

Dynamics of Emancipatory Politics and The Inchoation of Indian English Literature

Jyothi Lekshmi G¹, Research Scholar (Full time) Reg.No. 19214014012045,
Department of English, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti,
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu- 627012, Email- jyothiremadevi@gmail.com

Prof. S. Prabahar², Professor of English & Dean, Faculty of Indian and Other
Languages, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil
Nadu- 627012. Email- prabahar@msuniv.ac.in

Abstract

The term “resistance” has always been in vogue in the socio-political context of India. With the advent of Europeans, the term gained more ground, deeply founding itself on the ideologies of nationhood and sovereignty. The politics of resistance cohabits with identity politics, the dynamics of nationalism and the enrooted demand for freedom. In this paper, the historical inchoation of Indian English literature as a dimension of resistance politics in India is discussed. A space for concrete dialectic carved out by Indian English literature forms an explanatory foundation for emancipatory politics in literature which is more politically subjective, unlike the predecessors. The paper looks upon how the historical advent of colonialism and thereby colonial modernity heralded the dawn of Indian English literature and the evolutionary process, the very terminology had to undergo. Moreover, this examines the various dispositions which enable Indian English literature, in the words of Michael Necosmos, “to act as a representation of social space”.

Keywords: Indian English literature, colonial modernity, resistance, emancipatory politics

Thomas Macaulay, the pioneer of English education in India once remarked, “The history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral and intellectual improvement” (qtd. in Deshpande 1311). Though aimed only at the colonial supreme, the historical evolution this improvement brought in the colonies cannot be enervated. Superficial changes in the social mentality were supplemented with intellectual continuities earmarked for an era of resistance and revolutions in India, a concept apparently inexistent at the time. The lack of premodern historicity in India is disparaged by writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He comments, “Bengal has no history. Proud nations have an abundance of historical writings; we have none” (qtd. in *Nationalist Thought* 82). Indeed, it is with the emergence of Indian English literature, an intellectual, as well as historical homogeneity, could be established.

On December 31, 1600, Queen Elizabeth I of Britain issued a charter that bestowed exclusive trading privileges upon a company known as the "Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into East Indies." The company was presented with extensive market opportunities in distant regions, particularly uncharted territories such as India, which had not yet been explored by the English. The company has the potential to procure raw materials at a more affordable cost from these territories and subsequently market them in Europe at elevated prices.

However, the commercial activities of the English company did not unfold as seamlessly as initially anticipated. The main obstacle encountered by the endeavour originated from other European counterparts, specifically the Portuguese and the Dutch. These companies were all focused on acquiring similar assets, resulting in intense competition. The competitive dynamics among multiple European companies resulted in a significant increase in the prices at which goods were obtainable, thereby diminishing the overall profitability. The desire to establish dominance in the market prompted intense conflicts among different European powers in the Indian Ocean.

In 1609, Captain Hawkins, representing the English East India Company, undertook a visit to the court of Jehangir with the objective of establishing a trading outpost in Surat. However, the Emperor faced obstacles in granting permission for this venture due to the objections raised by the Portuguese, who were the initial European traders in India. However, the Portuguese influence waned following the defeat of the Portuguese by Captain Best of the East India Company in 1612. The Mughal ruler, having been impressed by the English influence, granted formal authorization for the establishment of a factory in Surat, which was entrusted to Thomas Aldworth in the year 1613. Following this, Thomas Roe, who was appointed as an ambassador to the court of Jehangir, successfully obtained authorization to establish additional factories in Agra, Ahmedabad, and Broach.

Until 1687, Surat served as a prominent hub for commercial activities, but subsequently, the Western presidency was relocated to Bombay. Bombay, previously under Portuguese ownership, was bestowed as part of a dowry to King Charles upon his marriage to Princess Catherine of Portugal in 1662. Subsequently, the English East India Company assumed control of the territory, thereby establishing it as the administrative centre of the Western presidency. However, it was in 1623 that the English East India Company achieved success in the establishment of factories in various locations, including Broach, Ahmedabad, Agra, and Masulipatnam (which had been established in 1611). Following the transfer of Bombay, a state of tacit peace emerged between the Portuguese and English. Additionally, the rivalry between the British and the Dutch was also influenced by the Anglo-Dutch compromise. This agreement entailed the British agreeing to cease their trade activities in Indonesia, a market that was more lucrative for the Dutch, in exchange for the Dutch withdrawing from the Indian market. Therefore, the English East India Company successfully established its dominant position as the exclusive European trading entity, effectively eliminating its two primary competitors, namely the Portuguese and the Dutch.

