

*Commentary-5*  
*Global Media Journal-Indian Edition/ISSN 2249-5835*  
*Sponsored by the University of Calcutta/www.caluniv.ac.in*  
*Winter Issue/December 2013/Vol.4/No.2*

## **ROLE OF THEATER MAGAZINES: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OR CONNECTING INTERNATIONALISM**

**Nripendra Saha**

Theatre Journalist & Critic  
Member  
Communication Committee  
International Theatre Institute, UNESCO  
Paris, France  
Email: nripendra\_saha@rdiffmail.com  
Website: www.iti-worldwide.org

The role of theater magazines or theater related periodicals isn't limited to the topics related to theater and drama only. Not only should it elucidate discussion about the theater practice of the particular language community it serves to, but also cater to the development of regional culture of that community, embalmed in socio-economic and political environment. However, if we particularize the role of these theater magazines or periodicals for the development of regional culture only, that indicates an incomplete perception and only a part of the reality. Needless to say, as we are in the doorway of 21<sup>st</sup> century, no culture can be viewed as a secluded regional culture per se. Except for the ancient groups, influence of national and global culture can now be seen in nearly every regional cultural communities. The growth of cultural industries has eliminated the gap between rural and urban cultural set up. Therefore, a competent theater magazine will not only help the culture of a particular region to bloom, but make it connect to the national and global cultural perception as well. And for that purpose, theater can motivate the life philosophy and struggle for existence of the common people, by reinforcing the socially mutual relation of the trio – dramatic arts, the artists and the audiences. And that will be the true role of theater magazines.

Let's explain how. Although drama and plays have been an integral part of our life since the beginning of culture, publication of theater magazines in Asia was originated as a result of 20<sup>th</sup> century drama research. According to history, theater practice of a land, based on its distinctive religious, economic and socio-political environment, is basically an expression of its national background, harsh criticism and sometimes depiction of an organized resolution to the problems.

If we look carefully into the global trend of theater research and development, we can observe two trends of the art form. One, that is, based on little tradition of the folk culture of a particular language group and thus popularly denoted as 'folk theater' and another one that focuses on great traditions or sophisticated form of theatrical art of the same language group, for instance, and thus termed as 'classical theater'. Since the past 2000 years, this classical theater has embraced various traditions – foreign or its own idiosyncratic little traditions – and experimented with unique styles to develop its modern form.

So far, no directory, on theatrical art and production, is been able to provide any substantial document on the historical background and emergence of theater magazines around the world. However, according to *The Cambridge Guide to World Theater* edited by Martin Banham in the chapter titled 'Criticism', in 1877, a British drama critic Clement Scott (1841-1904) used to publish a theater periodical named –*The Theater*, till 1890, before it ceased publication. Drama criticism began in Europe not long before 16<sup>th</sup> century and even during that period, the discussions were barely restricted to the appreciation and integrity of the conventional theater. The trend of theater criticism in a classical perspective began with Philip Sidney, when he started a defensive argument on the honesty of theater as an art form. The style of neo-classical criticism began in France with P. Corneille's analysis of *Le Cid* (1637) – famously known as '*Querlle du Cid*'. During this time pamphlets started distributing around the land, to promote performance centric theater analysis. An editor named Jean Loret collected all these pamphlets and publishes *Muse Historique*. Politician and critic Joseph Addison edited a theater related magazine 'The Spectator' with the assistance of Sir Richard Steele. Followed by its success, a number of publications emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and popularized theater criticism in the course. In the later of the same century the neo-classical style faced criticism widely in France, Germany, England and other parts of Europe. August Wilhelm and Karl Wilhelm Friedrich, in Germany, began the trend of romanticism in theater criticism. As Shakespeare never followed

classical approach of theatrical production in writing his dramas, his style contributed in the development of romantic criticism in this century. The next decade, 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw the growth of strong realistic and pragmatic approach in theatrical criticism. In France, the newspapers and periodicals reserved nearly 150 columns specifically for discussion on drama theories and its application. A daily paper named *Comoedia* started publishing as theater journal, since 1907.

A chronological account on the emergence and growth of theater magazines and periodicals should be there in the history, but it never happened owing to the general apathy towards its importance. However, thankfully, in this end of 20<sup>th</sup> century we can see the International Theater Institute, directed by UNESCO, has got interested in doing the long due work and I expect, they are almost done with the survey and research on European theater magazines. Therefore, following the initiative, theater editors and critics have gathered here today for an insightful discussion about Asian theater magazines and periodicals, with a unified motto of – Cooperation through communication. I hope the talk will be of excellent stature to determine the role of theater publications in the development of regional culture.

In Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Burma, Bangladesh, China, Japan and South East Asian countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and beyond, the practice of theatrical art and performance goes long back in the history and in some cases, richer than the Greek dramas in tradition. In this part of land as well, theater broadly has two genres – little tradition and great tradition. The long ruling period of European imperialism on various parts of Asia resulted in a transformation of the culture of different ethnic groups, inflicted by colonialism. The transformation has a unique characteristic, that in a way expressed the influence of European theatrical art and on the other hand, except for the style, storyline and the context always criticized and opposed the threat of foreign rule on nationalism. As a tool to protest against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, theater in Asian region emerged with its distinctive flavor. However, it's not feasible to delve deep into the historical background of theater practice in different parts of Asia, as most of the information are document related and barely experienced in first hand, unlike of my motherland India, especially West Bengal, where we have been able to experience direct contact. Our topic of discussion is Asian theater publications, but apart from the knowledge about our own language papers, we

hardly have any quality data about other countries of this region. Although the theater practices of those regions are old in tradition, the speakers of the countries are young in energy, I hope.

In case of India, before the year 1901 there was no authentic theater publication in Bengali language. The influence of English theater was apparent in the Bengali theater practice of colonial India. Although the 'little tradition' inspired *jatra* and folk theater have been there in the country since a long time. Since Sanskrit is the source of Bengali and other primary Indian languages, the Sanskrit drama and theater can be termed as the 'great tradition'. In 1795 when Herashim Lebedef produced the first Bengali theater in Calcutta, despite its European content the influence of *jatra* was clearly apparent in theatrical application. From 1831 to 1857, most of the plays directed and staged by the Bengalis were mostly Sanskrit. The inspiration from Sanskrit natyashastra, European dramas and *jatra* can be traced in the first two dramas that were written during that time - '*Kirtibilas*' and '*Bhadrarjun*'. Later in 1860s principle of the same trio was apparent in '*Nildarpan*' as well. And this one play created such a stir that frightened the British imperialists to stop the oppression on indigo planters. In 1872 *Sadharan Rangalaya* was formed in Calcutta with the staging of this play. In the following period, a number of dramas were played there and increasingly caused a matter of concern for the British rulers. As a result Dramatic Performance Act was promulgated in 1876.

Now how come we get to know about the early years of Bengali theater from 1795 to 1876? What is the source?

Well, the sources are advertisement, news, articles on dramatic performances, drama criticism, letters and essays published in Bengali and English newspapers of that time.

Printing press came in India during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and 'Bengal Gazette' – the first Indian newspaper in English language – was published by James Augustus Hickey on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1789. The publication of Bengali newspapers began in 1818. The activities of Lebedof became public with the advertisements published in the 'Calcutta Gazette' newspaper in 1795. This publicity made people curious about him and after research it was revealed that being a Russian, his non-British nationality made him a foe of the then British rulers. They blamed him for being a Russian spy. The colonial rulers couldn't stand the empathy of this Russian man for the growth

of Bengali culture and out aversion they put the Bengali theater on fire just after the second day performance of Lebedof.

Although there are hardly any document available, tracing the development of Bengali theater in period after 1796 and before 1830-31, the information on the abolishment of 'substandard production of *jatra* descended from classical drama' and growth of 'reformed *jatra*', inspired by European sophistication can be found on the newspapers of that time. Even in 1826, a conservative paper like '*Samachar chandrika*' also proposed the need for an entertainment medium for the Bengalis, just like the Englishmen had. The history behind the creation of theater for the '*babu*'s or gentlemen of the then Bengal can be known from the September 17, 1831 edition of '*Samachar Darpan*' newspaper. It was not emerged out of mere popular excitement, but as a socio-cultural revolution and this marked the beginning of Bengalis' tryst with Shakespeare practice. It was through his creations that made the theater of Bengal acquainted with the world drama. The drama critics of those early times realized the close alliance between theater and realism. Those critics already had the knowledge about European dramas and our very own Sanskrit *natya* before penning down their analysis. Their criticisms were not devoid of the generous dose of socialistic accountability. The clash with Western civilization inspired modernism in the Eastern civilization. In Bengal, a conflict instigated between two groups of newly emerged middle-class. One group aimed to step ahead with scientific and progressive perspectives while the other stuck on to conservatism. In the midst of such social conflict, Bengal Theater aspired to bring in revolution for social reform, nationalism and independence. The plays that were being staged triggered huge response from the audiences that time. The performances spread in the suburban areas like Chuchura, Dhaka and Pabna and became popular. The standard of journalism during that time was wholly based on integrity of the writers and thus the criticisms were neutral. As a result, the artists also paid much attention to the critics' views and strived for betterments in their performances.

