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**‘Pure and Mixed’ in East India:  
Gerasim Lebedev’s Intercultural Enthusiasms\***

SUMMARY: This article attempts to delineate and plot the contours of the intercultural contributions of Gerasim Lebedev in a linguistic-cultural domain totally alien to him, in early-colonial Calcutta. It also seeks to contextualise the intense polysemy between ‘microcosmic’ personal and literary journeys and the ‘cosmopolitan’ acculturation that came with Lebedev’s socio-cultural background and travels. Though, as will be seen in the essay, Lebedev’s pathbreaking maverick effort was largely a shot in the dark, his achievement is seen, in almost the entire theatrical fraternity in West Bengal and Bangladesh, in terms that can be described as larger than life. The essay will seek to understand the extent to which Lebedev’s personal and professional choices reflected deep cross-cultural sympathies, thus making him an enthusiast with a difference.

KEYWORDS: interculturality, Gerasim Lebedev, Goloknath Das, Russian Indology, pre-Victorian Bengali theatre, Sir William Jones.

Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev (1749–1817) was a Russian musician, theatre-enthusiast, peripatetic fortune-seeker, translator and scholar, who had travelled to India, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with an English military band *en route* to Madras. As he mentions in the “Introduction” of *A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects*, the book which made him a pioneer of Russian Indology, “on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, 1785, [he] embarked from England in the Honourable East India Company’s ship Rodney” (*ibid.*: ii). He had had

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\* All translations, unless it is mentioned otherwise, are by the present author.

a checkered and colourful early life, in Russia and Europe, and had set up the first modern Bengali theatre in Calcutta and even freely adapted two European plays, Molière's *L'Amour Médecin* and Richard Paul Jodrell's *The Disguise*, with the help of his Bengali tutor Goloknath Das in 1795–6. In this venture, he was of a pioneering, nearly unique significance, followed as he was by the denizens of a culturally-hybrid tapestry of 'progressive' somewhat arriviste Bengali intellectual life. These prominent members of the burgeoning Bengali intelligentsia, largely, though not entirely, composed of absentee landlords and/or merchant-princes, who had made their money and thus acquired their high status during and/or due to the ascendance of the English East India Company and, chiefly, Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement (1793),<sup>1</sup> constituted an interstitial network in which competing and, occasionally, dissonant constellations of identity and "fields of belonging"<sup>2</sup> were merged. They were, later on in the nineteenth century, to perform Shakespearean plays at David Hare's school,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called Permanent Settlement (of Bengal) was a *modus vivendi* which was reached between the English East India Company and the landlords of the British province of Bengal in 1793 as a part of the overall framework of legal reforms that was named after Charles, then Earl of Cornwallis. Due to the shift in landholding mechanisms and the class character of the new landed gentry, a new social segment of 'absentee landlords' (as they could afford to and would largely be absent from their estates) arose. They would partake of the 'refined' and 'cultured' life of the metropolitan centres—in this case, primarily Calcutta—while deputies with plenipotentiary powers would be managing their estates.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of Baden Offord's "Mapping the Rainbow Region: Fields of Belonging and Sites of Confluence", *Transformations* No. 2 (March 2002), p.1; *cf.*, [www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue\\_02/pdf/offord.pdf](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_02/pdf/offord.pdf), accessed 02.10.2015.

<sup>3</sup> David Hare (1775–1842) was a Scottish horologist, who had come to India in 1800 for professional reasons but went on to become one of the most loved and respected educationists, social reformers and philanthropists in early-colonial Calcutta. He was instrumental in the setting up

the Oriental Seminary<sup>4</sup> and the Hindu College,<sup>5</sup> and even set up the first substantial indigenously-funded and locally-managed Bengali theatre in Belgāchiā, a northern suburb of metropolitan Calcutta.

