

**WHEN THE WINDOWS OPENED: COMMUNICATION THROUGH FOREIGN
ADAPTATIONS ON THE BENGALI STAGE**

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The windows are still open and often frontiers overlap with each other, whereby our contemporary context inspires a dramatist of the native soil to look beyond. Often it is not just a case of borrowing; by the mental force of the playwright-producer; the play from a foreign soil gets transformed to the extent of being re-created on the native soil. Landmarks are thus created in the history of stage performance. Martin Meisel has shown in his book *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre* how Shaw adapted or transplanted foreign plays (mainly French) and their genres to the soil of the English drama and made it all the richer in its output. Over decades, the Bengali stage, through its interaction with Group Theatre, got inspiration from many landmarks of European drama and through adaptations changed its contours. The present article only endeavors to re-capture the early attempts; very recent adaptations are relegated beyond such an overview.

Production-wise, the most remarkable impact was created in the early sixties by Sombha Mitra's team 'Bohurupee' which introduced Ibsen (in all his complexity) on the Bengali stage, thus significantly breaking down the citadel of the historical-mythological and social problem-oriented drama, which had ruled the Bengali stage from the outset, making it almost insular in character. Even the expert management of stage skills by Sisir Bhaduri in and outside India could not give it a wider and universal character until 'Bohurupee' in the fifties,

following spilt in the IPTA—or, more properly speaking, Sombhu Mitra's in-depth dynamism—had the courage to attempt the breakthrough.

Translation and stage presentation of any classic demands the producer's awareness of the play's relevance to any other scenario, both spatially and temporally. When Mitra, just passing through the initial post-independence phase in India, saw the crumbling down of positive values, Ibsen seemed to him to be the right choice. Without judging Ibsen on the basis of any fixed label, he wanted to capture a rebel against the accepted modes and mores of the upper middle-class society. His legacy continued to inspire generations of new dramatists, new audiences and intellectuals alike.

'Dasha Chakra' (*An Enemy of the People*) was the first foreign play to be adapted by 'Bohurupee' and presented on the stage. In 1952, it was when dreams in post-British India were beginning to be shattered or proved to be illusory. The first General Election and the need to define the scope and character of our new democracy needed to be pointed out. It was necessary to underline the courage of a single individual in daunting the undue pressure of the hysteric masses. In short the force of wrong ideology remained, and showed the tendency to choke the voice of a 'single' individual, though he be in the right direction.

For 'Dasha Chakra', following Ibsen's '*An Enemy of the people*' was a mind-setter in its own time. The need to re-define the path of so-called 'democracy' never seemed to bother our political leaders. Building up individual consciousness that can pierce the darkness of muddleheaded self-interest was the dream of Tagore and Gandhi. But the 'freedom at midnight' let loose absolute social, political and moral anarchy. Sombhu Mitra, whose study of world's dramatic scenario was too rigid to fit into the simplistic world-view of the IPTA went into the innermost depth of a rare visionary and dared to performance 'Dasha Chakra' amid applause.

A straight line of approach may be drawn through Mitra's production of world classics: from Putul Khela' (*A Doll's House*) (1957) through 'Raja Oedipous' (*Oedipus the King*) (1964) to 'Galileor Jiban' (Life of Galileo), (1980). All the three plays underscore the same vital message of journeying through the darkness of life. Dr. Roy ('Dasha Chakra') finds that none can match the strength of an individual who has the courage to stick to his vision against all opposition of the world, All the three plays explore, in different socio-political and cultural contexts, man's illimitable fight against Destiny (absolute or immediate in form) and his

dogged tenacity to fight through darkness to light.(The same propensity, perhaps, drove him to Tagore's Raja and Raktakarabi too). 'Bohurupee' itself(not to speak of other groups) could never touch such horizons in its other plays.

It is difficult to assess the impact of other foreign adaptations on the Bengali stage. For, it cannot be summed up under any single heading.

Yet it was Brecht during the sixties and seventies whose plays seemed to catch the tune with more than one group. The leftist leaning of the period, leading to emergency and censorship, perhaps upheld Brecht as a socialist playwright with definite social message. Also, Brecht's use of posters, songs and episodic nature of his drama creating the famous 'Alienation effect' proved popular on the Bengali stage, although nobody pointed out its similarity with traditional Indian style of drama.

Therefore, just his 'Good Person of Setzuan' was translated & performed as 'Bhalomanush (Nandikar) 'BhaloManusher Pala'(Chetna), later as 'Sankhapurer Sukanya'(Nandikar), The Caucasian chalk Circle as 'Khorir Gandi' (Nandikar), 'Herr Puntila' and his man Matti as 'Pontu Laha'(Theatre Unit'), Life of Galileo (as both 'Galileo and 'Galileor Jiban'(both Natyakendra and Bohurupee'). Soumitra Chatterjee translated & adapted 'The Exception and the Rule' as 'Bidhi-o-Byatrikan'(Chalachal) or Utpal Dutta's translation transcreated 'De Masname' as 'Samadhan' and later staged by 'Chetna'.

