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COMMUNICATION THROUGH PUBLIC STAGE: A STUDY IN 19TH CENTURY BENGALI THEATRE

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Introduction

The strength of theatre as a medium of communication lies in the fact that as a lively and kinetic media it can communicate to people to an extent which cannot be matched by any other idiom of art and literature. Theatre was established in Bengal as an ancillary of the British colonial rule and its culture. Theatre is not Bengal's own culture like Jatra-Lokantya-Thumer-Sang Nach-Half Akhrai-Khemta etc. Cronically, when Kolkata was becoming important in the 19th Century as British India's capital and a centre of trade and administration, it was the European import of theatre and not the ethnic forms, became the favourite medium of cultural practice of the educated intelligentsia. The quintessential bengali 'Babu', enlightened with European education and culture, accepted theatre primarily as a mode of entertainment and secondarily, as a platform to prove to the British that they were no less to the latter in terms of capitality in modern cultural practice. This particular class of 'Anglicised' Bengalis wanted to creat a class of their own district from the common Bengalis who were fond of ethnic cultural forms mentioned earlier. Thus it may be inferred that European theatre which got a hold in Kolkata due to imitating efforts of a few learned Babu's, was from its inception, a minority culture. It had little or no

connection with the larger society beyond the urban scape of Kolkata. Even today, things have not changed much.

Having said that, the fact cannot be denied that when theatre passed on from the 'Babu's to the middle class intelligentsia. It indeed became a powerful medium of communication. it aptly reflected various local reforms, mass protests, class conflicts and went beyond the access of a handful to the outskirts of Kolkata. This is the period when conflict centred around theatre between the so called intellectual's and the common people denoted as 'other' which the former has always wanted theatre to remain confined as their exclusive medium of entertainment, the latter has envisioned theatre's cultural expansion from a mere art & entertainment form, Bengali Theatre has evolved from this ever continuing debate. The intellectuals have attacked, criticized and praised theatre equally according to their convenience. In the third decade of the 20th Century, post First World War realism brought about a wave of modernity in our cultural practice. Theatre too underwent major transformation on one hand Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's intervention made it more popular among Kolkata's elite and intelligentsia and the other hand, the forties saw the rise of the IPTA movement. Theatre virtually became the spokesperson of the elite. These transformations emphasize the fact that there was always a cerebral conflict between the Bengali intellect and theatre. That even today, the Bengali theatre is being controlled by the elite—was it an inevitable consequence? To find out the answer to these questions we have to explore the evolution of colonial Theatre in the 19th century. The conflict between Bengali "Bhadralok" and common masses may be fathomed from their relationship between theatre and "Bhadralok". How did theatre, as a strength medium influenced the conflicting classes? The present discussion aims at finding out answers to these questions.

In search of Theatre Ideology: East or West?

The educated Bengali 'Babu' or 'Bhadralok' that we are referring to is a class that rose in the first half of the 19th century. The Hindu School, established in 1817 and upgraded to a college in 1825 and brought under direct Government control led to a massive expansion of English education among Bengalis. Besides Hindu school, institutions like David Hare Academy, Oriental Seminary School, Metropolitan Academy, Dharmatala Academy established by Mr.

Drummond much before Hindu School, contributed to this phenomenon. In 1828 Derozeo led to the formation Academic Association. Throughout the 19th Century, the middle class intelligentsia evolved through a process of Seminars –conferences–debates–associations to open up a new dimension of practice of knowledge. Among subject of popular discourse & practice were – European philosophy, rationalism, elocution, recitation, debate and acting. This neo-Bengali middle class preferred theatre as a medium of cultural practice.

