Chapter Four: Critical Insiderism in Shoshee Chunder Dutt’s

*Reminiscences of a Kerani’s life.*

In the Preface to *The Works of Shoshee Chunder Dutt*, Shoshee writes that,

The works comprised in these volumes were originally published several years ago, some of them under English pseudonyms, to conceal their authorship for the time. They were, for the most part, very kindly noticed by English press... The *Westminster Review* recommended the “Ancient World” for being used “as a school-book” in England: while the *Edinburgh Daily Review* said that it did not know of any work which gave “so clear and well-informed a critical narrative of pre-Christian times” as it did. Of “Modern World”, the *Scotsman* observed that it was “excellently adapted to be used in the higher classes of schools”, and that there was “no other elementary compendium of modern history which could at all compare with it”; while the *Glasgow Herald* recommended it strongly “to teachers of our youths who teach history for its own sake, with no proclivities, Liberal or Conservative.” *My books*, I should here mention, were, most of them, *written mainly for the information of my own countrymen*, and all that was aimed at was to bring my readers to the threshold of useful study... (v)

When Shoshee says that he wrote for the information of his “own countrymen”, he certainly included both the Indians and the English in the purview of his definition of his “countrymen”. In fact the choice of his language might have been dictated by his urgency to communicate with the English, because he could otherwise have written in
the vernacular. However, here we must remember that in India, due to the existence of multiple regional languages, English came to perform the role of a unifying lingua-franca between Indians, and in order to communicate with the whole of his country, many writers would choose the English language.

Shoshee outlines in clear words his rationale of writing:

[My works] are chiefly of a purely historical, religious or social character. I have not had much occasion to treat of politics, but, where I have dealt with it, I have always spoken of British Rule and its intentions and achievements, with loyalty and respect. Its faults and weaknesses I also of course freely examined; but I have in the same breath borne willing testimony to the innumerable benefits it has conferred ...

One English journal, in a curt and sneering review of *India, Past and Present*, was pleased to find fault with me for not speaking of the governing classes in the country more respectfully, and characterized my objections to them as "unjust" and "far-fetched", though it was good enough to add that they were "not less interesting on that account". To all reviewers of this stamp I would reply in the words of Dr. W. W. Hunter, that "an Indian annalist has more important work to do than to sound the praises of the English governors"; and, I would add further, that the native annalist in particular has no duty more important, or more appropriate, than to give a truthful exposition of the conditions and disabilities of his race, with all their attendant surroundings, irrespective of the pretensions and interests of any other class. The adulation of the governing classes, or even of the
paramount power, was not exactly the work I had chalked out for myself, though I may honestly and confidently assert that I have not been wilfully, and certainly not maliciously, disloyal to either (Italics mine) (v-viii).

We see here that Shoshee takes on himself the task of examining, interrogating the English race and the English rule. He calls himself “the native annalist”, and thereby locates himself outside the dominant colonial discourse. He undertakes the task of the truthful exposition of his environment. It is the task of interrogation/ cross-examination, a task that is self-imposed.

In the nineteenth century Calcutta the word kerani denoted the clerk/copyist working in an office for a paltry salary. His work was not supposed to be intellectually stimulating. Psycho-social stereotypes about the kerani have been as strong as the image of the typical kerani. Sumit Sarkar, in Writing Social History (1997), notes that the in nineteenth century Bengal the typical kerani was subject to racial mortification, insufficient salary, restricted mobility, and gruelling schedules of office.

In her essay “In the Name of Culture: Rethinking the Political Economy of the Bhadralok in Bengal” Tithi Bhattacharya observes that, a class of “petty landowners” came to the city “under duress” to become the white collar worker or the “much maligned” kerani. She goes on to say that “while ownership of even a small holding in the village had provided a degree of status, the city in all its impersonal homogeneity and pecuniary hardship robbed him of even that.”

W. W. Hunter’s A Statistical Account of Bengal provides an approximate review of the number of people engaged in the service sector and petty trade in the twenty-four
parganas in 1870-73. According to him there were more than twelve hundred clerks employed under Government, Municipal or other local authorities (45-9). As early as 1860, when English education was still in a nascent stage, James Long had observed that the Bengali *kerani* could be employed at one-third the cost of the Eurasians. Later, in 1876, in his “Report on the Administration of Bengal”, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Richard Temple remarked that the position of this class engaged in public and private professions was “in some respects...improving fast; [but] in other respects it...[was] becoming harder and harder”. He said that it was becoming so cheap to hire clerks because of their abundant availability that it failed “to afford reasonable remuneration to those engaged in it” (44).