It must be mentioned, however, that Brecht adaptations have not taken roots in the soil of Bengali stage. 'Bohurupee' under Sombhu Mitra did not lean towards Brecht, though the combined Repertory (Natya Kendra) production of Brecht's Galileo had Sombhu Mitra as the star attraction. Later on, Mitra went back to the myths of Bengal and folk 'Jatra' style to compose his soul-stirring play 'Chand Baniker Pala. In between, his daughter Shaonli followed suit by re-exploring the 'Mhabharata' and the form of 'Kathakata' in her 'Katha Amrita Sanan' or 'Nathabati Anathalat.'

Adaptations from foreign plays by Nandikar had their heyday in late sixties and mid-seventies. But there was hardly any consistency in their choice of playwright, except connecting 'Bengali stage with the 'avant-grade' dramatists of the world class.

Thus, when Rudra Prasad Sengupta translated the basic uncertainty and quest for self-identity, 'Pirandello's 'Six characters in search of An Author'('Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra) and Nandikar performed it, Bengali stage reached an unsurpassable height. Later when 'Henry the Fourth' by the same author was adapted & enacted by Ajitesh and his teammates, the existentialist peep into the absurdity of the universe was established. But a completely different direction was taken up when they staged Anton Chekhov's 'The Cherry Orchard' as 'Manjari Aamer Manjari' or 'Tamaku Sebaner Apakarita' (On the harmfulness of Taking Tobacco). Ajitesh Banerjee made a grand success with 'Nana Ranger Din'. But it can hardly be matched with the production of Pirandello they had undertaken before. In short, there has been no running continuity on the part of 'Nandikar' so far as adapted plays are concerned.

It can be explained from another angle also. In 1962 IPTA censured Ajitesh Banerjee for producing Pirandello. This even showed not only the claustrophobia that IPTA had been in; on the other hand, his eyes opened to the panorama of world theatre. But still it is not clear how in pre-and post- Brecht phases,'Nandikar' resorted to Chekhov or later, even Harold Pinter (The Birthday Party) ('Trettishtomo Janmodibos', dir. Ajitesh Banerjee).

These are some examples of a few adaptations which have remained at best partial in outlook. They might have glorified the Bengali stage for a brief while but could not show any permanent avenue.

That is why G.B. Shaw could not inspire anything permanent other than 'Madhuchakra' (adaptation of Mrs. Warren's Profession by Utpal Dutta and produced by 'Gandharva'). Dramatically poles apart, Ionesco was adapted and produced by Shaonli Mitra on behalf of 'Bohurupee' ('Rhinoceros' as 'Gandaar') in the sixties. While John Osborne, the pioneer-figure in British Theatre of the 'Angry Young Man' has not been present on the Bengali stage even during the Naxalite Movement though 'anger' in the 'socio-political and 'socio economic' senses was rampant in Bengal .But Arnold Wesker with his socially conscious worldview has been adapted as 'Jakhan Eka' by 'Nandikar' (Roots) and 'Bela Abelar Galpo' by 'Theatre Workshop' (Chicken Soup With Barley).

From among the American dramatists who have defined the modern human being's existence Tennessee Williams, Arther Miller and Eugene O'Neill have made some inroads.Gangapada Basu's adaptation of 'Desire Under the Elms' was performed by

'Anwasha' in the seventies 'The Glass Menagerie' was adapted as 'Kancher ghar' and performed on All India Radio, Kolkata in the seventies, once again, but did not find suitable stage. Indrashis Lahiri adapted 'A Streetcar Named Desire' into 'Ichhey-Gari' and Rama Prasad Banik directed it. What must be noted with due importance that Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman stormed the stage as 'Janaiker Mrityu' by 'Chaturmukh' under the able direction of Ashim Chakraborty in the sixties. The same was revived by Rudra Prasad Sengupta as 'Feriwalar Mrityu' under 'Nandikar', as well as his A View from the Bridge as Gotraheen. A more recent adaptation of Miller has been 'Aagsuddhi' (The Crucible) by 'Chenamukh' under the direction of Rama Prasad Banik.

The present scenario does not seem to look westward. Indigenous productions do not seem to be too ambitious. But there is a trend towards revival of classics and bio-dramas. An alert and alive adaptation may indicate a brighter future.

(In the preparation of this article I acknowledge the inspiration provided by Rudra Prasad Sengupta's book Paschimer Theatre: Ibsen theke Albee).