Despite the absence of competing forces in the market, the company's operations were not operating smoothly. The uninterrupted interference by regional authorities impeded the unrestricted flow of trade. However, the company's activities exhibited a consistent pattern of growth and progress. The company experienced an enhancement in its status when the Sulthan of Golconda issued a decree known as the "Golden Farman" in 1632. Additionally, in 1639, the British merchant Francis Day obtained authorization from the ruler of Chandragiri to construct a fortified factory in Madras. This establishment, named Fort St. George, subsequently supplanted Masulipatnam as the primary hub of English settlement in South India. Subsequently,

the English expanded their trading endeavours towards the eastern regions, establishing factories at the Mahanadi delta and Balasore in the year 1633.

The establishment of the initial English factory in Bengal occurred in 1651, specifically situated along the banks of the Hugli River. The Hugli basin can be considered one of the most prosperous regions within the expansive Mughal empire, owing to its abundant resources, well-developed transportation infrastructure, and favourable geographical characteristics. The establishment of this factory served as the foundation for the company's commercial operations throughout the subcontinent. The merchants and traders associated with the company arrived and established their presence in the vicinity of the factory located in Bengal. Nevertheless, the organisation occasionally encountered disruptions from customs officials who demanded payment of tolls. Due to the increasing scope of trade and alterations in policy, the company advocated for the establishment of a fortified settlement at Hoogly, thereby facilitating a strategic base for their military forces. However, the entreaty presented by William Hedges, the inaugural agent and governor of the East India Company in Bengal, to Shayista Khan, the Mughal Governor of Bengal, was met with indifference. Consequently, a state of conflict emerged between the British and the Mughal Empire, resulting in the British assuming a subordinate position as petitioners, obligated to engage in trade in Bengal while making an annual payment of Rs. 3000 in exchange for exemption from all financial obligations.

However, a Zamindar in Bengal initiated a rebellion against the Mughal authority, thereby providing the English with the rationale to strengthen their settlement. Consequently, the individuals initiated the construction of fortifications surrounding the factory premises, while simultaneously engaging in the practise of offering illicit incentives to the Mughal authorities in order to obtain the rights of zamindari over three specific villages: Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata (later known as Calcutta). Subsequently, the fortified settlement was officially designated as Fort William in the year 1700. The Company experienced advantageous outcomes with the presence of Sir William Norris, who served as the ambassador to the court of Aurangzeb. His diplomatic efforts resulted in the acquisition of additional trading privileges directly from the Mughal emperor. Despite Sir William Norris serving as a representative of a competing entity to the East India Company, which was established by the Whigs, the amalgamation of these two organisations under the name "United Company of Merchants to England Trading to the East Indies" resulted in the consolidation of all privileges within the unified East India Company.

The company was granted the privilege of engaging in trade without the imposition of duties and was also bestowed with dastaks, which granted them the authority to issue passes facilitating the unrestricted movement of goods. However, the company officials engaged in the improper utilisation of privileges and engaged in tax evasion, even in relation to their personal business activities. As a result, this misconduct led to a substantial deficit in revenue for the Bengal Government. Farman consistently served as a source of contention between the Nawab and the Company due to its significant financial implications. Furthermore, the company also

implemented the imposition of substantial duties on commodities entering the port of Calcutta. This exacerbated the dissatisfaction among the Nawabs of Bengal.

Subsequently, the demise of Aurangzeb precipitated the waning of the Mughal empire and the ascent of regional powers. The significant Zamindars and regional rulers, such as the Marathas and Nawabs, experienced a notable increase in their authority and autonomy. The Nawabs of Bengal consistently opposed all attempts made by the Company to expand their trading territory. The company faced denial of all trading concessions and was prohibited from engaging in coin minting activities. Furthermore, in anticipation of a potential conflict with the French, who had established a trading station near Calcutta, the British initiated efforts to expand their fortifications in the region. The act of fortification, which involved disregarding the Nawab's assertion, was perceived as a direct challenge and an affront to the Nawab's authority. When the French acquiesced to the Nawab's ruling, the English harboured resentment, thereby provoking the Nawab, Siraj-ud-Daula. The Nawab launched an assault on the English fort located in Calcutta, resulting in the capture of 146 English individuals who were subsequently confined within a warehouse. Most men, except for 20 individuals, perished due to suffocation, resulting in the event being famously referred to as the "Black Hole tragedy". The British, led by Robert Clive, responded to this violent incident by undertaking a military campaign towards Calcutta. They successfully captured Chandernagar and subsequently regained control of the Calcutta fort. In 1757, the British established a covert alliance with the bankers of Bengal, a development that ultimately led to the Battle of Plassey. This triumph has been recorded in historical accounts as the seminal event that established British dominion in India.

