

MASS COMMUNICATION THROUGH THEATRE

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Introduction

Bengali Theatre's Chief Architect Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) in his youthful days had once set up his mind to denounce the civil life and become a sage. In the period leading up to the decision, Girish Chandra experienced back to back demises of his near and dear ones. He was frequenting Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in those days. The shock of losses and the attraction he felt for Paramahansa, created confusion in his mind to continue work and normal civil life. In a moment of almost depression, he approached his Guru, the Paramahansa and expressed his desire to denounce. Ramakrishna at once replied in negative and advised him to continue his work in the Public stage, as he famously opined: Theatre-*e Lokosikkhe Hoi* (Theatre educates the mass.) Girish Chandra somberly asked his mentor, how he could get rid of his pains. Ramakrishna, a great people's poet himself asserted that Girish Chandra should bear the pains of others', like a *Nilkantha* (Lord Shiva's name after he drank poison) and vent out his reactions in his plays. Theatre, he emphasized, would be his ultimate motto, abode of peace and salvation. Ramakrishna anointed his instruction to Girish Chandra to hang on with Theatre as a *Bakaloma* (an order) 18 years after this incidence, legendary German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) commented that Theatre is simultaneously means of Entertainment as well as Education. (E² Theatre = ENTERTAINMENT + EDUCATION)

A theatrician and a spiritual leader, people of two different backgrounds, from different poles, commented in the same line about Theatre. In the coming years, many more talented people opined the same. Presently, the chief underlying consideration for any aesthetic creation has to be entertainment and education together. This basic condition applies to all kinds of art—Painting, Music, Acting, Literature. Those creations which impart entertainment only or preach education only, do not find a place in the long run. Both these aspects blend together, in requisite proportions to give birth to a true creation and this has been happening right from the start of human life & civilization. A morbid painting by Matisse enriches our aesthetic sense and imparts joy to our confused hearts. “*Lokosikkhe*”, the term Paramahansa used, implies an effort to educate the masses; Theatre is a place where people from different backgrounds gather. So, theatre has to become a mean of entertainment and knowledge for all of them. One can acquire education from a school or varsity or by reading books. But to acquire knowledge one has to resort to literature, films and plays. In theatre visuals become poetic—it purifies, enriches and enhances the mind of the spectator. This is a process of communication between those who are presenting the creation and those who are receiving it. An interaction continuously goes in between them as they exchange feelings and emotion. Both sides have to be conscious about talent, knowledge and education.

Theatre is a lively art form, a dynamic and kinetic sculpture. Plenty of people gather in a Theatre to taste the expressions of Theatre. Cinema although has a wider reach, is a synthetic film after all. Theatre is not only a live film about a composite art form comprising elements from all other art forms. It is an wonderful resultant of inputs from light-sound-dialogues-set design-background score-story etc. Theatre captures the reflection of a country in her many contours and flavours starting from society-politics-economics and the lives of people. The area where Theatre excels is purification of the heart. That is precisely why Theatre continues to survive in spite of the action of forces of Globalization, Open Market Economy, and Conspiracy of Mercenaries etc. History has proved that no force in world can destroy the tools of mass education. An eminent political leader had once told Girish Chandra that his plays Siraj-ud-daula and Mir Kasem can stir the masses more than any political rally! Theatre is powerful not only because it inspires but it comments an idea in the hearts & brains of people by communicating

the right words, in right voice, through illusion. It is reminiscent of a heap of gunpowder; the summary of an epic and a gatekeeper of realization.

Different Idioms of Theatre

Bengali Theatre started in 1795 in the form of Proscenium. The original art form of our land i.e. the Folk Theatre dates back to thousands of years. Sanskrit Theatre is also second in age only to Greek Theatre. Bengali Theatre can be classified into three categories—Folk Theatre (Lokanatyā), Public Stage (Sadharan Rangalaya) and Parallel Theatre. The Word ‘Lokanatyā’ itself bears the unity of ‘Lok’ (People) and ‘Natyā’ (Theatre). According to Bharat’s Natyashastra ‘Theatre’ is a composite art form formed by the fusion of the four Vedas i.e. Theatre is the fifth Veda (Pancham Veda). However, we still have not accepted this term which is again a mystery. In all probability, the influence of colonialism has made us prefer “Theatre” over “Pancham Veda”.