The low pay of the *kerani* has been the subject of a lot of writing—discursive, theoretical, and also fictional, and attempts have been made to ascertain its socio-historical causes as well as consequences. In *In the Name of Culture: Rethinking the Political Economy of the Bhadralok in Bengal*, Tithi Bhattacharya comments that the *kerani* was the main customer of the “Battala texts” from the mid-nineteenth century. She says that in one of these texts, by one Taran Sharma, titled *Kerani Puran*, the destitution of the *kerani* was explained. Sharma recounted a conversation between the “Creator Brahma” and his “trusted sage Narad”. *Brahma* was regretting having cursed the *kerani*, to a life of hardship, as they had plucked all of *Brahma*’s swan’s feathers to write with. *Narad* was despatched to earth to assuage their woes. It was found by *Narad* that the *keranis* were of three castes: the *kulin* amongst *keranis* earned between two to four hundred rupees; the second were the *bangsaj* with a salary of one to two hundred rupees; below them were the *moulik* who earned only thirty to hundred rupees a month.
Below this range were the menial mouliks and above the four hundred mark were the chief kulins.²

Parama Ray has compared the status of the kerani to that of the governess in mid-nineteenth century Britain, “characterized by a string of middle-class bankruptcies”. She says that, the kerani had become an “archetypal symbol of uncertainty and colonial subjugation”, “a symbolically freighted figure of classed uncertainty and colonial abasement.”³

In “The Englishmen and the Indians”, Tagore attempts to explain why the Bengali kerani continued to suffer abasement. Tagore remarks that,

Who is not aware of the deep remorse and intense self reproach with which the poor Bengali employees return from their office, how exceedingly unbearable seem their life of ignominy: the intensity of the feeling is such at that time that even the weakest turns aggressive. Yet, -- in spite of it, -- the next day, at the same hour, putting on the coat over his dhoti he enters his office, and bending over a huge leather-bound ledger open on the ink stained desk he silently bears the rude insult of the white barosahib. Can he afford to forget himself on the spur of the moment and ruin his family! Are we as self-sufficient and as free of family responsibilities as are the English? When we are about to sacrifice our lives helpless women and innocent children waving their hands fervently appear before our mind’s eye. (Jharna Sanyal’s translation) (South Asian Review, vol. XXV, No. 1, 2004, 104-132)
In this context, Reminiscences of a Kerani’s life (henceforth Reminiscences) (serialized in Mookherjee’s Magazine in 1873, and later published in Dutt’s Bengaliiana in 1885) is an important text because though it indulges in an odd laughter at the cost of the typical copyist/kerani, on the whole it subverts the stereotypical notions about the kerani. Thus, in Reminiscences, the first autobiographical work in Indian Writing in English, Shoshee takes the reader “straight inside the heart” of the East India Company.

At the outset it has to be stated that though it is an autobiographical narrative Reminiscences is not the author’s autobiography. It is a memoir of the author’s experiences as a kerani (writer/copyist/clerk). But what is significant is that Reminiscences, belying what its name suggests, is not just about private/personal memories/recollections. Later, Shoshee’s nephew Romesh Chunder Dutt would also pen his own Reminiscences of a Workman’s Life (1896), but the latter work is a compendium of personal, family memories. Shoshee’s text functions as a socio-historical document that is a representation of the contemporary administrative scenario.

It furnishes an interesting insight to the functioning of the East India Company portraying its bills-and-counter-receipts culture, its rivalries, conflicts, strategic manipulations, its one-upmanship, and shifting loyalties. Alex Tickell speaks of the “sense of agency” in Shoshee’s work being “mediated” through “irony and anecdotal understatement, a strategy that relies on an intimate, sometimes weary knowledge of the colonial information order.” Tickell also says that Reminiscences is “the most pertinent example of this critical insiderism”, and that it highlights the “priorities of colonial discourse analysis as an interpretative mode concerned more with absences and shadows in colonial writing, and with what the colonial text doesn’t say, than the actual conflicts,
strategic manoeuvres and double-edged exchanges apparent in writing by the colonised” (Introduction, Dutt, Selections from Bengaliana 16). The narrative displays a strong self-determination that counteracts European supremacy in various episodes, such as those narrating the experiences of racial discrimination, bribery, corruption, persecutions and social injustice.

It is strange that Shoshee had chosen to become a kerani in the first place. As he himself says in the very first chapter of Reminiscences,

...with supercilious contempt the Baboo told me to mend his pens. Was Young Bengal to submit to this? Shades of Bacon, Addison, and Johnson, was the student who had kept company with you so long, and pored over your pages night and morning, now to mend the pens of an old kerani?

(Dutt, Selections from Bengaliana 26)  

But Shoshee’s career was chosen for him by his father when he had before him many options to choose from. With his characteristic tongue in cheek humour, Shoshee recollects the dilemma common to every young man at the beginning of his career:

Raw from school... what was this young man to do to commence with? Of course he could start a newspaper or a magazine; nothing, in his estimation, was easier: or, better still, he could write books for the edification of mankind in general, and the Hindu race in particular; or he might become a pedagogue... All these appeared to him to be quite easy and feasible... But papa shook his head, and said “Nay” to every brilliant idea as it cropped up, and the upshot was that, at the age of eighteen, I
joined the respectable firm of Smasher, Mutton, and Co., as an apprentice

(Italics mine) (25).  