English in India

Warren Hastings, the inaugural governor-general of the East India Company, advocated for the establishment of educational institutions, specifically English schools and colleges, to address the dearth of individuals proficient in the English language. However, a significant shift in perspective regarding education became evident with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal by Sir William Jones in 1784. Charles Grant further strengthened this position and held that "the social abuses and the moral degradation of the people were the result of dense and widespread ignorance, could be removed only by education, first of all by education in English" (qtd. in Ramamurthi 27). Thus in 1793, William Wilberforce proposed to add two clauses in Company's Charter Act.

- To spread Christianity.
- To send school masters from England to India.

This Charter Act of 1793 was revised in 1813, which asserted the supremacy of British Crown over India. It had three propositions mainly.:

1. The Act expressly asserted the Crown's sovereignty over British India.
2. It allotted Rs 1,00,000 to promote education in Indian masses.
3. This act permitted Christian missionaries to propagate English and preach their religion.

In the interim, India experienced widespread internal conflicts in opposition to British policies. The Mysore rulers and Maratha rulers exhibited resistance towards acknowledging British sovereignty and actively participated in a conflict against the British forces. Dean Mohammad, an eminent figure, holds the distinction of being the first Indian to contribute to the English literary canon. Notably, he served as a surgeon within the esteemed British Army during their engagements with the Marathas. The travel narrative authored by Dean Mahomet, titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* and published in 1794, is widely regarded as the earliest extant literary work in English by an Indian individual.

This assertion clearly illustrates that prior to the implementation of colonial English education in 1813, Indians had formed strong alliances with Europeans through diverse methods, including employment, marriage, religious conversion, and friendship. During the period spanning from 1660 to 1760, a specific group of privileged individuals from India participated in exchanges with the English, leading to their assimilation of Anglicised customs and practises. The process of cultural assimilation and linguistic adaptation ultimately played a significant role in the emergence of Indian-English writers approximately one century later. The bilingual Indian intermediaries, referred to as *dwibashis*, were instrumental in facilitating English business endeavours in India through their ability to bridge the communication divide between English traders and the Persian-speaking Mughal bureaucracy. The utilisation of the English language began approximately 175 years ago, preceding its official introduction into Indian schools by the colonial government. Fort William College was founded in the year 1800 in response to the enactment of the Charter Act of 1793. Undoubtedly, this development laid the groundwork for an educational transformation in Bengal. The institution was initially established as a centre for oriental education under the patronage of Lord Wellesley. A division became evident among the English individuals, resulting in their classification into two distinct groups: orientalists and Anglicists. Prominent figures such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy expressed their endorsement for the incorporation of Western education facilitated by the English language, while simultaneously opposing the Orientalist perspective that advocated for the implementation of traditional Indian education conducted in Indian languages.

T.B. Macaulay was designated as the president with the purpose of resolving the impasse within the Committee, and was bestowed with the authority to cast the deciding vote in matters pertaining to the Committee. The inclusion of T.B. Macaulay and Alexander Duff into the Anglicist faction resulted in an increased division, ultimately leading to the triumph of the Anglicists. Consequently, the allocated public funds were directed towards English education with the objective of providing the indigenous population with an understanding of English literature and science through the utilisation of the English language.

The initiation of social reform movements in Bengal was spearheaded by a group of Indians led by Raja Rammohan Roy, coinciding with the establishment of an increased number of schools and colleges. In his work titled *Gift to Monotheists* published in 1809, Ram Mohan Roy articulates his adherence to the principles of

monotheism while simultaneously condemning the prevalent polytheistic customs observed within Indian society. In the year 1814, the individual in question established the Athmiya Sabha in Calcutta with the purpose of advocating against practises of idol worship, inflexible caste systems, and various other societal shortcomings. The individual in question exhibited unwavering commitment in his opposition to the practise of Sati, and his strong ethical endorsement played a pivotal role in the enactment of Regulation XVII of 1829. This regulation stands as a significant historical milestone, as it officially declares the abolition of Sati.

The Indian Society underwent a comprehensive cultural and educational revitalization, characterised by the infusion of Western ideals of rationalism and individualism. In the interim, a cohort of youthful Indian students hailing from Hindu College in Calcutta, guided by their esteemed professor Henry Vivian Derozio, initiated the “Young Bengal Movement”. The embers of this movement served as the catalyst for the rebellious, or more accurately, reactionary literary works of Kylas Chunder Dutta and Shoshee Chunder Dutt.