We can trace the beginning of ‘Parallel’ Theatre back to 1943. It is also popularly known by names like Gananatyā, Nabanatyā, and Group Theatre Movement etc. Although it remains a mystery whether a movement is at all feasible with art forms. In general sense, it denotes the theatre which runs parallel to the Public Stage with same level of confidence and prestige. On a satirical note, it may be said that the Public Stage is ‘Sadharan’ i.e. not for the Sadharan or the general public! It is difficult for the commoners to fathom the poetic philosophers, psychology and politics discussed upon in Parallel Theatre. This is precisely why Tagore, around 1927, had proposed setting up of “Little Theaters” for the staging of Parallel Theatre. But unfortunately, no one took lead of what Tagore said and till date Parallel Theatre is staged for a handful of intellectuals inside empty big auditoriums. This form of theatre practice has not been able to perform the act of communicating to the masses. The Indian People’s Theatre Association (also known as IPTA & Gananatyā Sangha) was established in 1943.

With an aim to arouse the masses through Theatre but, it was soon accused of compromise to aesthetic aspects in favour of political propoganda and as a result, many talented artiste were compelled to quit. The dream of staging Theatre amidst the masses was shattered and Theatre become confined in the cities are a medium of ‘Babu Culture’, entertainment for the urban elite.

As the access of common people to Theatre was blocked, Badal Sircar philosophized taking Theatre to the terraces of the masses. This gave birth to his “Third Theatre” movement. Although, he viewed it as a philosophy, not a movement. Entry through, tickets makes Theatre dependent on money. So he gave up the system and instead called for voluntary donation which is also optional but his effects reached only few people and failed to connect to the masses. Although the philosophy was commendable, audience was very few in number. In this contest, I would like to quote Bijan Bhattacharya, one of the chief theatricians of the people’s Theatre:

“People’s Theatre (Gananatya) cannot be performed without connecting to the “Gana” (people)”.

But, the question is how to connect to the masses through Theatre? Bhattacharya has opined by not worked on the issue. He remained engaged ion group Theatre. The differences between the public stage and Group Theatre is not clearly accounted unlike their hostilities, while the former is perceived as crass, the latter to be amateurish and mass-isolated. Both accuse each other to be ignorant in terms of acting! Many feel that the public stage is a dead & lost entity. But logically it does not seem correct as many contemporary Group Theatres are currently operating under the philosophy of the public stage. There are instances of this phenomenon in past history of Bengali Theatre as well. The transition of Bengali Theatre has taken place from Shyambazar to Academy and in the process it has messed up its character, heritage, ideals, motive, class, colour and every other feature. Theatre cannot survive only on purity and intellect.

The categorization of Theatre is not acceptable logically-Question many be raised-Has education and entertainment not been integrated in the public stage? Could Parallel Theatre at all originate, if there was no Public Theatre? Did public stage die for the rise of parallel Theatre or for its own faults?

The Public stage in Bengal

Before we dwell deep into the present discussion, it is better to admit the fact that it is an impossible task for the Group Theatre to communicate to the masses the way public stage did, Group Theatre operates in a framework of limited shows and limited audience while ‘mass’

indicates uncountable people, from all back grounds- 'loka' in 'Lokosikkhe' as Paramahansa referred to.

The Bengali public stage started in 1872 with the play "Neeldarpan". 'National Theatre', was just a theatre group not the name of a theatre hall. A longstanding theatre started with 'Bengal Theatre' with the staging of "Sharmristha" in 1873. It continued shows for about 30 years. Bengali as a language and literature, it was a stage of infancy. The studies and discourses relied heavily on the Veda-Upanishad, Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata and English books. Of course, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was trying relentlessly to reform the Bengali language. Colonial language was steadily intruding into literature. The musical acting of the Jatras was being adopted in proscenium Theatre as well. As people flocked to watch Theatre, society was divided in its opinion on this new phenomenon. While some viewed it as a medium of education, others felt it was pure entertainment. While some despised it for involving the prostitutes as actresses. Others explored different spaces like terraces and different texts like Kalidasa and Shakespeare. The sly British rulers got the scent of nationalistic tendencies in it and promptly passed the Dramatic Performance Control Act 1876 to chock any voice of revolt from the stage. This fear proves that Theatre was gaining in strength in terms of communication to the masses.