There came to exist, within the span of a few decades in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, in an increasingly English-dominated Bengal, new negotiations between societal and political identities that were to set up, among other 'nation-building' projects, the indigenous stage, represented by institutions such as the above-mentioned Belgāchiā Theatre. Thus, there emerged in early-colonial Calcutta a ferment of momentous cross-cultural intellectual experimentation and innovation, which would go on to impact socio-political constellations in the entire Indian Subcontinent. The Bengali intellectual of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, like her/his early-20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts, was "an avid consumer of socio-cultural Anglophilia [, which] was not only limited to the consumption of Anglo-European canonical literature but extended to the domains of popular culture, cuisine, modes of socialisation, intellectual priorities, political and cultural organisation, sports and recreation and even social and religious reform" (Chakrabarti 2012: 256). As Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, in the 2007-Preface

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of a number of modern schools, which imparted 'western' education, one of which is named after him, and the Hindu College.

<sup>4</sup> The Oriental Seminary, founded in 1829, was the first privately-managed, non-denominational school for Hindu (*cf.*: Kopf 1979: 49) children in Calcutta. The other famous educational institutions dating back to this period were all either under the management of Christian missionaries or regulated by the Government. The founder was a renowned educationist and philanthropist, named Gour Mohan Addy.

<sup>5</sup> The Hindu (renamed Presidency from 1855) College, now the Presidency University, is one of the oldest institutions of Europhone higher education in South Asia, having been set up in 1817 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Bengali social reformer and founder of the unitarian socio-religious movement called the Brāhmo Samāj, and other members of the emerging Indian societal-cultural elite of Calcutta.

of *Provincializing Europe*, about growing up in mid-twentieth century Calcutta, a process that does seem to have been a function of the socio-cultural negotiations and cognitive-noetic choices imposed by nearly two centuries of colonisation, “[t]he legacy of Europe—of British colonial rule for that is how Europe came into our lives—was everywhere” (Chakrabarty 2008: x).

This article will attempt to locate and map the contours of this Europhone ‘cultural net’, through, in this case, the transcultural contributions of Gerasim Lebedev in a linguistic-cultural field totally foreign to him, and contextualise the intense polysemy between ‘local’ Bengali personal and literary journeys and the ‘cosmopolitan’ acculturation that came with Lebedev’s socio-cultural background and travels. Though, as will be seen in the following pages, Lebedev’s pathbreaking effort was largely a shot in the dark, his achievement is seen, in almost<sup>6</sup> the entire theatrical fraternity in West Bengal and Bangladesh, “as the founder of the first Bengali theatre” (Senelick 2012: 20). In fact, not only is he remembered through the normal routine of road-naming—the “Herāsīm Lebedeff Saraṇi [Street]” in Central Calcutta—but, “[r]effering to the date in 1795 when Lebedev’s theatre offered its first public performance, [the cultural historian Krishna Dutta] proclaimed in true spread-eagle style, ‘27 November remains in the history of Indian culture a symbol of the friendship of two great peoples of the world’” (*ibid.*). This ascription of anti-colonial solidarity, in this case between a Europhone but non-colonial actor and a newly-colonised society he seems to have been genuinely interested in, has, in post-colonial India, acquired an ideological dimension through the active engagement of, formerly, Soviet and,

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<sup>6</sup> There have been dissenting voices, like that of the dramatist Selim Al-Deen, who did not appear to accept Lebedev as having fathered Bengali theatre; however, one can read a certain amount of cultural nationalism in “Al-Deen’s dismissal of Lebedev [, as it] was part of his lifelong effort to establish a Bengali theatre divorced from Western traditions and rooted in purely native soil” (Senelick 2012: 22).

nowadays, Russian diplomatic and academic agencies in researching and perpetuating Lebedev's memory in the Bengali-speaking world. However, it does seem, especially when one reads the "Introduction" to Lebedev's *Grammar*, with its often-euphoric estimations of India, that "[h]is aims, consonant with Enlightenment beliefs in natural law and universal goodness, were altruistic and came to grief when pitted against the interests of a foreign power: the East India Company" (*ibid.*).