It may seem mysterious why Shoshee’s father should have wanted him to become an apprentice to the named firm rather than pursue the other more covetous careers. Malavika Karlekar remarks that,

From the gifted and well-placed Rambagan Dutt family of Calcutta, it is strange that Shoshee should have settled for the job of a clerk — even though he was rewarded with the title of Rai Bahadur for his dedicated service. The accompanying photograph of him in later life exudes an air of distinct confidence; clad in an expensive chogha over a kurta-pyjama, he is every inch a well-heeled, highly educated bhadralok, patronizing one of the many exclusive studios in the city. His chogha — perhaps of Kashmiri silk or wool — that has rich embroidery (zardozi) around the seams, pockets, hem and neckline — was of the kind worn by the Indian elite in the north and west as well as in Bengal.

It was, however, not very unusual for people with Shoshee’s education to become a kerani. In “The Young Bengal Vindicated” Kristodas Pal, himself a “Young Bengal”, notes that it was a “sorry” aspect of the Western educated Young Bengal that “with all his knowledge and enlightenment, with all his boasted love of freedom, he prefers the kennel of a karanee” (23).

However that may be, it has to be remembered that Shoshee was in some way or other involved with all the careers mentioned in the extract above: he was a regular contributor in periodicals, he wrote books on many subjects as already elaborated in the
previous chapter, and he was something of a pedagogue too with all his writings on diverse subjects.

Shoshee distinguishes the kerani of his day with later keranis thus:

There were no conveyances in those days for apprentices... those therefore who drew no pay did not think it infra dig. to trudge to office on foot; and if any found the sun too hot for him, there was the chatta, a very respectable protection for the head—I mean those bursatee chattas with long poles, which—alas! For poetry and romance—have now become extinct (25-6).

The bursatee chattas may have become extinct by the time Shoshee was writing his reminiscences, but the image of the chatta clutched kerani remained extant for another century:

...a bespectacled man clad in a starched white dhoti and kurta, a black umbrella tucked under his right arm, oiled hair and a harried demeanour. This is perhaps the most lasting image of the typical Bengali kerani babu. “The Bengali clerks as I saw them during the 70s, was of a group of people without ambition and hope. Yet they formed the bulk of the moddhobitto Bengali society who carried on the Bengali culture,” says writer Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. His efforts were necessarily half-hearted so he could neither be a religious fanatic nor an agnostic. He loved to boast about what Bengal had achieved but never tried to achieve anything himself. He loved to crib about how little he had got and yet never tried to improve his own condition. This is the image that still rules
over the minds of Bengalis when we refer to “keranis” (“Clerk”, Calcutta Times, The Times of India, 14 April 2002).8

Shoshee did not last long in the Smasher, Mutton, and Co.:

Behold me six months after seated behind the counter of the Government Treasury, this time no longer an apprentice, but hedged with all the dignity that pertains to a paid servant of the Government (27).

It is his experience in the Government Treasury that is recorded in the pages of Reminiscences. He is at first full of awe at the sight and sound of so much gold all about him. But once the novelty wears off he begins to take notice of other things:

For days, weeks, and months it haunted me as a pleasing fancy—a ravishing dream; till by everyday repetition it lost its charm, ceased to please... There were other things also for a novice to note with wonder. The number of men coming in and going out; their faces, nationality, and the errands on which they came: these comprised a study in itself (28).

Indeed, it is Shoshee’s penchant for character study, his fondness of observation, that has made him pen down his Reminiscences with such delightful humour and sardonic satire.

Shoshee speaks of how he gets into favour with the Burra Saheb, “a good man overflowing with the milk of human kindness... pleased to think kindly of me” (29). But what keeps him engaged in the Treasury is not just his work, but also his keen observance of people whom he met there. He describes all kinds of people—his colleagues: the different Burra Sahebs and Chota Sahebs; and people who came to the Treasury: Englishmen, Jews, Afghans, Bengali Millionaires, hot tempered English ladies
and many others. For some of these people he is full of genuine admiration: such as the young English cadet whom he describes in the following words:

One day there came a young English cadet, with the bloom of old England still on his cheeks—the handsomest specimen of the human race that I have ever seen... with the sweetest face in the world he had also the sweetest temper, and he laughed and chatted with everybody without betraying the least impatience. If all Englishmen had been as even tempered as that boy, would not the race have been idolized by the Bengalis? (31)

Shoshee goes on to say that, "Unfortunately, men of a different stamp are more common in the world", and he gives the example of a young Marine apprentice who was so impatient of delay that "taking up a paper weight of shots he struck one of the assistant cashiers with it..." The next few lines describing what happens next are very interesting:

The nigger, also a young man, was quite equal to the occasion. He snatched the paper weight from the apprentice's hand and returned the blow with somewhat greater smartness. An Englishman on being struck always returns to his senses. He is apt to consider every man his inferior who does not establish by the incontrovertible logic of force that he is his equal (Italics mine) (31).

