

## Translating Resistance: The Sociopolitical Impact of the English Translation of *Nil Darpan*

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### Abstract

When Reverend James Long published the English translation of Dinabandhu Mitra's Bengali play *Nil Darpan* in 1861, he was prosecuted for seditious libel, fined, and imprisoned for a month. The colonial administration's decision to prosecute a translator — rather than address the conditions he had exposed — reveals something essential about the nature of imperial power: it is always, at some level, a contest over who gets to be heard, and in what language. This article argues that the English translation of *Nil Darpan* was not merely a literary act but a strategic political intervention that transformed a vernacular theatrical text into a document of global humanitarian significance. Drawing on Tejaswini Niranjana's theorization of colonial translation, Lawrence Venuti's foreignization/domestication paradigm, Christiane Nord's Skopos theory, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between what he calls "History 1" (the universal-humanist narrative of rights and progress) and "History 2" (the heterogeneous, culturally specific lifeworlds that resist subsumption into that narrative), this article examines how the translation bridged the gap between the experienced violence of Bengal's indigo plantations and the English-speaking conscience of a liberal British public. Through close comparative reading of the Bengali original and Long's 1861 English text, it argues that the translation's political effectiveness depended on the systematic erasure of what Chakrabarty calls History 2: the sacred-social universe of *prana*, *atithi-seva*, the devotional literary vocabulary through which women's grief was registered, and the moral obligations of the Bengali householder whose destruction by the plantation economy the play documented. The translation and the plantation system shared a target. What the indigo system destroyed from the outside, the act of translation rendered invisible from within. The stakes of that double erasure, and the trial that followed the translation's publication, illuminate a broader truth about language and power: that for resistance to be effective at a global scale, it must first be translated — and that the act of translation always leaves behind precisely what was most worth defending.

**Keywords:** Indigo Revolt, postcolonial translation, Skopos theory, Vaishnava devotional tradition, untranslatability