Although educated Bengali preferred European Theatre wave than their own folk and native forms, they accepted performance of *Vidyas under* at Nabin Basu’s theatre in Shyambazar in 1835 positively. The review of the performance in *Hindu Pioneer* in October 1835, which is also the first Bengali drama criticism, goes like:

“With a pleasant surprise, we discourse a competent creation in spite of lack of experience and knowledge. The audience must have felt that the time has arrived to make our housewives and first educated, ... the girls who in spite of having quality have been misunderstood thus far, is the theatre, babu Nabin Chandra Basu, who has single handedly kept the theatre running by devoting his efforts & money. It is hoped that his efforts shall inspire the elite section of our society and lead to a revolution to build up India as a glorified nation.”(1; pp 18)

The fifth decade of the 19th Century saw drama productions being adapted from English and Sanskrit plays. The students of Oriental Seminary established Oriental theatre in 1853 and staged Shakespear’s *Othello* and *Henry IV*. The following year, *Julius Ceasar* was staged in Pyari Mohan Basu’s house at Jorasanko. In 1857, Asutosh Deb alias Satu Babu’s grandsons staged kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* in his house. A report carried in 9th February 1857 *Samachar chandrika* praised the performance and commented –’Why do not the Bengali babus produce plays in their own language just as British do?’(2; pp37-38)

The lament was complied to with Bengali plays being written & produced soon after. *Kulin Kulasarbasso* was enacted in 1857 at Jayaram Bassak’s residence while Bidhaba Bibaha in 1857 at Metropolitan theatre. 1857 saw the establishment of theatres in the residences of Asutosh Deb, Jayaram basak and Kali Prasanna. The period prolific staging of from Sanskrit Drama.

Kaliprasanna Sinha's 'Vidyatsahini' stage was inaugurated in April 1857 with the staging of Bhatta narayan's '*Benisanghar*' which was translated by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. The success of the staging inspired kaliprasanna to take up translation of Sanskrit Drama into Bengali. He translated Kalidas' '*Vikramorbashi*', '*Malati-Madhav*' and wrote '*Savitri Satyavan*' based on Hindu mythology. In 1857, Kalidas' '*Avigyan Shakuntalam*' was staged in the theatre at Asutosh Deb's premises which was adapted by Nanda Kumar Roy. The following year, Belgachia Natyashala was inaugurated by staging of Shri Harsha's '*Katuabasi*' which was adapted by Ramnarain Tarkaratna. This fascination towards Sanskrit drama has a greater logic and reason. The period was characterized by the 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 where the Bengali Babus undoubtedly took the side of the British rather than the Moghal Empire. The experience and memories of the pre-British Moghul era was not very sweet for the Babus and therefore they could not stand by their new wave of Nationalism which originated from this revolt. Instead they banked on a newer idiom of Nationalism drawing inspiration from the ancient Hindu culture. The trend of adapting Sanskrit dramas by the Bengali education Babus is nothing but the search for an alternate nationalism.⁽³⁾

The *Hindu Patriot* (15th February, 1857) wrote, thus of the enactment of '*Sahakuntala*' at Satubabu's residence:

We have forgotten that we had something known as "Theatre" We came to know from an invites that a new Bengali theatre has originated, much like the phoenix, an the ashes of a yeastier year Theater. Another issue which really refreshes is that the play to be enacted is a use Bengali play—an adaptation of Kalidas' renowned Shakuntala.(2; pp 38-39)

Samvad Prabhakar wrote on the second enactment (February 22, 1857) of the same play:

"We are pleased to see that young students have aptly portrayed the inner feelings and thoughts of the poet in their enactment of Kalidas' '*Sakuntala*'. It will really be gift if other members of the student community draw inspiration from this event to recover the plays created by Sanskrit Bards."^(4; pp 50)

The tone of encouragement is apparent in both the above reports. Notably, the *Hindu Patriot* hails *Shakuntala* as a pure Bengali play and consider the Bengali adaptation of the Sanskrit drama to be an asset of Bengali literature. *Samvad Pravakar* advised the youth to search identity in Sanskrit Theatre. This was an era where Bengali Theatre Searched its unique identity on the ideological lines of Sanskrit Theatre. One of the main aschetechts of constructing this initial structure of Bengali Drama was Ramnaryan Tarkaratna. From Michael Madhusudan Dutta's letter to his friend Gourdas Basak, we come to know that the king of Paikpara had sent Michael's script of the play *Sharmistha* to Ramnarayan for correction and editing.(2; pp54-55)

