

**Kylus Chunder Dutt, *A Journal of Forty-eight Hours of the Year 1945*. Ed. Somdatta Mandal. Sodepur, Calcutta: Shambhabi, 2014. 85 pp. ISBN: 978-93-83888-15-3.**

The history of a book's journey ever since its publication is often as interesting as a detective story. Due to painstaking (re)search efforts by "scholar-detectives," sometimes spanning continents, a book perceived to be lost in history resurfaces miraculously. While reviewing the Penguin version of the English translation of a book of Urdu stories titled *Angaare* (2014) for an Indian national daily, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was retrieved from oblivion and restored to memory by the efforts of two scholars. It was originally written by a collective of Muslim progressive writers and published in 1932. Since the radical nature of the stories incited the anger of the conservative Muslim society, it was proscribed by the government of the United Provinces in 1933. Published copies of the book were destroyed by the police. Only five copies survived. Shabana Mahmud and Khalid Alavi, through a persevering search, discovered the copies and later republished them in 1988 and 1995 respectively. Perhaps more interesting is the case of Kylas Chunder Dutt's fictional work in English interestingly titled *A Journal of Forty-eight Hours of the Year 1945*. It is a futuristic narrative of a revolt by the natives of Calcutta under the leadership of a daring "nationalist" young man called Bhoobun Mohun who was educated at the Anglo-Indian College. It was originally published in 1835 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) edited by David Lester Richardson who was the Principal of the Hindoo College where Dutt himself was a student. Its content was considered to be "seditious" by the British colonial establishment. Since contemporary researchers surprisingly did not find it in important libraries or archives in India or abroad, scholars involved in the field widely surmise, as does Somdatta Mandal, the editor of the volume under review, that it must have been withdrawn, confiscated or destroyed by the colonial authorities. Pallab Sengupta during the course of his Ph.D. research in the 1960s came across a copy of the particular issue of the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* in the Uttarpara Public Library located in Uttarpara near Kolkata, copied the entire work from it, and later even published in a Bengali quarterly in 1965 an article in Bengali with a Bengali translation of the text and a commentary on it (*Chatuskone*, Aswin 1372 BS issue). But when he later returned to the library to consult the original again, he could not trace it. Later scholars like Subhendu Mund and Alex Tickell could not find it either in the National library in Calcutta or anywhere else in India or abroad. But the search, as Mandal observes in her "Foreword," continued throughout the twentieth century. Alex Tickell could not trace that particular copy in the British India Library in England. He even visited Calcutta in search

of the elusive issue of the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*. Then quite accidentally he stumbled upon the work in a second-hand bookshop in Leeds and published it in 2005. In a *Wasafiri* (Vol.21 No.3) article titled “Midnight’s Ancestors: Kylas Chunder Dutt and the Beginnings of Indian-English Fiction,” Tickell compares his own search for the lost “treasure” with the plot of a detective story and observes that “the hidden hinge of the plot is actually its more familiar component,” implying that the treasure had all along been lying invisible near the seeker of the object – in England itself:

The work of colonial acquisition had already been done for me by a Victorian missionary, E.J. Barton, who had survived the Indian climate in the mofussil or country town of Gaya long enough to bring his library home to a Northumbrian parish. Holding his copy of the Gazette, I remembered the words of a Bengali academic I’d spoken to about the find, who said acerbically: ‘You should have known it was in the UK, after all, aren’t all our treasures over there?’ (Qtd. in Mandal 28)