However, Lebedev's early achievements, both in Calcutta and earlier, while moving up the social ladder in the Russia of the time of Catherine the Great, were not necessarily political or ideological, at least not in terms of being motivated by statist or anti-/colonial persuasions. Though Soviet and contemporary Russian historians, followed by their Bengali colleagues, seem to emphasise Lebedev's undeniably-pro-Indian sensitivity and the, perhaps consequent, bitter disagreements with and even persecution by the British colonial elites as incontrovertible evidence of his political idealism, the initial inspiration behind his maverick travels seems to have been an intense individual quest, informed by the prevailing European *Zeitgeist* that sought empirical knowledge about Asian, especially Indian languages, literatures and culture. As will be seen in the course of the following discussion of his life and achievements, "Lebedev's adventure was a mere blip on the screen of Bengali performance history" (*ibid.*: 28). The argument for a nuanced interest in Lebedev's contributions to the modern Indian stage should, perhaps, take the shape suggested by Laurence Senelick and view the variegated life-story of the former "as an exemplum of the Enlightenment" (*ibid.*), an impressive instance of the Europhone—as Catherine the Great's Russians, undeniably, were or were becoming—"subaltern" connecting with his Indian counterparts and 'superiors' and translocated colonial elites.

Though it was, apparently, "an isolated venture" (Zbavitel 1976: 222), Lebedev's attempts at kickstarting an indigenous—though intensely transcultural and even experimental—modernity on the Bengali stage represented an overarching Icarian initiative that prefigured and informed later hybridisations and other transcultural experimentation.

“Lebedev’s hybrid cultural formations... disrupted this edenic notion [nurtured by the Anglophone elites] of an untainted civilization” (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 26), which was sought by the English—for a time, at least—to be preserved as a sort of civilisational menagerie, both to be ritually-celebrated as a “jewel in the crown”<sup>7</sup> and distanced as an alien cultural constellation far removed from and, thus, confounding and incomprehensible to the Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural sensibilities and behavioural codes. Apart from Lebedev’s implicit—more perceived than actual—challenge to the commercial and political paramountcy of the East India Company, he seems to have broken an unspoken taboo by attempting to liaise a bridging of Indian and European literary-cultural forms and tropes. This should have upset the various representatives of the Company, which had long regarded its Indian possessions “as a kind of inviolate paradise into which no European culture... should be allowed to penetrate” (Lawson 1993: 129), due to their usual suspicion, which was both ethno-culturally and societally predicated, of such attempted cultural *mélanges*.

Lebedev’s life, in fact, seems to have been an often-spontaneous medley of diverse formative influences, sudden leaps of faith, rapid upward mobility in Russian and Anglo-Indian social circles and equally climacteric falls from grace. This makes him an allthe-more endearing representative of post-Enlightenment and post-French-Revolution civility, which sought to accumulate knowledge from all conceivable and reachable parts of the world, through empirical observation and data-collation. The meritocratic notion of terra-mapping as a function of the validity and even desirability of ‘superior’ analytical frames drawing the image of the world according to its own categorical imperatives led to the expansion of a Eurocentric taxonomy through Russian hegemonic intervention into Central Asia and West European colonialism in large swathes of Africa and Asia. It is against the seeming

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<sup>7</sup> *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) is the first novel of Paul Scott’s acclaimed series *Raj Quartet*; it is set in 1942 in a fictional British-held Indian town called Mayapore and was made into a television-series.

neatness of this packaging of the world into zones of influence and/or rule, not always analogous to the afore-mentioned fields of belonging, that a cross-cultural and hybridising figure like Lebedev stands out as a somewhat exceptional interlocutor between the so-called binaries of 'East' and 'West', without, given his exact historical moment, having to struggle against "the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures [and] recommend that 'roots' be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present" (Bhabha 2004: 13).

While Lebedev might be said to have romanticised the Indic linguistic and literary-cultural past/s, as accessible to him through the limited tutorial resources of Goloknath Das, his Bengali 'tandem-partner',<sup>8</sup> he does not seem to have attempted to retrogressively configure an entire diachronic narrative, using universalist and homogenising categories. As seen in the often-anecdotal, despite the palpable attempt at being empirically correct and honest, style of his *Grammar*, Lebedev seems to be content with reporting things and phenomena as he saw them, though his vision may have been tinged with the romance of the exotic Orient. This empirically-oriented but emotionally-coloured approach to the Other can even be said to have prefigured or, at least, anticipated Europe's, especially Germany's, own idealising/ed engagement with Indian philosophy and literature not much later. Indeed, it is worth remembering that "[i]n 1805 in St. Petersburg Gerasim Lebedev founded the first Bengal typography in Europe and published the first original work in Russian on India, "An Impartial Contemplation," which, in fact, anticipated Schlegel's theories [as detailed, primarily, in his *On the Indian Language, Literature and Philosophy*]" (Whittaker 1978: 509).