Another patron of the philosophy of alternate Nationalism bassed on Sanskrit Drama was Sourindra Mohan Tagore. In 1859, he initiated the enactment of *Malavikagnimitra* in Pathuriaghata Banganatyalyaya. A letter was published in *Somprakash* about the second enactment of the play (July 7, 1860), where the writer hails the enactment as *Welfare of Nation*(3; pp253-255). In 1878, *Aryadarshan* carried a long article by Sourindramohan titled “*A Discourse on Hidnu Natak*”(5; pp138-142)In this article, he showed a path for Bengali Theatre by combining Nationalism & Hindutva, much in the lines of Bharat's *Natyashastra*.¹

Public : Different Tastes

As the Bengali intelligentsia experimented with Sanskrit Drama, a quiet revolution took place in Bengali theatre. In 1860, Dinabandhu Mitra portrayed the exploitation of Indigo planting by the British Indigo businessmen in his play *Neeldarpan*. He highlighted the lot of planting so beautifully that it inspired many more such plays viz. Mir Musharaf's *Jamidar Darpan*, Jogendranath Ghosh's *Kerani Darpan* and Dakkhinaranjan Chattopadhyay's *Jail Darpan* and *Cha-kar Darpan*. The wave of social movement hit the Bengali stage. In 1856, Umesh Chandra Mitra wrote *Bidhaba Bibaha Natak* to the widow Remarriage movement. In similar lines, Shimuel Pirboux wrote *Bidahaba Biraha Natak*, Kolkata literary scenario was resplendent

¹ Dr.Sukumar Sen in the chapter titled “Bichitra Samaj Chitra” (ref. no. 5) mentioned numerous Bengali plays published between 1860 – 1872 and labelled them as trash. A play criticized in similar lines by “Rahasya – Saudarba”, a monthly magazine was “Durbhikkha Daman” (1867) written by Jadunath Tarkaratna ,a Professor of Sanskriti College ,Kolkata.

throughout the with dramas and skirts on various social issues like child marriage, Polygamy, alcohol addiction and prostitution(2; pp69). These were makeshift stages in every nook and corner of the city. The trend continued even in the suburbs and outskirts. Michael Madhusudan Dutta's *Ekei ki bole Sabhyata* and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Sadhabr Ekadoshi* introduced satire as the new flavour in 1865 the farmer was staged by Sobhabazar Private Theatrical Society, Jorasanko Thakurbari the trend in Bengali Theatre shifted from adapting Sanskrit Drama to writing original socially oriented Bengaloï scripts. plays reflecting contemporary issues and playwright were much in demand. The Jorasanko Natyashala Committee advertised for scripts based on the Hindoo Females–Their conditins & Helplessness the village zamindars in the Indian Mirror dated July 15, 1865. The best scripts were to be awarded Rs 200 & Rs. 100 respectively. This was remarkable as it was the first occassion when a Babu theatre actually bothered about bringing on the life of the common people onto the stage. This society, however, wound up after staging Ramnaryan's *Nabanatak*. It may be noted here that the society had eminent people like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan, Rajkrishna Bandopadhyay, Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya, Pyarichand Mitra in its committee(2; pp 63-64). But it heralded the interception of theatre by the middle class and commoners signaling an end to the Babu monopoly in Bengali theatre. Soon, Bagbazar Amateure Theatre was formed by a group of unemployed youth who started off by casual presentations of *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* and *Leelavati* to arrive at 'Neeldarpan' which was to be staged for the first time, with Neeldrapan, India and Bengal got its first Public Stage The National Theatre debuted on December 7, 1872 to create history the Bengali intelligentsia distanced itself from the public stage. Besides the sepoy mutiny, 1857 also said the establishment of Calcutta University. The mechanism of creating educated 'Bhadralok' according to Mekhley's theory, had already started. The distance between the educated 'Bhadralok' and the common man had gained mountaneous proportions.

