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**Mirroring the *Blues of the Imperial Society*:  
A Short Study of a Translation of Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Neel Darpan*  
(The Blue Mirror)  
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The foundation of the Calcutta University in January 24, 1857 and the opening of the Sepoy Mutiny under the leadership of Mangal Pandey had exercised far-flung effects on the growth of the Indian nationalism and literature. The Indigo agitation, which augmented the growth of the nationalist literature in Bengal, took place almost in the wake of the Insurrection on 1857. According to Nemai Sadhan Bose,

The politically conscious Bengali intelligentsia which showed little sympathy for the Mutiny stood by the side of the poor Indigo cultivators in their heroic struggle against the unbearable tyranny and the exploitation of the Indigo planters. It provided an inspiring example of co-operation between the poor peasants and the educated class. (Bose 19)

The literature of Bengal especially the works of the celebrated writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873) Rangalal Bandhopadhyay (1826-1887) and Dinabandhu Mitra (1829-1973) captured and reflected the spirit of the age. Around this time the Bengali play *Neel Darpan* (1860) by Dinabandhu Mitra about life on an indigo plantation was translated into English by Michael Madhusudan Dutta and was published and distributed by Reverend James Long. Its stark down-to-earth realism shook the government off its complacent malpractices. The play seized every opportunity to knock out popular assumptions with startling revelations about the atrocities that were committed by the planters.

The European Indigo planters inflicted upon the peasants every form of oppression that, in the words of Haran Chandra Chaklodar, “unrestrained tyranny could devise” or “rapacious imagination could contrive.” (22) Murder, homicide, riot, arson, loot, plunder and kidnapping were some of the oppressive actions of these Indigo planters. This and the rise in the prices of all agricultural produce culminated in the mass movement against its cultivation in 1860. Being brought up in one such indigo district called Nadia afforded Dinabandhu Mitra with first hand observation and knowledge about the dismal plight of the poor farmers. He witnessed the atrocities committed by the planters who exploited and compelled the defenceless farmers to

enter into transactions which caused them to incur heavy losses and debts. He incorporated these authentic facts with consummate skill in *Neel Darpan*. The play has acquired a considerable reputation both for its revolutionary content and the kind of reaction it evoked from the Colonial British government and its then colonized people. This paper aims to analyse the play historically, politically as well as in the literary traditions of Bengal. It also attempts to explore the areas through which the play sensitively anticipates the reactions and resistance of the peasants and indigenous landlords; the response of an educated middle class; and the courage the rebellious role of the foreign missionaries in exposing racist exploitation. The play also provides an account of the Indigo plantation system as a capitalistic enterprise functioning within the colonial state, and the land tenure system of Bengal at the time. While the people responded to the play with unprecedented enthusiasm, the colonial government reacted by banning it from being staged. It raised a furore in the literature and the political field of Bengal. It did immense service with its unobtrusive call awakening the minds of the people of all classes to the injustice, miseries and sufferings of the people of the Indigo district. The preface to the play is a strongly worded piece criticising the planters, but expressing the hope that they "...would take a look at their own faces as reflected ..." in the play (Rao, Rao iv).

The play is set in the mid nineteenth century Bengal, in Swarnpur in the district of Nadia. The story relates the oppression which the planters inflict on an old landowner called Golok Chandra Basu, his family and the peasants. Golok Chandra generously aided all those who were in need and looked upon every village as a member of his family. But once the planters take lease of the village he yields to all their demands with the intention to barter any amount of wealth with them for the security of his farmers and the villagers. Yet, they ruthlessly usurped his free-hold on his own land and his ancestral property. Without being paid for the Indigo already delivered to the planters, he has to face a fresh demand to cultivate indigo even on the remaining areas of his rice field. His son Nabinmadhav, a man of modern education, pleads his plight in the court of law hoping to be treated with impartial justice. But the European magistrate is a friend of the planters and faithfully preserves his evil alliances with them. He sends Golok Chandra to prison on the planters' false charges that he had been inciting the peasants against cultivating indigo. Unable in his old age to endure this humiliation he stubbornly succumbs to a fast and then commits suicide by hanging himself in prison. The shock of his death unleashes the complete ruin of the village which in turn is followed by a

series of deaths in his family. Destruction of a whole way of life follows the tragic death of Kshetramani, a young pregnant village woman and the only child of her parents, after she is seduced by one of the unscrupulous planters called Rogue. Thus the boon of their blissful land is turned by the planters into a bane on the lives of the peasants who cultivate it. Its beautiful hue is enshrouded with so much violence that both the indigo and everything associated with it become symbol of '*a venomous snake*' on one hand and the '*Kirtinasha*'<sup>1</sup> on the other. This prompts Golok Chandra's son, Bindumadhav to lament in despair: "Oh Indigo! What a killer you are!" (Rao, Rao 84)