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<sup>8</sup> "Lebedev was later to write, [Das] 'was Skilled both in the Bengalie Language and the mixed (Jargon) Hindostanie Dialects grammatically and he understood *tolerably well* also the sacred Shanscrit language' [italics mine]." (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 22)

In order to retrace the arc of Lebedev's considerable interest in and even, perhaps, fascination with Indian life, languages, literature and drama, it should be useful to discuss his rise from a possible—due to the unavailability of a “birth certificate or church register” (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 20)—birth in Yaroslavl, the home of the famous Volkov Theatre,<sup>9</sup> and an intellectually-oppressive paternal injunction against “learning to read and write until he was fifteen” (*ibid.*), through his intellectually-enriching and socially-fortifying stint in St Petersburg, to Calcutta. Despite the absence of any documented record of a meeting between Fyodor Volkov and Lebedev, it is possible that the latter had “attended the barn-like, 1,000-seat Yaroslavl playhouse, whose eclectic repertoire included adaptations of Molière” (*ibid.*: 21). According to Margarita Vanyashova, however, he, “in St Petersburg, became acquainted with Feodor Volkov [and] participated in the performances of Volkov's theatre as well” (Vanyashova 2000). Be that as it may, the big turn in Lebedev's life came at the age of fifteen, when he moved to St Petersburg, accompanying his father, who had joined the choir of the Royal Chapel. This gave the former ample opportunity to study the arts, especially music, and literature to his heart's content and acquire quite a big reputation as “an expert violinist and cellist” (*ibid.*). Being an avid reader, who was able to benefit from the all-pervading enthusiasms of the Enlightenment, not least in the court of Catherine the Great, certainly till the French Revolution, he was apparently buoyed by the revolutionary contemporary European idea of the universal brotherhood of man and decided to explore it at its source by finding a noble patron, given Catherine's

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<sup>9</sup> The first theatre-house in Russia was built in 1750 at Yaroslavl by Fyodor Volkov (1729–63), an actor born into a mercantile family based in Kostroma: it exists and functions till date and was named after its founder in 1911. His radical—for the times—interpretation of classical roles made him famous and he, with his troupe, was invited by Catherine the Great to perform and establish a court theatre in St Petersburg; *cf.* online: <http://www.volkovteatr.ru/theatre/history/>, accessed 07.01.2014.



releasing of “the hereditary nobility from many of their ceremonial duties, which led to a wave of travel to Europe” (*ibid.*). His search ended with the confidant of the Heir Apparent Prince Paul, Count A. K. Razumovsky, who, in 1777, had been appointed as the Ambassador to Naples. However, in a turn of events that was to prove propitious for Lebedev, the entourage was stuck in Vienna for a year due to the Austro-Prussian War. He was able to benefit from the cultural sophistication of Razumovsky’s circle—the latter being a connoisseur of good music and an acquaintance of Haydn, Mozart and, especially, Beethoven—and the Viennese ambience as a whole, and further polish his knowledge and develop his skills and tastes. This experience, including, as he later wrote, his travels “around Europe for five years, performing at courts and learning French” (*ibid.*), helped him in preparing the ground for his visit to India.