The Theatre of the Outcast

National Theatre was followed up shortly by two more public theatre–Oriental theatre in February 1873 and Sharat Chandra Ghosh's Bengali Theatre. The reaction ot these public stages were mixed. The print media like *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Nabaprabandha*, *Sulabha Samachar* and *Education Gazette* welcomed it. The establishment of Chaitra Mela and Hindu Mela in 1867

was arousing nationalist sentiments among the Bengali intelligentsia. Sisir Kumar Ghosh in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* dated 12.12.1872, commented that *Neeldarpan* should be staged in the suburbs, not in the city(2; pp101). Nabagopal Mitra. Known as 'National' hailed the enactment of *Neeldarpan* to be a matter of 'National importance'. Both of them were indirectly connected to the public stage. The conflict between moral values and tastes of elites and masses was also an key issue in the changing theatre environment. Girish Chandra Ghosh, himself did not want the phrase 'National' in the name of the public stage as he felt that the resources were too thin to upkeep the status of the word. In alias, he even mocked at the public stage-' *Sthan Mahathey hari shuri paisa De Dekhe Bahar*', he wrote (theatre has become a place where lowly people like *Hari*, one who burns corpses and *Shuris*, one who sells wine can get access for money(6; pp 22-23).

Indeed, giving access to illeterate masses inlieu of money has not been a cherished experience for public stage. After *Neeldarpan*, National Theatre staged *Sadhabar Ekdashi* and *Nabin Tapaswini*. The latter's criticism appeared in *Madhyastha* (Pous 29,1279 Bengali Calender) as follows:

“When the stage has acquired the name 'National', it showed be careful to maintain the dignity of the name. (6; pp114)

The report further explained:

The choice of the drama should be such that it educates besides merely entertaining. It should send across a holy message to boht performers and the audience—a message which generates repulsion towards misdeeds and attraction towards duty; one which ridicules social eveils and presences social norms; one which glorifies the national events of importance and heroic deeds of the people toe inspire & motivate the audience in patriotism. All of these may not be possible presently, but contemporary playwrights should make efforts to achieve these goals.(6; pp 114-115)

Thus, we can see that the journalist of *Madhyasatha* has clearly outlined the philosophy and process of maintining dignity of 'National' theatre and it si pretty evidently on the lines of Bengali Bhadrlok ideology. But theatre goes on in its own course of action. It chose to supply

drama according to the demands of the audience. New productions were needed to stage on Wednesdays & Saturdays which gave way to the introduction of 'prompter', addition of short sketches and pantomime at the beginning of the main play. The use of actresses to play female roles created a row in the society. In 1873, four prostitutes were appointed as actresses by Bengal Theatre which enraged the civil society. Newspapers like *Madhyastha* and *Bharat Sanskarak* thread vicious jibes at the event. Manomohan Basu editor of *Madhyastha* wrote:

“With this the prostitutes get equal rights to socialize. At last the Bengali audience have used their eyes and ears to the best and the social norms have become pure and kinetic (just like Kolkata's newly fitted drain pipe water)!... This is certainly not the last surprise of my life but it is indeed tough to survive this exuberance of this ultra - civilization”(6; pp 150)

The Brahmo Samaj found it most difficult to digest this event. Their activities were confined to religious practice, abolition of cast system, character building etc. In fact the year prostitutes were inducted into theatre, also saw the establishment of 'society for the suppression of public obscenity' at Town Hall under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen. The concurrence does not seem to be a coincidence.