The charter act was again renewed in 1833, but this time ended the commercial monopoly of the Company over education and assumed the missions of educating as well as civilizing the population. It put forth:

1. The assumption of a new responsibility toward native education
2. A relaxation of controls over missionary activity in India

Furthermore, as a result of this action, the designated language of communication was transitioned from Persian to English. The English Education Act, enacted by Governor-General William Bentinck in 1835, resulted in the removal of English instruction from colleges that primarily focused on teaching Sanskrit and Arabic. Instead, English education was limited to institutions that exclusively offered instruction in the English language. The allegation was that individuals enrolled in said educational institutions failed to acquire any knowledge and were unable to communicate proficiently in the English language.

The Charter Act of 1833 facilitated the inclusion of Indians in civil service positions, although the number of English-educated Indians remained limited. This led to the formulation of a novel Education Policy for India, which subsequently gained prominence under the name of Macaulay's Minutes of 1835. His Minutes, delivered to the Council on February 2nd, 1835, offers a rationale for their endorsement of English Education. The individual holds the belief that the language and knowledge originating from the East are inherently inferior in comparison. Macaulay asserts the primacy of the English language in comparison to what he categorises as “dialects” or Indian languages, specifically Sanskrit and Arabic. He posits, “dialects ... contain neither literary nor scientific information ... until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them”. Moreover, in India, English is already spoken by the “ruling class”, heralding the future of English as the commercial language of the east. He claims, “[A] single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”. He denounces Indian literature for the dearth of the kind of works

in which “facts are recorded” – history, physical and moral philosophy etc. He claims the superiority of Western knowledge systems over Eastern ones. He asserts, “We are to teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine ... in company with a false religion”. Finally, he concludes, “of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects.” Since it is difficult to educate the entire Indian population, Macaulay argues for educating a minority, selected from the Indian Society,

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.

Moreover, he ascertains that even if traditional education is to be promoted, it is the duty of the English Educated Indian Elite and not of the colonial state. This Filtration Theory of Macaulay and Mill, promoting a small elite group through education in English, contributed to the linguistic stratification of Indian society (Viswanathan 116). Minutes secularized English education in India, thereby pursuing “an educational policy that actually confirmed, not altered, the patterns of stratification already indigenous to Indian society” (Viswanathan 145).

Shortly following the release of Macaulay's Minutes, Kylas Chunder Dutt, a budding author, promptly published “A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of The Year 1945”. This narrative chronicles a militant uprising aimed at challenging British rule. However, it should be noted that the publication containing the story, as found in The Calcutta Literary Gazette, was subject to confiscation by the Government. Interestingly, this text was composed subsequent to the repeal of Press regulations through the enactment of Charles Metcalf's Act XI of 1835. The story anticipated the Revolt of 1857, it began:

The people of India and particularly those of the metropolis had been subject for the last 50 years to every species of subaltern oppression. The dagger and the bowl were dealt out with a merciless hand, and neither age, sex, nor condition could repress the rage of the British barbarians. These events, together with the recollection of the grievances suffered by their ancestors, roused the dormant spirit of the generally considered timid Indian. (qtd. In Mund)

The publication was viewed as an act of sedition since it glorified an armed rebellion for the freedom of the country. A sense of fear and insecurity sprouted in the mind of the British rulers and they observed, “When the British parliament ordered a sum to be set apart out of the revenues of India, for instructing a native population- it could never have been intended to teach them sedition.” (qtd in Sarma 140). The action undertaken by K.C. Dutt can be characterised as a daring endeavour during a specific historical period. At the tender age of 18, Dutt chose to eschew the composition of romantic literature and instead embarked upon a literary revolution by envisioning an armed uprising aimed at toppling the ruling authority. The narrative takes place in the year 1945, a period preceding India's attainment of independence, wherein a young individual named Bhoobun Mohun emerges as the leader of an armed rebellion

against the ruling authorities. Driven by a profound dissatisfaction with the various forms of subaltern oppression perpetrated by the British colonisers upon the Indian population, the individual in question ultimately turns to armed insurrection as a means of resistance against the British authorities. He says, “We are determined to assert our liberties, when every other resource has failed, by the strength of our arms and that we mean to abide by our own laws and parliaments” (16). K. C. Dutt, in conjunction with his associate Bhuban Mohan Mittre, undertook the editorial responsibilities for a fortnightly publication known as *The Hindu Pioneer*. The publication of K.C. Dutt’s story introduced a novel dimension to the realm of resistance literature.