As Senelick writes, “[i]n Paris in 1782, [Lebedev] claims, the idea of visiting India first occurred to him: he was influenced by then current concepts that India was the cradle of civilization, that its culture preserved vestiges of these origins, and that Sanskrit was the key to western languages” (*ibid.*). The notion of the ability of Indian philosophy to serve as some sort of a palliative, if not panacea, to the problems of a post-industrial, post-Enlightenment Euro-American world may be, justifiably, traced back to this very idea that motivated Lebedev to attempt to seek the fundamentals of civilisation and culture in early-colonial Calcutta. Not surprisingly, the Indophile savants of the East India Company, Sir William Jones (1746–94) and Sir Charles Wilkins (1749–1836) being foremost among them, had also acted upon a similar impulse and invested a lot of time and energy in attempting to decipher the encrypted—through the ravages of time and distance—pathways of commonality between the Europhone linguistic-cultural heritage and the Indic corpus. As will be discussed later, these explorations could only result in tentative approximations and, at times, even rather idiosyncratic leaps of the imagination in attempting to create a bridge between the all-too-palpable chasm between the ‘homely’ and the ‘other’. However, as Bhabha writes, “a bridge where ‘presencing’

begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha, *ibid.*).

Thus, one may argue that, as a cross-cultural and somewhat-liminal figure, twice- and, perhaps, multiply-removed from the Indian societal, cultural, ideational and political spaces, being a Russian musician from Yaroslavl—as contrasted with the Oxonian background of Jones—Lebedev was the ideal translocated unhomed subject, who was, consequently, able to create a sense/substance of India that locks the estranged civility of himself as the ‘Other’ to one or more of the regenerative-reflexive possibilities of his host-culture, the ‘Home’ in this case. As one reads of his adventurous voyage from Paris, through London, to Calcutta, one cannot but wonder if a more productive way of looking at his agency would not be by inverting the “rite of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation” (*ibid.*): Lebedev did not discover India, India was discovered to him. His personal and professional vicissitudes and somewhat maverick interventions in his societal-cultural milieu in Calcutta, India, during his regrettably short stay there, make him one of the earliest and most interesting examples of the non-colonial intercultural actors in early-colonial India. At a time that was marked by the burgeoning influence of European cultural tropes and choices in India, especially in the Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies, Lebedev did not merely seek to engage with Indic societal-cultural tropes and their expressions in language and literature. He also attempted to renegotiate their absolute position and relative value in the fast-changing structural hegemonies of discursive colonialism.

Lebedev’s way to India was paved by Count Seversky (“the Northern Count”), actually Crown Prince Paul moving under an alias, who arranged to get him to London, given the British ascendance in India, where he was successful in receiving the support of many leading Russian expatriates, including the Ambassador, Count S. R. Vorontsov. With such high-powered patronage, he managed to travel to India and be treated with hospitable kindness and general civility by the British

colonists and wrote that “[in Calcutta], as in Madras, he was treated by all ranks with the greatest hospitality” (Lebedev, *op. cit.*: iii). In Madras, Lebedev learnt Tamil, becoming almost certainly the first Russian person to have any acquaintance with that most ancient Dravidian language. However, his primary goal “was the study of ancient Indian culture, and for that he needed Sanskrit” (Senelick, *ibid.*), which was difficult for him to acquire in Madras, owing to a paucity of English-speaking Sanskrit-scholars and, perhaps, the relative strictness of Brahminical pedagogical exclusivity in South India as a whole. Hence, Lebedev decided, despite his financial security and social standing in Madras, to move to Calcutta, where the political climate was shifting from that of the dominance of a mercantilistic monopoly that exercised political control to that of “a consolidated colonial regime” (*ibid.*: 22) in the Bengal Presidency, which, after an Act of the British Parliament in 1773, was deemed to be in administrative supervision of the Bombay and Madras presidencies and other British-held territories in India.

It is in Calcutta that he met Goloknath Das, his Bengali tutor and collaborator, who was to not only give Lebedev his idiosyncratic grasp of Bengali, Hindustani and Sanskrit—in that order of expertise—but also facilitate his dramaturgical-theatrical escapades. These two met, however, after a couple of years of fruitless searches by Lebedev to find a Sanskrit-scholar willing to take him on. It was his “Sircar (Steward) [who] introduced to [him] a Bengallie School Master, named Shree *Golocknat-dash*, who was grammatically skilled both in the Bengali language, and the mixed dialects; and also understood well enough the Sanskrit language” (Lebedev, *ibid.*). According to the renowned Bengali educationist and linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Lebedev “was very much under the influence of his informant, Golok Nath Das, who was his friend, philosopher and guide in his linguistic studies as well as in his theatrical ventures. Lebedev, in his enthusiasm for what he considered to be the right way of approach to study Indian languages and Indian culture, seems to have taken for correct whatever he received from this source of his information” (Chatterji 1988: xxvi). Chatterji even goes on to suggest that Lebedev’s grammatological