It was undoubtedly a worthy “find” for Alex Tickell as it is the first fictional work in English by an Indian English writer, although it is not the first Indian English narrative – the credit for the latter, as Subhendu Mund points out, goes to Dean Mohamet’s *Travels of Dean Mohamet* (1794), the text of which was reissued by Michael H. Fisher, a historian, in 1996 (13 n1). (In Mandal’s edition, however, the cover page mentions Dutt’s text as the “first published narrative” by an Indian English author although on the inside cover page it has been rightly mentioned as “the first Indian fictional narrative in English.” It seems to be a careless mistake on the part of the publisher who has not tallied the manuscript with the cover page he has prepared before going to the press). Moreover, the retrieval made the “seditious” content of the work accessible to the postcolonial readers who might have been ignorant of the explosive anti-colonial nature of early works like Kylas Chunder Dutt’s *A Journal of Forty-eight Hours of the Year 1945* or his cousin Shoshee Chunder Dutt’s *The Republic of Orissa: Annals from the Pages of Twentieth Century* which was published ten years later. The latter work is also futuristic and, like the former, speaks of a rebellion (this time a successful one by the tribals in Orissa) against the British. Considering the thematic similarity of the works, scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Alex Tickell, Subhendu Mund and now Somdatta Mandal discuss the two works together.

Mandal has rightly realised the importance of the text for postcolonial readers all over the world, particularly in India, because Kylas Chunder Dutt’s text, like his cousin’s, foregrounds the existence of the resistant literature very early in the history of Indian English literature. Earlier Tickell himself in the *Wasafiri* article mentioned that he was motivated by “[t]wo potent myths”:

The first... is the dream of finding the lost work. Because it echoes the normal process of critical investigation (with its trail of minor revelations), but also coincides so readily with literal treasure-seeking.... The second myth is one of origins, of finding a fixed essential starting point for a specific cultural phenomenon. (Qtd. in Mandal 27)

Tickell successfully re-establishes the genesis – “a fixed essential starting point” – of Indian English fictional writing. Mandal, in her carefully edited and low-cost edition, disseminates the newly gained knowledge and makes the text available to a wider readership. In this way she helps dispel what had been, historically speaking, an amnesia induced by the repressive colonial system and thus performs an act the like of which Ali Behdad in his memorable book *Belated Travelers* calls “anamnesic,” an act which is very much part of the postcolonial project.

Dutt’s seventeen-page text in Mandal’s edition (44-60) opens with a quotation from a speech by Junius Brutus which sets the tone of the story:

And shall we, shall men, after five and twenty years of ignominious servitude, shall we, through a fear of dying, defer one single instant to assert our liberty? No, Romans; now is the time; the favourable moment we have so long waited for is come. (44)

“[I]gnominious servitude” and the urgency to come out of it and assert liberty, even though through violent means, constitute the theme of the text. A group of young men launch a spirited armed movement against the British in the “metropolis” of Calcutta under the able leadership of a twenty-five-year old young man Bhoobun Mohun. He is “a protagonist who embodies all the revolutionary magnetism of the romantic rebel-hero” (Tickell 63). The time of the setting is 1945 (missing the actual Indian independence in 1947 by just two years) – one hundred and ten years into the future – and the author imagines a passionate but unsuccessful uprising against the better armed, better trained colonial force. Alex Tickell feels that the short fictional works of both the Dutts – Kylas and Shoshee – are “set in the future” presumably to “avoid official censure” (60). At the first gathering of the rebels Bhoobun Mohun draws the attention of the crowd to the fact that the people of “Indostan” have to suffer much humiliation because of their subjugation by the British. He addresses them as “My friends and countrymen” and calls for the emancipation of “the natives from the thralldom of oppression” (47). He also asks them to “unite in a body, and it shall be the most glorious scene that *India* has beheld, when we effect the overthrow by one powerful and deadly blow of this system of injustice and rapacity” (47-48; emphasis added). The same address is repeated in his last speech delivered after the rebels are effectively defeated and Bhoobun Mohun is captured. Immediately before he is put to death on a scaffold, he