Shoshee's study of the national character of the English is significant. He seems to be at pains to discover "... surely all Englishmen are not of the same stamp. Why are they all disliked, if not hated?" Shoshee does not answer the question directly, but
throughout *Reminiscences* may be found comparative evaluations of the conduct of Englishmen and Bengalis and sometimes people of other nationalities.

Shoshee’s representation of his colleagues is filled with delightful humour. His depiction of the “useful” “copyist and draftsman” is a fine piece of sarcasm. This man had a poor knowledge of English, but was an excellent copyist:

A paper once came down to the office written in Arabic, which no one could read. Copies of the document were urgently wanted for circulation to Mofussil officers. This copyist, without understanding a single word of the language, made copies of the paper so exact that, when they were submitted to competent officers for verification, not a single mistake was found in them... it certainly did require great precision of hand to copy stroke for stroke, without making a single twist (68).

Shoshee also speaks of another copyist who was given a large salary precisely because he could copy without understanding—he had to copy correctly every letter of a Governor General “who wrote a very crabbed hand” (68).

One of the subjects that occupy a great deal of space in *Reminiscences* is that of recruitment. Shoshee notes the often arbitrary manner of recruitments:

A petty post... had fallen vacant... the candidates were many; a long line of Khans and Meers stood ranged awaiting the arrival of the Burra Saheb, who wished to make the selection himself. During the incumbency of the former Burra Saheb there was a similar vacancy in the post of a *durwan*, with a similar parade of up-country athleté. The selection in both cases was characteristic. The former Burra Saheb asked each man his name.
“Ramdeen Ojah”.

“Ojah won’t do; I don’t want a Brahman”.

“Gugraj Doobay”.

No Doobay for me: the same objection as to No. 1”.

“Matadeen Tewary”.

“I won’t have a Tewary anymore than an Ojah or a Doobay”.

“Luchmipat Chowbay”

“The same objection as before. All Brahmans are bad men, and I won’t have any.”

...

“You there what is your name?”

“Lutchman Sing”.

“Ah! That will do very well. Sing means a “lion”, I think. Well I will have the lion. He is a good stalwart man too. Let him be enrolled” (54-5).

In a later chapter Shoshee exposes how appointments to lucrative posts are given based on patronage:

A nice appointment – that is, for an uncovenanted officer—has become vacant. There are many candidates for it—one among them par excellence the best of the whole lot, being a man of education, station in society, and much official experience. Another candidate is a very young man, of no official aptitude whatever, but very well connected, and personally known to Sir Henry Hardinge, with whose daughter he has
danced in England! Will you bet who wins the prize? The man of parts was sanguine, but did not get it (69).

Shoshee gives more examples like this:

A new appointment is created in an office where proverbially there is little work to do. The pay is handsome, and there are three candidates, two of whom would have graced any appointment. The third is illiterate, but has been of great service in diverse unofficial ways... The great man's nominee gets the post; the fact being that it was created for him, with especially fat pay and no work, the admission of other candidates being all a sham (69).

After giving more examples Shoshee says that,

It is useless multiplying instances. No deserving man in the public service can look above him without seeing many inferior people hoisted far beyond his reach. He may feel aggrieved, but must expect no redress (70).

The frustration and despair in Shoshee's tone is obvious here. The sense of not getting what he deserved probably drove Shoshee to write so prolifically and also injected some amount of sardonic humour in his prose. Shoshee's dejection is not historically untrue. Tithi Bhattacharya has noted that,

The *Kerani Puran* lamented that neither education nor intelligence were prerequisites to obtaining a job, whose imperatives rather were: very slight efficiency, *salaams*, oil, auspicious offerings at the right places and the benign glance of the Saheb.⁹
She farther states that the emerging middle class played a vital role in this regard. She refers to Sumit Sarkar’s comment on Vidyasagar’s ability to acquire “fairly important posts for some friends and clients” in the 1840s and 1850s. Vidyasagar’s importance in this regard is confirmed by the fact that once when he was ill for two weeks, “a daily stream of notes and requests for jobs, around twenty-five everyday, used to pour in for his commendation.” Sarkar mentions that in the capacity of the principal of the Sanskrit College and a member of the Board of Examiners, “Vidyasagar was responsible for procuring a head-teachership for the Brahmo scholar Akshaykumar Datta in the normal school that he established in 1854. Besides this he was also invested with limited control over the hiring and firing of subordinates.” Bhattacharya concludes that, “indeed, an embittered and frustrated Vidyasagar’s resignation from all official posts in 1857 due to the various restraints put on him by the same bureaucracy of which he was a part, is a point that can bear out large generalisations about the limited nature of indigenous middle class control.”