intervention in the field of Indian languages and dialects was, primarily, inspired and informed by Das's own thinking: "my own conviction has been that [Lebedev's book] was mainly written by hearsay, and possibly considerable portions of it were written in the Roman script, for his benefit by Golok Nath Das or some other person similarly situated who came to help Lebedev" (*ibid.*: xxvii). This does make it sound as if Das, who, unfortunately, remains a hazy character known only through Lebedev's writings, was the latter's 'native informant' and he not only depended upon him for information and analysis of Indian linguistic-cultural and societal features and phenomena but also for quotidian and practical affairs, as is evident in their cross-cultural collaboration over Lebedev's pioneering theatrical project, which ultimately irked the British.

Indeed, so polyvalent was Lebedev's interculturally-intersubjective foray into the world of Calcutta's Sanskrit and Bengali scholarly practice that his translations of European plays into Bengali, made possible by his painstaking but somewhat rushed study of Sanskrit, Bengali "and the mixed... Hindostanie Dialects grammatically" (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 22) with Goloknath Das. However, given the paucity of scholastic resources of linguistic training—Sanskrit studies being an exclusively-Brahminical domain—Lebedev never quite managed to achieve any degree of mastery in Sanskrit: "he possesses a lexicon of Sanskrit words in Bengali pronunciation" (*ibid.*). He, it does appear, had a rather-voracious appetite for different linguistic registers and other ethnographical subjects, which he pursued through sustained, if somewhat haphazard, translation activities. According to Hayat Mamud, "[i]n Calcutta, he completed the translation of *The Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* into Bangla. ...He also translated into Russian a Bengali verse-epic *Vidyāsundar*, by Bhāratcandra Ray Guṇākar, and wrote his *Memorandum*" (Mamud 1995: 20), selected conversations and a treatise on Bengali arithmetical systems. It should be noted, at this point, that there is a substantial difference in opinion between South Asian scholars about the exact nature of Lebedev's translation of Sir Richard Jodrell's *The Disguise* and Molière's farce *Love is the Best*

*Doctor*, in its unprinted one-act English adaptation “presented at Lincolns Inn Fields in 1734 for the anonymous adaptor’s benefit” (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 23). Senelick guesses, not without substance, that “Lebedev was introduced to Jodrell’s obscure volume by his brother, Sir Paul Jodrell, who was the physician extraordinary to the Nawab of Arcot”. (*Ibid.*) He also posits that Lebedev’s French was sufficient to enable him to translate Molière’s play directly from the original.

Mamud opines that, “according to Hemendranath Dasgupta, Dr Kazi Din Muhammad, *The Disguise* was totally translated by Lebedev’s teacher Golaknath Das. In the opinion of Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji, it may be possible that Lebedev himself chose the above-mentioned play, but someone else did the translation into Bangla. Dr Sisir Kumar Das opined that Lebedev translated it into Bangla jointly with Goloknath Das. In this respect, Dr Sukumar Sen correctly emphasised that no Bengali translator translated this play, apart from G. S. Lebedev himself, because its linguistic style proved that it was mainly written by a foreigner, not by any Bengali” (Mamud, *op. cit.*: 276–79). Lebedev, in *Grammar*, credits himself with the translation, ascribing only an assessorial and evaluative, perhaps even editorial, role to Indian scholars and experts: “I translated two English dramatic pieces, namely, *The Disguise*, and *Love is the Best Doctor*, into the Bengal Language ; ... When my translation was finished, I invited several learned Pundits, who perused the work very attentively” (Lebdev, *op. cit.*: vi). He goes on to express his gratitude to Das, “an instructor [he] had the extraordinary good fortune to procure” (*ibid.*), and, it appears from what he wrote, it was the latter who had introduced the idea of staging the play in public: “[a]fter the approbation of the Pundits—*Golucknat-dash*, my Linguist, made me a proposal, ‘that if I chose to present this play publicly, he would engage to supply me with actors of both sexes from among the natives’” (*ibid.*: vii). Lebedev promptly seized upon this idea and, “without delay, solicited the Governor-General—Sir John Shore, ... for a regular licence, who granted it to [him] without hesitation” (*ibid.*). He invested a huge amount of his own money and efforts in acquiring and readying the theatrical space, and Das was,