addresses those in front of him in a similar fashion: “My friends and Countrymen! I have the consolation to die in my *native land* ... I have shed my last blood in defence of *my country* and ...I hope you continue to persevere in the course you have so gloriously commenced” (60, emphases added). There is clearly an unambiguous sense of nation and anti-colonial nationalism in the work – the first time it happens in an Indian English fictional work. Mandal in her “Foreword” mentions Saurabh Bhattacharyya as opining that the work offers ‘a rather fragmented imagination of the nation forming a kind of fictional idealistic backdrop of the uprising’ (29). Tickell too observes, “Considering the author’s youth and background we cannot expect Kylas’s short story to present a sophisticated account of proto-nationalist uprising against the British...” (63). To this reviewer, however, the “author’s youth and background” are not the only important factors, the time span and length of the story also matter. And both the short time span (forty-eight hours) and the length (seventeen pages) make it impossible for the author to make the nationalist vision comprehensive. The author works out a nationalist spirit that moves the characters and the thrust of the plot. The mention of the “national convention” as the forum for implementation of the idea of India/“Indostan” into a reality makes the presence of an active/activist (Young Bengal?) intelligentsia palpable. Nationalism in the modern sense of the term may not be present in all its ramifications but the representation offers a foundational moment on which the spirit of nationalism would be built up in future.

Bhoobun Mohun’s speeches immediately remind us of Mark Antony’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Indeed, as Tickell points out, there are echoes of canonical texts like those of William Shakespeare, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine and P.B. Shelley. The narrative is “a creative dialogue with the curricular texts of the Hindu College, and echoes canonical English literary works in its set piece soliloquies and gladiatorial scenes” (Tickell 63). I have already mentioned two of the “soliloquies” (addresses) earlier. As to the “gladiatorial scenes” the text gives detailed accounts of two – one that occurs in the midst of the first meeting referred to above and the other towards the end when Bhoobun Mohun, along with his comrades, marches towards the Fort (William) and fights the British. The first meeting is interrupted by the appearance of Red Coats and the “proclamation of dispersal” (as per the Riot Act) is read out aloud. But it produces resistance rather than compliance: “Go tell them that sent thee that we have resolved to hurl Fell Butcher [i.e. the present ruler Lord Fell Butcher] from his seat, we have renounced the allegiance of the feeble and false Harry of England, and that we mean to abide by our own laws and parliaments!” (49). A fierce battle ensues in which the protagonist plays a very important role. His valour is described in glowing terms – he is like a rebel-hero taken as if from the pages of a romantic work. In the last “gladiatorial” fight also he emerges as a hero. He fails to win the battle and is

put to death but he does certainly envisage the moment of his death as an inspirational and foundational one.

Kylas Chunder Dutt's fiction is a third person narrative in which the narrator describes the entire forty-eight-hour proceeding of events from some distance but whose sympathy seems to lie clearly with the rebellious group of men. The narrator seems to have left scope for ambiguities and irony to play on the minds of the readers. He, for instance, calls the rebels "patriots" (49) and "conspirators" (53) in the same breath; he also refers to the rulers with apparently eulogistic but inherently ironic and subversive terms like "humane viceroy" (59), "our noble lord" (59) or "most merciful ruler of India" (59). The authorial attitude is also evident in the naming of his British characters – Lord Fell Butcher and Col. John Blood-thirsty. This too conforms to the tradition of British satirical writings.

Somdatta Mandal as the editor of this historically important work provides a long thirty-five page "Foreword" (7-42) – the word "Introduction," I think, would have been more appropriate. In the first section she elaborately offers biographical details of not only Kylas Chunder Dutt but also the illustrious Dutt family to which he belonged. In the second section she contextualises the text by offering a picture of the contemporary educational, socio-cultural and political developments. The third section which is called "The Search for the Narrative and Locating the Text" provides a minute description of the search that led to the "discovery" of the text and details how scholars have responded to it. The fourth section analyses the text comprehensively. What I appreciate most is the Appendix where she includes Dutt's articles "India under Foreigners" and "Adieu," and a third one on Kylas Chunder Dutt ("Notes on Kylas Chunder Dutt, First Editor, the *Hindu Pioneer*") by Kalyan Dutt whose great-great grandfather was Kylas Chunder Dutt. The book, I am sure, will be very useful not only for the students of colleges and universities but also for serious scholars in the field.

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