The play is pervaded with the scenes of cruelty, arrogance of the colonizers, the agony and the fury of the colonized, the poverty of the illiterate but also their capacity for laughter, and their perception of the reality. Swarpur is a replica of the larger society to which it belongs, sharing its complexities of status, castes religion, profession and economic power. The play is crowded with realistic people from all professions namely village doctors, traders, cultivators, milkmen, fishermen, teachers, lawyers, court officers and the numerous employees of the planters. The characters and situations are unique and life-like in every respect as also their dialogues, behaviour and mannerisms. The scenes are audacious, precise and complete. But the characters like Golok Chandra and Nabinmadhav, who represented the high-caste society oppressed by the Indigo planters, were stereotypical, especially in their dialogue of high-flung literary style in which they spoke. However the play bears a genuine testimony to the realm of havoc that reigned supreme in the hands of the Indigo planters over the farmers of Bengal. It also depicts the liberal intermingling among the people of different classes of people along with its ironical contrasts. A critic rightly points instances how the arrogant white planter spoke a kind of pidgin Bengali generously strewn with obscenities daily offending the sensibilities of the people among whom they live. Their dialogues while speaking to and about the Indians are so replete with swear- words that they are rendered unpalatable and unquotable. On realizing this, those Indians who resisted these uncouth tormenters, mingled their high-flung language with equally abusive words. As a contrast to them the missionaries befriended the oppressed. The rustic simplicity of the villagers is dappled with dark patches of hypocrisy and double standards; and this is found in all the castes. Even among the Brahmins, the highest caste, some are priests, some teach in colleges, and some in the village school, where only Sanskrit is taught, but all are aware of their superior status. When offered hospitality, for example, by the Basu family—

who belonged to a higher caste but *Kayastha* – the Brahmins accept it with condescension as a mark of favour towards their hosts. Sabitri, the *Kayastha* widow is contented to break her ritual fast by eating the leavings of the food of a Brahmin priest. Yet, due to her relatively higher caste, it does not even occur to her to allow Rebati and his daughter of the caste of the cultivators to fetch their drinking water from their pond.

Relations between men and women within the family in Swaripur also conform in every detail to the norms of that contemporary society. Women confine themselves to the chores and concerns of their houses, catering to needs of the members in the family. In the play, Saralata's mother-in-law, Sabitri dictates terms and her decisions command obedience and are regarded as indisputable. As a result, under her directions the young wife Saralata does not to reply to her husband's letters, in spite of being literate, since his mother has forbidden her to do so. Thus the spectrum of the status of women in such a society is large: it spans from the unchallenged authority that Sabitri enjoys in her household to the pitiable condition of Kshetramani after she had been ravished by a planter, from Saralata's unalloyed virtues to Padi's guilty conscience for working as a pimp. Yet it can be agreed that younger, educated men in the village are beginning to harbour respect for a woman and realize her worth, but there is a long way to progress before a woman values herself as an individual, instead of voluntarily and blindly losing her own identity into that of her husband, even up to the point of wanting to be a *sati*.

According to some critics the play also pictures a demoralized and hypocritical society which silently and passively watches a brother (Gopinath) pushing his sister into the planter's bed, under duress, hoping to be promoted to a higher position in his work. The prostitute and candy-seller Padi was compelled to procure young women as prostitutes; it was the need for sheer survival which overcomes her genuine distaste for the job. Servile employees, even after been kicked and humiliated, never cease to flatter the planters aspiring to ameliorate their economic condition. They assist the planters in all their illegal and ruthless activities from collecting false evidence against honest men, to charging false law-suits against them which sent them to prison. Thus they were also responsible for unfairly victimizing innocent people like Golok Chandra. They suffer from no misgivings in creating the false accounts and the forged legal documents, which show the peasants in perpetual debt, their liabilities passing on to their sons

and grandsons. As planters' agents, they take forcible possession of the peasants' lands, drag them to the planters' office, compel them to take advances and, if they refuse, beat them and lock them up, sometimes leaving abandoning them there to die. They accompany the planters to plunder villages, burn down huts and destroy ripening crops. The evidence of these malpractices can be found in the scene of Golok Chandra's trial when the defence lawyer strips bare before magistrate facts regarding the heinous crimes of the planters and the farmers' pitiable predicament:

Defence lawyer: Your Honour, in no village, does a peasant voluntarily accept an indigo planter's advice. Accompanied by his overseer and employees, the planter or his manager, rides to the peasants' fields, marks out their best lands and orders them to sow indigo there. These peasants are then dragged by his men to the factory, and compelled to take advance. When they go home grieving, there is such lamentation that one might think that someone in the family has died. Even after the peasant has supplied indigo over and above what he owed the planter, the register continues to show him in debt. Once they take advance, they suffer at least for seven generations. (Rao, Rao 29)

The tragic sense of the play looms large when this realization makes Bindumadhab to mourn in the epilogue of the play:

The Indigo Planter is a venomous snake,  
My happiness he has reduced to ashes.  
Injustice killed father in prison,  
Brother was felled in the indigo field,  
Grievous loss made mother mad, and  
In a fit of madness lovely Saralata she killed. (34)

Revealing his sympathy for the victims in "the mighty ocean of sorrow", Rev. James Long has rightly pointed out in the preface to the translation to the play,-

If the Bengal *ryot* is to be treated as a serf or a mere squatter, a day labourer, the missionary, the schoolmaster, even the developer of the resources of India, will find their work like that of Sisyphus—vain and useless. (As quoted in Rao and Rao xiii)

Indigo is now a forgotten plant, no cultivator in Bengal grows it today and no dyer experiences the need for its extraction anymore. The agitation was successful in mitigation the worst evils of the indigo cultivation. It first taught the people of Bengal the value of a unified political agitation. Indian nationalism gained fresh grounds with it and literature, in its turn, played a vital role. Critics like Amiya Rao and B.G. Rao believe that the play did not solely intend a mere narration of “tyranny and misery” but it

sought explicitly to awaken the public, through the symbol of a colonized village, to the painful reality that the entire country belonged to a small but dominant group of foreigners, claiming the right to exclusive possession of power--....(Rao, Rao 15)

The history of Indigo plantation in colonial Bengal is thus an example of a how forces apart from the British control affected the lives and fortunes of hundreds of British and Indians.

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