "Foreword" that Mandal has played the "role of a literary archaeologist and excavated sites buried inside our familiar literary map" (11). Besides, as we have pointed out earlier, she has provided a very useful introduction which will help the readers evaluate the text properly. The "Introduction" is divided into three sections: the first one offers a biographical profile of the playwright; the second one contextualises the text historically; and the third provides information about the text. Mandal has also appended two important documents at the end of the book: "The Rev. Dr. K.M. Banerjea: A Sketch of His Career (1813-1885)" written by Amal Home for the seventeenth anniversary number of *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette* which he edited, and "A Drama on Hindu Society in Calcutta" written by Brajendranath Banerjea, published in the same volume of *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. Although there are some typographical errors, this edited volume will be very much helpful both for students and serious scholars.

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