K.C. Dutt was succeeded by his cousin Shoshee Chunder Dutt, who authored the publication titled “The Republic of Orissa: Pages from the Annals of the 20th Century”. “The Republic of Orissa” is presented as a historical account within the context of an alternative 20th-century narrative, wherein it is depicted as a factual representation. The publication of the article occurred in the *Saturday Evening Hurkaru* on October 25, 1845. These writings exhibited a notable inclination towards opposing the dominant influence of colonial powers. The author portrays Orissa as an autonomous entity, advocating for its independence and territorial expansion into British India, which is governed by indigenous tribes characterized by their formidable physical prowess and fearless bravery. In the account provided by Shoshee Chunder Dutt, it is depicted that the British forces, led by General Sir G. Proudfoot, conducted a military campaign in Orissa (now Odisha) in 1919, effectively suppressing an insurrection through the utilization of severe measures. However, a significant shift in the balance of power occurs during the Battle of Jumna in 1921, resulting in the decisive defeat of the British army. This event ultimately paves the way for the establishment of the independent republic of Orissa and marks a turning point in the decline of British colonial rule in India: “We regret for its fallen grandeur; —we regret to see an imperial bird, shorn of its wings and plumage of pride, coming down precipitately from its aery height”.

Indians writing in English started to carve out their own niche in the country’s burgeoning literary scene. While it is true that there were pre-existing English literary works by Indian authors prior to Macaulay’s Minutes, there has not been a designated term to categorize this domain of writing. The nomenclature and construction of Indian writing in English have undergone significant transformations throughout the course of several decades. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

While many good Indo-Anglian novels and many more short stories have already demonstrated the feasibility of Indian writing, English fiction. it is nevertheless true that the unique intricacies of social life and the untranslatable nuances of conversational speech are better rendered through the medium of one's own mother tongue. It is therefore certain that much of the creative work in fiction in the India of the future will be only done in the vernaculars; but good English novels and short stories too will continue to appear, either as translations or as original works. (29)

The term “Indo-Anglian” was introduced by Dr. Iyengar in 1883 to categorise a collection of essays authored by indigenous students. According to Professor A. Karkala, the body of literature produced by English-educated individuals from India is commonly referred to as “Indo-Anglian”. The author differentiates between oriental literature, Indian Literature in English, and Anglo-Indian literature. The first category of texts is authored by Orientalists, the second category is composed by writers such as Tagore, and the third category is produced by native English speakers. However, the term “Anglo Indian” carried various racial connotations, implicitly symbolising the English “sahib culture” of indulgent rulers or the “Brown sahib” culture of maharajahs and nawabs. The connotation of the term Indo-Anglian was also questionable due to its potential association with “Anglican”, which carries religious implications. The term Anglo Indian gained more currency during the British reign and was used to refer to English writers writing on India.

V.K.Gokak puts forth another five categories of Indian Writing in English. He catalogues:

1. works by English on Indian Themes
2. Translation of Indian Books by English men
3. books by English men who lived in India and written on India
4. Indo- Anglian literature made of works by Indians
5. Indo- English as the translations of Indian Works made by Indians itself.

But according to P. Lal, the editor of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1969),

The distinction between Indo-Anglian writing and Indian writing in English (or Indo-English Writing) is an important one. Indo-Anglian writing suggests writing by Englishmen on Indian subjects or by heavily-Anglicized Indians who look at Indian life with alienated eyes. Indian writing in English means for expressing their indigenously-rooted experiences and responses, or unselfconscious, meaningful writing by foreigners, who are either married to Indians or are naturalized Indian citizens. (qtd. in Ahlawat 203)

In 1943, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar published his inaugural book on the topic, which he titled *Indo-Anglian Literature*. Subsequently, he identifies a deficiency with the term, “Indo-Anglian literature”. In his inaugural and scholarly research, which was published in 1962, the author employed the term 'Indian writing in English'. The Sahitya Akademi has recently adopted the term “Indian English Literature” as the most appropriate designation for this corpus of literary works. This highlights the notion that this body of literature represents a distinct component within the broader domain of Indian literature, characterised by its diverse linguistic origins yet possessing a discernible sense of cohesion. Therefore, Indian English literature is inherently the outcome of the process of nativizing the English language in order to articulate the unique Indian sensibility. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar writes

It is legitimate to view Indo Anglian literature as a curious native eruption, an expression of a practical no less than creative genius of the Indian people. Indians have written-and are writing –in English for

communicating with one another and with the outside world, for achieving self-expression too artistically, using English. (4)

In its entirety, Indian English literature necessitates the assimilation of historical elements, the dismantling of colonial modernity, and a transformative departure from previous norms, resonating with the notion of dialectical transcendence proposed by Hegel, wherein the past is “cancelled yet preserved”(Bhargava 30).

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