In spite of talented playwrights writing for the Bengali stage, the likes of Dinabandhu Mitra, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore, it was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay whose novels became the back bone of the Bengali public stage. Tagore's plays were way too artistic for the common man to appreciate. As Bankim Chandra's novels gained popularity on stage, their sale as books also increased. Notable among these are *Kapal Kundala*, *Bishabrikha*, *Anandamath*, *Durgeshnandini*, *Krishnakanter Will*, *Sitaram* and *Indira*, Even new literary rhythms like Michael's "*Amitrakhar Chhanda*" and Girish Chandra's "*Gairishi Chhanda*" were brought and the stage with success largely due to efforts of talented actors. Thus, theatre popularized literature, it enabled the common masses to appreciate the taste of good literature, without even knowing how to read or write. In a third world country like India a large section of people are uneducated and illiterate. Theatre, by its communicative and interpretative role can life their knowledge and consciousness. It is an

unparallel medium when it comes to the welfare of society. Although cinema has more numbers in terms of audience, theatre influence mind very quickly and effectively.

Here is a list of first twenty five authors whose work have been adapted and staged in the public stage over the years.

1. Abadhut
2. Adwaita Mallabarman
3. Anurupa Devi
4. Ashapura Devi
5. Banaful
6. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay
7. Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya
8. Bibhutibhusan Mukhopadhyaya
9. Gajendra Kumar Mitra
10. Jajabar
11. Jarasandha
12. Narayan Gangopadhyaya
13. Nihar Ranjan Gupta
14. Nirupama Devi
15. Premendra Mitra
16. Rabindranath Tagore
17. Ramesh Chandra Dutt
18. Samaresh Basu
19. Shaktipada Rajguru
20. Shankar
21. Sharadindu Bandyopadhyaya
22. Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay
23. Subodh Ghosh
24. Sunil Gangopadhyaya
25. Tara Shankar Bandyopadhyaya

(The names have been laid out alphabetically)

A Quantitative computation of Audience

It will be interesting to calculate the number of viewers going to the Theatre. Bengali Theatre has been viewed by all kinds of audience, ever outside the Bengalis. We may assure that in West Bengal. But it may be undoubtedly inferred that audience of public stage in time period 1872-1992 is much stronger than Group Theatre during 1943-2013. In the period 1960-92 shows ran to packed houses for almost 4-5 shows per week of a single play. On every holiday and weekends there were double shows (3-6pm and 6-9pm) and are 6:30 show on Thursday . A play was staged about 22-25 shows per month. None of the productions ran less than 100 shows and the highest went up to 2,500 shows, The plays which had maximum shows are- Nahabat(2200 shows) , Barbadhu (1800 shows) and Samadhan (1600 shows). If we assume 600 audience on an average the total audience figure of three plays comes to 33, 60,000. The figure is a burning representation of the public stage's connection with the mass.

Excerpts from a figurative assumption:

1. Mother tongue Bengali- 10,000 people (50% literate)
2. Literate – 5,000 people (Readers-50, Highly educated-1,500, less educated-3,450)
3. Theatre Audience- 1,000 people (10%)
4. Readers-50 people (i.e. - 0.5%)

Thus, based on an assumption we arrive at an inference that only 0.5% of total population watches Theatre.

Theatre Communication- Qualitatively

As Shakespeare's Hamlet arrives on stage in its Bengali avatar of Sharat Chandra's *Devdas*, Theatre assumes the role of touch bearers to the right paths to be followed. It purifies the heart, enriches the mind and inspires the souls. It enlightens and makes people aware of their limitations. It points out to what is right and what is wrong.

A theatre narrates a story or reinforces a story with the help of external illusions like light- set-dance-music- recitation- dialogues etc. It transports our brain and heart into altogether different

ambience. It rejuvenates the brain of a tired man with examples and satisfaction. According Brain Scientists a two hour play is seen only by eyes but if a scene is retained by the third level of brain for seconds then it is a meaningful achievement. Theatre has the capacity to heal the restless mind and comprises both poetry (Kavya) and Scenery (Drishya). Eminent brain scientist Dr. Sajal Bandyopadhyaya opines that in the present times of crisis, the human brain is not functioning properly. In this case, Theatre can become a Therapy.

Conclusion

At present the main communicating mechanism between the people and Theatre-the public stage has closed down in Bengal as well as rest of India. But at one point of time, Theatre was the principal medium of mass education. The arrival of cinema and its competition with Theatre has affected Theatre badly. But it is a heartening fact that rural theatre, Yatra, still lives on and yields significant impact on the common people of suburbs and villages. The farmers and labourers taste mythological epics as well as current affairs in society through Yatra. Yatra is in fact combating the negative forces of television as competing media of mass communication. This is the same Yatra which blended with European Theatre to build up our public stage.