Bangadashan edited by none other than Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay became quite an important voice in the changing Bengali society was critical of the Bengali theatre. Bankim, in his article 'Rasikata' criticised the satires which were being published as :

“Most of the contemporary writers are impatient to crack humor, including many of the Hindu community; Their teeth is always out, no recess to body movements, eyes manipulative, But the elements of humor which they use comprise dry, meaningless, asymmetric, slang words; Their books smell rot, that of a pub”(7)

It is not that Bankim Chandra was not interested in Bengali theatre. In fact, he co-organised staging of *Leelavati* with Akshay Chandra Sarkar at Chinsurah in March 1872. He was also fond of the plays of Shakespeare and Kalidas, He has outlined valuable thoughts on theatre concepts in his article 'Gitikavya', However, later on in his life he developed some hostility against theatre. Srish Chandra Mazumdar has written about such a remark in his article, "Bankim

Babur Prasanga”, An adaptation of ‘Anandamath’ by Kedarnath Chawdhuri was staged in Pratap Chand Johuri’s National Theatre in March 1883. After seeing this enactment Bankim commented to Srish Chandra– *”Theatre are no longer places for civilized people to visit; Hooligans and prostitute keep on lagging aloud”*(8)

The first half of the 19th Century was a period for Bengal to rebuild its society from the conflicts of the old and new, in the light of new educations & culture, Bankim tried to build a new Bengal and one of his tools was *Bangadarshan*. In this phase, Bankim wanted people to be disciplined both in terms of religion and character. Therefore, he could not back the move of theatres to induct prostitute as actresses. This inspite of the Nationalist flavour imported by the Bengali Public Stage.

Dramatic Control Act

Great National Theatre had inducted fine actresses in 1874. In following year, Upendranath Das became its director and the theatre staged patriotic plays like *Surendra-Binodini*, *Hirak Churna*, *Sarojini* etc. The Prince of Wales visited Kolkata in January 1876. He attend his visit to Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay’s residence and even into the in-house created a social uproar. Upendranath, to mock the event staged a play called *Gajadananda O Yvaraj*, Patriotic shifted to Blind anti British movement as *Bharat Sanskarak* Murch 3, 1876 writes:

“The authorities if National Theatre were forced by the Police to stop the enactment of the play “Gajadananda O Yvaraj”, The play written in bad taste, calls the Prince as Delhi’s Horangjib’s Son and Gajadananda as Monkey. However the Government is coming up with an iron hand for these kind of plays”(6; pp193)

There were occassional & sporadic protests against the Dramatic control ordinance from the civil society. There was a meeting against the bill in Kolkata on April 4 1876, where proposals were

drafted for withdrawal of the bills(9; pp 129).But overriding all protests the bill was made a law in December 1878.² Sisir Kumar Ghosh wrote an *Amrita Bazar patrika*:

“... The objective of this law may be good but it is a fact that the Government has pressed its claws on us to extract our lifeline. if the Government goes on choking us in areas of daily life and activities, it won't be long before one Indians will reach places where the British rule won't affect us at all.(6; pp 194)

Basantak magazine mocked the law and published a cartoon–“*Masha Marte Kaman Daga*” (A cannon blowed to kill a mosquito). But some newspapers and eminent people happy that the law was passed. Raja Narendra Krishna Bahadur was one of them(9; pp 129).‘Bharat Sanskarak had to say:

“Leave alone the Government, an individual too, won't tolerate the prince's defamation, living under the British rule. The captains of Bengali Theatre are a shame to the society for their efforts to convert theatre into an object of hatred and insult. Although the act is indeed an impediment towards the development of theatre, we shall, for the time being, support it for the greater cause of the welfare of nation’’(10)

On November 1, 1858 the rule of India passed on form the hands of the East India Company to the Queen of England, Amrita Lal Basu, in his reminisces, has written that “*The palace of the Governor, balcony of the elite as wll as the poor man's thached roof, were all decorated by garlands of light*”(11). There, we can see that the educated Bengali civil society perceived the British rule as the boon' from God. It is obvious that these loyal subjects shall accept the Dramatic Control Act gleefully.

Natyamandir or the Hindu's theatre

² The mention of a protest meeting has been quoted from the *Englishman* in Ref. 9. It was held on 4th April ,Tuesday at 7 pm at the residence of High court Judge Dwarkanath Mitra and attended by eminent personalities.The proposals accepted in the meeting were extrated from Indian Daily News dated 01.03.1876 and quoted Ref. 16 .