Shoshee himself seemed to be utterly unable to ask for favours—“One thing I never did—I never cringed to any man for a favour”(66). And when he waited on a Secretary to the Government for urging his claims to the newly created post of a Deputy Magistrate, he was put off most unkindly as he had no friends to back him:

On the first occasion I was received and put off; on two subsequent occasions that I called I received the stereotyped answer—"Phoorsut nehi haye." There was the great man on whom all eyes were turned, the dispenser of bounties and coveted honours, accessible only to people with long names, and to such others as made “koorneeshes” and “salaams”
with both hands; but not to me and the like of me. I accepted my disappointment with impatience indeed, but still with as much pride as I could call up (37).

With almost childish self-indulgence Shoshee goes on to say that,

Years after I had the satisfaction of receiving from the same man a message that he would be glad to cultivate my acquaintance, and, subsequently to that again, an offer of a deputy-magistrateship, which I refused... In the height of his greatness the Secretary to the Government would not see me. I was delighted to learn some time after that a native gentleman whom he had asked to come to him had refused to do so... The reply was that on account of domestic bereavements the Baboo never went visiting. Oh! How the Huzoor must have felt the slight (37-8).

Though the above musing apparently hints at a rather juvenile sense of petty triumph over the Government Secretary, on the whole Reminiscences is not a text characterised by pettiness. Even the above description actually points to the author’s nagging aspiration for being treated with respect and equality by the British. It also reveals colonial psychological issues. The triumph that the author feels is essentially a psychological victory. It pleases his indigenous ego that the particular native Baboo had the means and the nerve to refuse to see the English Secretary.

Time and again in the text we encounter direct comparisons between the English and the Indian—manners, traditions, modes of living, temperament, and self-respect. The text accommodates important debates on the questions of culture, tradition, religion, caste, democracy, sedition, the economic drain of India, and the 1857 rebellion.
For instance, Shoshee designates an entire chapter to "The Shoe Question", which, though apparently a description of one of Shoshee's old fashioned colleagues, actually participates in the public debate over the much publicized order of the Governor General in Council in 1854 (the order was reconfirmed in 1868) of the taking off of shoes in public places such as government offices and judicial courts. Indians questioned the prohibition as it seemed to them to be an infringement of their dignity and in some cases, religion:

In going to the Burra Saheb, I of course always went with my shoes on. I was surprised one day to find another native assistant, with an equal status with myself, standing before the Huzoor with bare feet. When we both came out, he gave me a lecture on the disrespectfulness of my conduct in not taking off my shoes. I did not, however, see in what the disrespect consisted, and said that to my mind the disrespect was in going in with bare feet. This made him very angry and he called together a committee of all the old native assistants of the office who were unanimous in condemning me. I refused, however, to accept this decision (60-1).

Shoshee goes on to tell his colleagues, with his characteristic sardonic humour that,

Of course if the Burra Saheb orders me to take off my shoes, I shall do so. But I don't expect such an order, anymore than I expect an order to pull off my trousers; and, in the absence of peremptory orders, I consider it
The British stance on the "shoe question" was based on their early experience in the courts of Indian rulers. The Indian rulers stipulated that British residents and agents should take off their shoes before entering Indian courts. They regarded the ritual crucial to affirm their authority, power, position and respect. The reasons for the practice might have been cleanliness, convenience, or respect, but later on this custom came to be seen as a traditional practice associated with honour. With time the scales reversed as the Company became more powerful than the native rulers. Thus Lord Amherst, the Governor General during 1824-8, stipulated that Indians should uncover their feet before entering his presence. However, the rule was not adhered to strictly and almost came to be discontinued during the time of William Bentinck (*Hindu Intelligencer*, 9 March, 1857). It was Lord Dalhousie who formulated an official code stipulating that the natives have to abide by the indigenous custom of taking off their shoes when attending the Court or the Government House. The directive soon came to be adopted in all Government offices. *The Hindu Intelligencer* reported that the matter "seriously agitated the native mind" and that perceiving the regulation as an insult prominent citizens such as Raja Pratap Chunder Sing, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Hara Chunder Ghose, Krishna Mohan Banerjee and many others stayed away from the assembly of the Governor General held immediately after the passing of the directive (*Hindu Intelligencer*, 9 March, 1857).

In "The Great Shoe Question: Tradition, Legitimacy, and Power in Colonial India", K. N. Panikkar notes that in the above context, "the selective appropriation of traditional cultural practices" was a part British strategy of colonial control in India. The
assimilation of indigenous mores helped colonial rule to keep up “an illusion of continuity and legitimacy.” Panikkar says that “since appropriation tended to impart new meanings and symbolic importance to existing practices, tradition became a site of contest.” Several issues that were relevant to the question of “subjection and resistance were articulated and negotiated” by means of debates on what represented the “authentic tradition” of the “natives” (105).