all the while, approaching “actors and actresses (the latter a striking novelty)” (Senelick, *op. cit.*: 24). Starting on 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1795, it took three months for the play to be staged, with a motley team of actors and an orchestral accompaniment.

The most radical, perhaps even drastic, intervention that Lebedev made was in the area of dramatic adaptation. He, ultimately, forsook the idea of staging Moliere’s play and reduced *The Disguise* to a highly-edited one-act performance, which stressed its farce- and mimicry-based plot-constituents. According to Senelick, while “Soviet scholars suggested that Lebedev was influenced in this by Russian folk drama, ...given his long sojourn in Europe, the Viennese *Zauberstück*<sup>10</sup> and the English after-piece”<sup>11</sup> may have been more influential” (*ibid.*). One feels that it is rather difficult and, perhaps, even inconsequential to search for a Russo-European inspiration behind Lebedev’s focus on the comic dimensions of his chosen plays, especially as he leaves behind no indication, in his writings, about this. It is,

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<sup>10</sup> The Viennese *Zauberstück* (literally, ‘piece of magic’ in German), also known as *Zauberspiel* (=play of magic), was a theatrical genre which evolved during the Baroque period, that is, primarily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with ornate stagecraft and complex scenographic strategies. It was characterised by on-stage transformations, the appearances of a *deus ex machina*, trap-doors and other performative spectacles, constituting an approximation to the *Maschinenkomödie* or “machine-play” that saw an extensive and sustained use of stage-machinery. Cf., Weisstein, Gotthilf, “Geschichte der Zauberpossen”, *Spemanns goldenes Buch des Theaters*, eds. Rudolph Gnée, Max Grube, Robert Hessen, Paul Lindau, &c., Berlin & Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1902; this article can be accessed at the URL <http://www.internetloge.de/arst/zauberpossen.pdf>, accessed 30.09.2015.

<sup>11</sup> The English “after-piece”, “an audience favourite, was a chaotic farce” (Banham 2000: 696) that was, in the form of a one-act miniature-play or musical composition, added to a—usually tragic—play to effect a comic, even farcical relief; it was quite popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It nuanced the audience-involvement in and around the central tragic narrative by producing a tension-relieving and lightening effect, usually after or towards the end of the primary theatrical entertainment.

however, clear that he chose the comic aspects of the plays keeping in mind the responses of the Bengali scholars who had, earlier, reviewed his translation-adaptations. According to him, in *Grammar*, “Indians preferred mimicry and drollery to plain grave solid sense, however purely expressed” (Lebedev, *op. cit.*: vi). He further observed, keeping in mind the responses of the scholars, that Indian audiences were most likely to be swayed by scenes focussing on the comic and the ferocious. This may be linked—especially as he had translated an important early-modern Bengali epic poem into Russian and, hence, may be safely assumed to have been fairly conversant with the psycho-emotional tropes and categories of aesthetic appreciation of literary-cultural texts and other artefacts, namely, the *rasas*—to his familiarity with the nature of the affect as envisioned in India. While there appears to be scarce discussion, in his works and papers, of the *rasas*, it may be argued that he would have found it difficult to translate the texts he had, with their significant poetic complexities, without any knowledge of the subject.