Pratap Chandra Johuri acquired the ownership of National Theatre in 1880 and on his invitation, Girish Chandra Ghosh left his job at Parkar Company to join National at a salary of Rs. 100. He was getting Rs 150 in parker but this opportunity of becoming a whole timer meant more than anything to Girish Chandra. The period was characterised by a upsurge of Hindu nationalism led by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. His novel “*Anandamath*” 1882 deserves special mention here whose song “Vande Mataram” would go onto become a major slogan of the national Freedom movement. Newspapers and magazines became major look of publicity of this neo Hindu nationalistic and religious ideas. Notable among these magazines are Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay’s *Sanjeevani*’ released 1883). Akshay Chandra Sarkar’s *Navjeeban* and Rakhai Chandra Bandyopadhyay’s *Prachar* (released in 1884) Bankim Chandra was connected to the last two, Girish Chandra understood the pulse of the society very well and therefore zeroed in on mythological stories for his productions. He knew that these will be accepted by the audience who are part of the Hindu nationalist upsurge. His first mythological play *Raban badh* was enacted in 1881. about which Amritalal Bose wrote:

“On the first day of enactment we were all sceptical– will people accept mythological play ? But when Girish Chandra as Ram delivered dialogues in his baritone voice, the audience were carried away by devotion and their collective reaction clearly signaled that the production is on its way to success. It showed that Bengalis have not forgotten their roots and the play has appealed to their religious devotion”(9; pp 155-156).

The success of ‘Raban Badh’ carved the theatrical journey of Girish Chandra as he came up with more mythological plays like *Sitar Banabas*, *Abhimanyu Badh*, *Lakshman Barjan*, etc. These were highly praised in Dwijendranath Tagore’s *Bharati*, There was a marked change in the audience profile of Bengali public stage as the number of females increase. According to a report by ‘Somprakash’ on *Sitar Banabas*:

‘There was an audience of 200 all educated and of vintage lineage. They were all mesmerised by the enactment. The public stage has never been able to impress so many ladies and gentleman before”(12; pp 692-695)

Girish Chandra shifted from National to Star Theatre and produced bio-dramas on life of mythological heroes. His *Chaitanyaleela* in 1884 inflicted a religious revolution in the Bengali Society. Abinash Chandra Gangopadhyay writes :

“Girish Chandra through this play was able to touch emotion of the neo-Bengali as well as the vaishnav who has a Shaven head & sports a tilak. The dignity of the public stage was raised to that of a temple. The enactment moved famous spiritual practitioner Bijai Krishna Goswami so much that he left the seat of audience and started dancing in a state of trance”.(9; pp 197-198)

Amritalal Basu, in his marvellous language, has aptly described the state of Hindu society on seeing the play:

”The task of promoting religion has been taken over by indisciplined actors and purged actresses, what a shame ! Although this feeling creeps up in mind it should not be admitted as it a sin. One can’t make out how this miniscule group in their hated platform sung the greatness of Sri Krishna and that send across shivers down the religious revolutionaries. It awakened the religiously inclined Hindus from sleep to indulge in publicising the message of fraternal love by Brajaraj and the Doyen of Nabadweep. Consequently, Keertan communities were set up in every nook and corners and the country was flooded by various editions of Gita and Chaitanya Charit. Foreign returned Bengali declared his Hindu identity without any inhibition(9; pp 198).

Religious doyens like Ramkrishna Paramhansa and his disciple Swami Vivekananda grew fond of the public stage. Keshab Chandra Sen, leader of the Bramho Samaj also a fellower of Ramakrishnan, took him to a show of *Chaitanyaleela* at Star. After the show he blessed Binodini, who was playing the character of Chaitanya. Swami Vivekananda had also commented that *Bilwamangal* has surpassed even Shakespear! Thus Girish Chandra’s mythological model of theatre was patronised by the Hindu nationality Bramho Samaj and the educated Bengali intelligentsia.