Shoshee also deals with the question of unequal pay. He speaks of an incident when a military officer asked him if he was not overpaid. To this he answered,

Possibly, yes; taken in the abstract, the sum is large enough. But when I find that you are paid Rs.--, it then occurs to me for the first time that I am very much underpaid. Our duties are nearly similar; you have the military accounts while I have those of the civil departments; and yet you get just eight times more that I do. Don’t you think that to be somewhat unjust? (Italics mine) (72)

When the officer says that “your country can’t give us the men we want, and we must get out fit men from England”, Shoshee replies that “Just so, and my country is willing to pay handsomely for any available talent that England can lend her. What she complains of is that she has to feed so many drones too in the bargain” (73).

In his book India, Past and Present (Chapter XX, “The Prospects of the Country”), Shoshee postulates the same idea:

The English have the disadvantage of being aliens to the soil, and all the money raised by them in India is absolutely drained out of it. In the way of salaries, pensions, interests, commercial profits and industrial
savings... the country [is] regularly denuded of a large portion of its wealth, for which no adequate return is made to it... [the Mohammedans had no “home” to go to, there to spend the earnings of their lives. The sin laid at the door of England in this matter is, however, one that cannot be atoned for; and there is no alternative therefore for the natives but to acquiesce in the position of their conquerors... (Dutt, *The Works* First Series, Vol. 4, 297).

Shoshee also talks of the concept of birth right in *Reminiscences*. When the officer says that, “we have conquered the country, and are entitled to everything in it as a matter of course”, Shoshee, envisaging the concept of birth-right decades before it gained currency under the nationalists such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, replies that “but the country was lost by Mahomedans, who had no inherent right to it. You did not fight the Hindus, and I contend that the Hindus have not forfeited their birthright” (Italics mine). To this the officer asks if Shoshee is prepared to fight for his birthright. He replies,

Perhaps to say so would be treason; but when I hear every individual Englishman arrogating to himself the conqueror’s right, and bragging of it, I am almost tempted to have a play at quarter-staff with him, if only to convince him that each Englishman individually is not necessarily a conqueror (73).

With his typical sharp satire he also says that,

The English are protecting us with great kindness, but many people may nevertheless wish to learn to protect themselves. The occasion may arise when it would be of inestimable value to them...}
of the work of evangelizing India, and may give her up altogether someday when we least expect it... (Italics mine) (73-74)

Shoshee further says that the English should set up military schools to “enable us to stand by and be of help to the English in the hour of need” (74). This, of course, is again an example of Shoshee’s fore-sight—India would indeed support England during many of her wars with other countries, notably the World Wars.

Reminiscences also discourses on the subject of the 1857 “mutiny”. When an assistant of the Account Office holds a market of various articles that he had collected as booty as a police officer during the “mutiny”, Shoshee declines buying anything from him. When asked about his desistence, he calls into doubt the truth of the claims about the “mutineers” and says that those articles might have been taken “from people who were called mutineers that they might be plundered”. Questioning English historiography, he says that,

The English officers in cold blood would do nothing so brutally unjust, I know; but they are demons when their blood is up, and this the mutiny has proved incontestably everywhere. People have been hanged and shot to death who were no more mutineers than you or I, and whose only misfortune was that they came across the avenging parties by accident.

Just look here, Colonel; here is a nose-ring, an ornament used only by females. Do you mean to say that there were females fighting among the mutineers? (Italics mine) (75-6)

To such a spirited reply the Colonel tells him that he would doubtlessly give his “version” of the mutiny some day. Shoshee retorts that “the governors would not like
anything of the sort coming from the governed”. Eventually he does pen down a tale of the “mutiny” (*Shunker: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857* which has been dealt with in the next chapter), and his focus there is on a woman who is a victim of the mutiny (she is raped and commits suicide), whose only fault was to have trusted and given shelter to English soldiers.

Shoshee here interrogates the received version of history and anticipates the stance of the Subalternists. The Subaltern Studies Group, the influential school of Indian historiography founded by Ranajit Guha in the early 1980s draws attention to “the small voice of history”. In his powerful essay “Chandra’s Death”, Guha restates the Subalternist position thus:

> The ordinary apparatus of historiography has little to offer… Designed for big events and institutions, it is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena which visibly stick out of the debris of the past. As a result, historical scholarship has developed… a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths (138).

Questions which have been central to the subaltern studies are: Can history be written outside the dominant structures of history (such as colonialism)? Who has the authority to interpret historical events and how does the writer’s consciousness influence his writing of history? What are the documents that are ordinarily overlooked in history writing? How are documents and archives interpreted? How far and in what way can socio-historical documents be reclaimed? And, most importantly what constitutes history
and to what ends and purposes history is written? *Reminiscences* takes up all these issues in its scope.