The theatrical location of *The Disguise* was Spain, though Lebedev effected a transformation of Jodrell’s Madrid and Seville to British Calcutta and the flamboyant Lucknow of the Nawabs of Awadh (‘Oudh’, as the British spelt it). The names of the characters were Indianised, with “Don Luis bec[oming] Bkholonat Babu, and Bernardo bec[oming] Ramshontosh” (Senelick, *ibid.*). It is interesting, given the cross-dressing and, thus, ‘feigning’ element of the plot—the female lead dissimulates as a young man-servant—that there did not appear to be a public outcry against an Indian actress not only appearing on a public stage but also inverting gender roles. This may or may not have had much to do with the audience, which, given the relatively high ticket prices, was restricted to the upper-middle classes and the aristocracy of Bengali society. Hence, for them, the “steep” ticket prices—“eight rupees for boxes and pit, four rupees for the gallery”, for the premier on 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1795, and a limited-subscription “One Gold Mohur a ticket” (*ibid.*) for the second show—were not a dampener in the least. According to Senelick, “[a]s the high prices

imply, Lebedev was not drawing on folk traditions in his performances” (Senelick, *ibid.*). However, this does not quite follow automatically from the fact of the high ticket prices, as the elite audience was quite acquainted with and even appreciative of low-brow genres of theatre and other modes entertainment, like the popular—especially in rural and semi-urban areas—genre of travelling operatic entertainments called the *jātrā*: “[i]n the 19<sup>th</sup> century, amateurs, mostly the sons of the bourgeois of Calcutta, developed their own [*jātrā*] groups and chose secular themes for their subject matter rather than traditional religious fare” (Brandon 2002: 89).

Thus, it stands to reason that Lebedev need not have been completely uninformed of and uninterested in the popular and folk idioms of Indian theatre. Although Senelick, referring to the work of Rakesh H. Solomon and A. B. Davidson and I. I. Filatova, maintains that Lebedev’s upper-class, bourgeois-intelligentsia audience “despised popular art as vulgar and degenerate, fit only for the lower orders” (*ibid.*), the reality was far from being so binary. It should be more useful to view Lebedev’s efforts, like those of the Belgāchiā Theatre that was established later on in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as attempts to create a composite, syncretic, self-reflexive and integrative cultural hybrid that would be up to the task of accommodating Indian literary-dramatic traditions within the altered societal-cultural realities of colonialism and advancing modernity. This becomes clearer when one looks at the second and planned third performances of Lebedev’s play. The second staging, on 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1796, was more impressive than the first, with *Kālpanik Śambadal*—the Bangla title for *The Disguise*—being expanded to its original scheme of three acts. Buoyed by this heartening success, he made rather grandiose plans for the third performance. The entire house was to be reserved for the non-European subscribers, who were going to be treated to a visual treat, in terms of Charles Dibdin’s musical play *The Deserter* (1773), in Bangla translation: “[i]tself an adaptation from Sedaine with music by Philidor, [and] one of the most popular proto-operettas on the English stage, requiring skilled singers and actors”. (*ibid.*). In order to realise this grand project, he sought



a full theatrical licence, which would permit him to stage plays in both English and Bangla, and also a professional scene-painter—a search that brought him in contact with his nemesis, one Joseph Battle, “a counting-house clerk who purported to have served as a scene-painter” (*ibid.*) with a rival British theatre-establishment—and, thereby, initiated a series of events that were to lead to his sustained persecution by different levels of British society and colonial officialdom in Calcutta and force him to leave the country in serious distress. He had, through his intercultural enthusiasms and maverick attempts at cross-cultural synthesis, aroused British antagonism, by increasing their insecurities *vis-à-vis* the indigenous elites, and brought about his persecution, downfall and hasty retreat from India. While it is not within the purview of this essay to discuss the exact reasons for and the course of Lebedev’s downfall within the European societal milieu of Calcutta, it ought to be noted that his was the first concrete and successful, if short-lived, effort to launch and maintain an Indian theatre-establishment that sought to work with Indian languages in presenting intercultural and international stage-productions. Howsoever macaronic and transitory it might have been, it was not until the advent of the Belgāchiā Theatre, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that such a cultural experiment—though nuanced in a much more indigenous and, perhaps, less manifestly-hybrid manner—was to achieve any success on the literary-cultural landscape of colonial Calcutta.

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