Yet theatre was criticized by a section of the society on moral grounds. Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan's *Som Prakash* dated 18 Sraban 1293 carried a letter from a reader which launched an unprecedented attack on theatre. Excerpts :

“People may recover from cholera and Snake bite as there is treatment for them, One may even escape from the attack of a tiger or lion but one can never escape from the affliction of theatre opera. Even Lord Shiva is helpless. ... Some unfuturistic youth are presently writing in support of theatre in news papers. They feel that if males replace prostitute in enacting of religious tales, the character of youth could be restored. They should know one who joins theatre actually enters hell. It shows that he is spoiled and routed.”(12; pp 695)

The writer continues to target these who have expressed their support for theatre:

“O, the sponsors of theatre, can you give an account of how many people you have recovered? How many distracted youth have you reformed?” (12; pp 696)

The writer goes on to heavily criticize the formation of a theatre group as a tool of social reform in 1886 by Nababidhan Bramhosamaj led by Keshab Chandra Sen:

“Brothers of Nababidhan have started a theatre group, the objective of which is difficult to understand. If their motto is to induct people to Nababidhan ways of religion and to recover people from the mud of sins, then people have clearly get the hint of their capability & goodwill. Oh God, what a terrible situation threatens the sanctity religion – it is a matter of entertainment. I pray to thee Lord retrieve good senses in your sons so that they do not play with you.”(12; pp 696)

The Clash of Dominance

In spite of being a prolific reflector of social trends in Kolkata, theatre could never become a convincing medium of communication to the Bengali educated community.

This inspite of successfully mediating the rise of patriotism through plays like *Neeldarpan* and promoting Hindu religions upsurge through devotional plays. The reason for this lies in the conflicting evolution of the history of the 19th century Bengali society. In the first half of the century, theatre remained art of the elites, derived from the British and inaccessible for the common people. The common people enjoyed Jatra, Sawng, kabigan, panchali, Kheur, Khemta and other native art forms which were till then patronized by the Babus, who were rich peopple of the Suburbs and newly rich businessmen. In fact this kind of patronization led these art forms to actually change for worse in order to suit to the later of the patrons. However, the common Bengali formed the support base of this country culture.(13)

The situation changed in the second half of the century. As the economic and occupational profiles changed, they were united through a cultural commonality. The social reform initiatives led by Vidyasagar and Bramho Samaj deeply affected the grass-roots level. They took part and expressed their opinions in context to the social transformation. One of the major media that reflected it was stires and Skits which were written a plenty during the period.(14)

The phenomenon was a clash of cultural dominance. Theatre, which was primarily the seat of Babus' culture, addressed issues reelected to lives of the common people and gradually the control of theatre shifted in the hands of the middle class. The backdrop of this transformation was unique, independent of changes in other art forms. Theatre, derived from the British, was perceived to be a parameter of healthy culture, holyer than the native forms. The inclination of people towards theatre, was initially encouraged by the 'Babu' backed media. On May 21 1857. *Bengal Harakuru* wrote:

“It is being reported that a group of eminent Hidnu youth shall enact “Bidhobodbaho” and “Probodh Chandroday” very soon. The first play shall be staged it Babu Mahindralal Basu's residence at Kansaripara. This is a signal for the development of nation and any body who loves it will be happy to note this enthusiasm of people towards theatre”.(2; pp 51)

In similar lines, the article “Natakavinay”, published in *Nabapatra*, August 1867 issues goes like :

“The last five years have seen a tide in enactment of Drama and opera in the country. This is undoubtedly healthier practice than the erstwhile Half-Akhrai & Panchali”.(2; pp 94)

Education Gazette in review of performance of *Neeldarpan* at National Theatre in 1872, wrote :

“ It is a request to the Bengalis at the end that they should not ignore the public stage rather encourage it and connect to it ... it is our duty to ensure the spread of healthy and pure entertainment in place of the vulgar and uncivilized fun & frolic.”(2; pp 103)

From the above expectation, it is clear that theatre was being viewed as a social reform rather than an art form. To the nationalists, it was a tool *Amritabazar Patrika*, in its description of the staging of Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay’s *Bharatmata* at National Theatre writes:

“The audience at National Theatre has returned with an unforgettable feeling and education. The stage is both a social reformer as well as social education. We hope that National Theatre will able perform both the great duties”.(2; pp 126)

Bharatmata had brought the audience to tears. Theatre has not been able to live up to the expectation of the Bengali intelligentsia as the latter’s sociological ideology was not in sync with the farmer’s way of functioning, Mekley’s Trickle Cocoon. Theory has been the basis of the enlightenment of the Bengalis which was mainly in the lives of European education and sensibilities. The Bengali educated class had developed a model of theatre which would weep away the vulgar and lowly country culture. But just like Mekley’s Theory, this model did not succeed. When the public stage of Bengal passed into the hands of the middle class and its audience were mainly the common masses, whose cultural heritage was that of the country culture, the so called ‘vulgarity’ was reflected there. The culture of Jatra-Pachali-Kabigaan-Akhrai may be coined ‘vulger’ by the Bengali elite but it can’t be denied that the common

Bengali could relate their emotion and life with it. It would be relevant to quote from the review of the first show of '*Neeldarpan*' (December 7, 1872) by *Amrita Bazar Patrika*:

“Calcutta is not the proper place for staging *Neeldarpan*. The audience of Calcutta possess no idea about what goes on in the suburbs and villages. Otherwise they would not have laughed aloud at the pathetic scene of the poor farmer crying out of pain when the Neelkar Sahib kicks him. On the contrary, the same scene brought instant tears to a few people among the audience who were from the villages”.(2; pp 101)

The people from the villages become the principal clients of theatre tickets. Although theatricians like Girish Chandra could not accept this but he had to recognize their importance and make productions that satisfy their taste. In December 1877, at the start of the production *Meghnad Bodh*, Girish Chandra recited a poem which he himself wrote, which goes like:

“If money would not have been the prime considerations the stage would have got audience who could appreciate. No one comes to the stage to admire poetry, every body wishes to see sensuous signals of the heroine.”

Shibabrata Chattopadhyay, in his book *Bangiya Natyashalar Itihaas*, has mentioned with statistic, issues like how many distinguished people have helped theatre in monetary terms upto 1920; Rich businessmen who invested in theatre only to be routed. He has also given interesting account of innovations, weird in nature, introduced by theatre to satisfy its audience.(6)

Thus, we can see that theatre has always tried to keep the masses happy rather than appear the Bengali intelligentsia. It has changed according to the ongoing trends to remain popular. Some times it has dwelled into hot, contemporary issues like nationalism, resurgence of Hinduism, Mohonta - Elokeshi scandal or incidents of the British Prince visiting the bedroom of a Bengali. The Bengali intelligentsia has supported theatre only when they have found a representation of their thoughts or public stage. And when the opposite happened, they instantly attached it

without any hesitation. But, theater continued the shows without bothering too much, in its own rhythm.³

Conclusion

Theatre has one of the key factors in regulating the conflicting relationship between the Bengali intelligentsia and the Bengali masses in the colonial era. Both have tried to control theatre as a powerful and lively cultural medium. But when theatre came under the aegis of the middle class, its power of mass communication enhanced. The level of this mass communication was enhanced during the partition of Bengal in 1905. Theatre became more acceptable to the leader of the national movement. In spite of this adoration, it remains a question, why theatre of today remained confined within the control of a minority educated class of people. The root of this isolation lies in our disrespect of tradition. We are still living in an era of isolation --isolation between cities and villages, educated and the commonness. Thus, painful but true, theatre remains a symbol of the urban class, urban civilization.

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³ Utpal Dutta in his play has mentioned the Dramatic Performance Control Act. And has appreciated the courage of artists of the then public stage (ref. 15). The analysis of society and theatre in the context of the law and Bengali Nationalism may be found in the work of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s “Bangadesher Krishak” and the book of Shibabrata Chattopadhyay (Ref.6) Binay Ghosh has quoted very relevant and indicative lines from the speech of president’s speech by Dadabhai Naoroj ; at the Second Meeting of the congress in Kolkata in 1886 .(Ref.17)

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