A noteworthy feature of *Reminiscences* is that notwithstanding all the serious subjects it deals with, the manner is almost always amusing, witty, ironical, and sometimes sarcastic. Shoshee is not all praise either for the English or for the Indians, but always seems to keep an eye open for observing the good and bad traits of both the races. In a chapter titled “Hinduism versus Christianity”, one of the author’s colleagues says,

Krishna was—what? The same as Christ an, incarnation of the *love of God*. *God is love*: the whole life of Krishna explains this, for it explains love in all its phases; love of the child for its mother, and of the mother for her child; *love* between friends; love between lover and mistress; love of the worshipper for the object worshipped. What besides this does the story of Krishna expound? There are indecent anecdotes mixed up with it: reject them as spurious; they are the conceptions of indecent minds, connected, where no real connection exists, with a tale of great purity.

What is the history of Christ... but a repetition of the story of Krishna in another, but not a better form? (32-3)

This is similar to Krishna Mohan Banerjee’s argument in his *Aryan Witness* (1875), that the *Prajapati* of the *Vedas* is Jesus Christ. This kind of an attempt at a cultural/religious equation, the search for cultural equivalences, is also found to a great extent in Lal Behari Behari Day’s *Govinda Samanta*.11
Reminiscences also dwells to a great extent on the figure of the “Baboo”. The class “Baboo” included in its scope the poor kerani as well as the millionaire. Many “Baboos” are described in the text with fond indulgence. Some of them are millionaires, some office clerks. But, interestingly, Shoshee doesn’t seem to give in to stereotypes about the “Baboo”. Here, it is important to remember that in the nineteenth century a lot of baggage was attached to the term “baboo”. The term referred to an educated urban gentleman. Initially used with respect, it soon acquired a derogatory nuance for the educated Indian who was desperate to acquire the manners and customs of the English. According to Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive, a dictionary of Anglo-Indian terms and phrases, a “baboo” is a term which among Anglo-Indians is “often used with a slight savour of disparagement, as characterizing a superficially cultivated, but too effeminate, Bengali.... The word has come often to signify “a native clerk who writes English” (Yule, 44). Interestingly, the dictionary also gives the following use of the term: “1873. — "The pliable, plastic, receptive Baboo of Bengal eagerly avails himself of this system (of English education) partly from a servile wish to please the Sahib logue, and partly from a desire to obtain a Government appointment." — Fraser's Mag., August, 209” (Italics original) (44).

In “The Englishmen and the Indians” Tagore indiavates the same negative slant in the British attitude towards the “baboo” when says that, “The representations of the Indian, particularly of the educated ‘babu’, in English literature and narratives, travel writing, history, geography, political writings and satirical poems, are persistently

In *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Tapati Guha-Thakurta shows how the figure of “Calcutta's degenerate babus” appeared in Kalighat art. Purnima Bose has argued that such stereotypes of the “babu” emerged out of colonial racial attitudes about the Bengalis, who as a highly educated community, challenged British representations of Indians. Because of their defiance of colonial rulers, Western educated Bengalis were “dismissed as comic imitations”. Bose points out that “they were virulently caricatured in the figure of the Bengali Babu: a small dark-skinned, effeminate intellectual who had an imperfect command on English.”

This image is reiterated in Charles Allen’s *Plain Tales From the Raj: Images of British Indian in the Twentieth Century* where former colonial officials recall that it “was the fashion to denigrate the babu”:

We used to make fun of them ... because they were interpreting rules which we made. Babu jokes, based on the English language either wrongly or over-effusively applied, were a constant source of amusements for all Anglo-India. Coupled with the denigration of the babu was a traditional distrust of the Bengali—“litigious, very fond of an argument”—who was frequently seen as a trouble maker: He doesn't appeal to many British people in the same way as the very much more manly, direct type from upper India (198).
In this context, Nandi Bhatia has given an interesting insight as to why the "babu" was always the butt of ridicule. In "Kipling's Burden: Representing Colonial Authority and Constructing the "Other" through Kimball O'Hara and Babu Hurree Chander in Kim", referring to both Purnima Bose and Charles Allen, Nandi Bhatia asks that "why did colonial officials make fun of the babu? Why does Kipling perpetuate the myth of the "babu" further?" She answers that since a great part of the nationalist resistance came from the educated section of Indians, who, with their "close encounters with British administrators" were "fully aware" of British ways, "the educated babu Hurree Chander thus represents a threat to the colonial presence." Bhatia posits that "Kipling perhaps recognized this threat. Therefore, to relegate the educated babu to a subordinate position, is, for Kipling, a historical necessity, in order to ward off any obstacles to the empire" (Italics mine). Bhatia's hypothesis is corroborated by Ashis Nandy's observation in The Intimate Enemy, that "... young Rudyard found England a harrowing experience. It was a culture he could admire... but not love. He remained in England a conspicuous bicultural sahib, the English counterpart of the type he was to later despise: then bicultural Indian babu" (67).

Shoshee's depiction of the "Baboos" in Reminiscences is laced with a strange concoction of humour, satire, respect and self-pity. While at times he is full of genuine admiration for the "unostentatious manners" of Baboo Madhub Dutt (66-7), the piety of Gungajal Baboo (Dutt, Selections from Bengaliana 32-3), and the courage of the Baboo who refuses to meet the Secretary to the Governor General (37-8), yet he also gives space to the "Baboo English" which made the Baboos an object of derision (30, 67-8).

Early in the text Shoshee describes the following incident:
...on taking over the balance of the day one evening, the Burra Saheb came to a bundle containing forty nine notes of 1000 Rs. Each. The number was correct, and accorded with the figures on the balance sheet before him. But, just as the bundle was about to be dropped into the iron chest, old Goberdhone put in that that was a “missing” bundle.

“What bundle?”

“Missing bundle, sir!”

The Burra Saheb counted the notes over again; once, twice, three times. The number was invariably forty-nine. He went carefully over the balance sheet; there was no mistake there even of a single pie. What then did the words “missing bundle” mean?

“You say this is a missing bundle; what is missing? Is the balance not correct? Has any note been lost?”

“Oh no, sir! That is a missing bundle only”

The patience of Job would have given way. I was at once sent for.

“What does this man mean by saying that this bundle is a missing bundle?”

I asked him to explain to me in lingua franca what he meant, and could hardly resist bursting out in laughter when he had told me.

“Well, what does the missing bundle mean?”

“Simply this, sir: it is a “miscellaneous” bundle, that is, formed of the accumulation of different dates”.
“Only that? Then don’t you allow this man to come up to me with the balance of the day again. Always bring it up yourself.”

Old Goberdhone was savage with me; but how was I to blame? (30)

The kind of malapropism described here was legendary. Rajnarayan Basu’s Ekal aar Sekal is replete with such instances “Babu English”. Shoshee however gives just one more example:

A Deputy Magistrate, flaunting a gold chain, introduces himself. An old copyist—a wag of the first water—is looking admiringly at the chain, with great affected simplicity. The Deputy Magistrate is much flattered, and asks condescendingly if the old man likes the chain.

“Oh! It is not that, sir! The chain is good enough; the gold is very bright too. But I am looking at it so steadfastly because it explains the meaning of a word I never understood before.”

“What word can it be I wonder?”

“Oh! A very simple word, sir; or rather two words. At home, youngsters, in conning over their spelling-book, constantly repeat the words ‘a he-goat’, ‘a she-goat’.”

“Well, how do these words concern my chain?”

“Why, sir”, asks the old man with the greatest simplicity in the world, “is this not a he-goat, and a she-goat too? Does it not answer as a gote (chain) both for yourself and your lady?”

The Deputy Magistrate was furious, — the copyist had run off (68).14
These sorts of bilingual puns were the source of much humour in Shoshee’s day, and indeed, are so even now. But the old copyist’s ingenuous confusion in linking the goat to the gote (the Bengali name of a particular design) chain is not just hilarious, but also signifies the perplexity/disorder that ensues when two widely variant languages/cultures collide.

Reminiscences is a subversive text. In the guise of a memoir, it is in fact a critique of the author’s times. The distinctive marks of this text are its satire, humour and irony; its interrogation of colonial moral certainties; its daring questioning of English historiography and English supremacy that takes a fuller form in Shunker: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny, and The Young Zemindar: His Erratic Wanderings and Eventual Return: Being a Record of Life, Manners and Events in Bengal from Forty to Fifty Years Ago (1885), texts at which I examine in the next chapter.
Notes and References

1 (www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/sas/papers/panel45_bhattacharya.rtf)

2 Same as above.

3 (Parama Ray, 'Bhadralok/Bhadramahila', *Keywords in South Asian Studies*, ed. Rachel M. Dwyer) (www.soas.ac.uk/southasianstudies/keywords/24800.pdf)

4 It would be interesting to look at the origin and the sociological connotations of the word *kerani*. The word derives from the Sanskrit *karanika* (Sanskrit *karya* = work, *ka* = one who does).

5 All subsequent extracts from *Reminiscences* are from this edition. Page nos. in parenthesis refer to this edition. The term "Baboo" is also spelt "Babu" by some authors.

6 It has to be noted here that 'starting a newspaper' or 'writing books for the edification of mankind' were the commonest career options of men with Shoshee's education and background, so much so that Shoshee here takes a dig at these professions.

See page 46 above for social connotation of *Bhadraloka*.

8 The negative slant in the above description brings out the attitude towards the *kerani* that has persisted to this day. Shoshee's text brilliantly contests this image.

9 'In the Name of Culture: Rethinking the Political Economy of the Bhadralok in Bengal', www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/sas/papers/panel45_bhattacharya.rtf

10 As above.

11 This has already been dealt with in Chapters two and six respectively.


14 It is pertinent to note here that this is the very Baboo who could copy perfectly without understanding a single word.