The position of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was only confined to the household and they had no independence of whatsoever. Personalities like Bankim Chandra, Michael, Vidyasagar and Dinabandhu struggled for women liberation. Before 1872, the role of women characters were played by women themselves in elite theaters, but after *Rangalaya* was established, the trend of men performing in women characters were seen. For the sake of maintaining realism in

dramatics, when Michael suggested for selecting women or *Noti* for such roles, they were collected from prostitute homes. That created a stir in the society. An uproar created about these 'wicked women' polluting the theater environment, but ironically, its those ill-fated and poor women who managed a distinct position in the history of Bengali theater on their own merit. Such was the conflict in middle class mentality of the men that refrained them for allowing women from their families to act on stage but found no problem in assigning prostitutes for the roles, even ignoring the opposition from their wives. The period of British colonialism only fueled such waywardness of men. Rabindra Nath Tagore took the first step towards breaking this obnoxious trend in a theater staged in *Jorasanko*, where he let the women of his own house act in the play. The *Notis* of *Sadharan Rangalaya* got money and fame alright, but had no social respect till the mid of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The trend changed after that though. The women of today, if interested in the art and have the caliber to perform on stage, are now coming forward to act in theater.

The enhancement of social respect of the performers implies increase of social value of theater. However, till 1901, there was no theater magazine or periodical in the country. There can be few reasons – one, the standard of theater journalism itself was so high that it could assess the performances accurately and predict its future; two, the drama artists were so occupied with the production and staging of the plays that they found no time or finance to publish any theater journal; three, since the artists had to spend much time with the prostitutes for the performances, they faced severe criticism from the society and suffered from insecurities and they also had a kind of literary arrogance in them which refrained them to write on poem and novels, but theater; four, till the time of Girish Chandra – as the best dramatic and director – there was only one creative stream in *Rangalaya*, thus we had to wait for the new transformation. And that phase began with the entry of young and talented Amarendra Nath Dutta on theater, hailing from an affluent and educated family. As we said before, theater publications were a new identity of modern theater.

Despite various opinions, the arrival of modernism in the world of culture can be traced during the time of 1890s onwards. From that time to the 1930s European arts and cultural world freed from naturalism. Scientific innovations and logical socialism in politics and spurt of socialism in one hand and frustration of bourgeois, death, first world war, soviet revolution on the other hand

brought in metaphorical realism, expressionism, surrealism, Dadaism, futurism and cubism in literature, art and theater.

In reality, the revolution of Karl Marx clouded a dark cloud over capitalism. Demand for freeing the working class from age long oppression and dominance and their unification to fight against the wrongs at one point and the demolition of feudal monarchy along with the rising rage of the middle class against all-devouring capitalism at the other point influenced the artists and intellectuals to revolt at the same time. This revolution either strengthened the struggle towards making a better world or fueled the bourgeois thoughts. Progressive revolt or reactive wave – the transformation in the art world had its unique expressions. This conflict was apparent in theater as well. A. Alvarez rightly remarked that such wide expansion is basically an international revolution, which instigated the expression of a number of powers in a number of countries at the same time.

Amarendra Nath Dutta, who in 1901 transformed the theatrical practice, started the publication of '*Rangalaya*' – a weekly theater publication to articulate the experiences, thoughts and pros and cons of the applications for the people by the artists themselves. The famous Panchkori Bandyopadhyay was appointed as editor of the paper, which used to come out with ivory prints with beautiful pictures and writings. It went well and published at regular intervals for two years. Amarendra Nath couldn't devote much time and patience in the publication after managing the stage shows and drama planning. The editor was given the sole responsibility for two years and the paper stopped publishing after that incurring a loss of Rs. 60,000. But the paper was immensely popular during that short period of time and sold thousands of copies. The selling cost of the paper was 2 paisa and the production cost was 6 paisa. There was a time when Amarendra Nath announced that he aimed the number of paper subscribers to cross 1 lakh. Incidentally, I would like to mention that the current sell of international theater publication 'The drama review' isn't even 10,000 copies.

The release of '*Rangalaya*' inspired other theater stalwarts to come out with their own publications as well. '*Rangabhumi*' (1901), published from Minarva Manch, couldn't run for long. Therefore, the notable theater publications as published during early 20<sup>th</sup> century are;

1. *Rangalaya* (1901-04) – weekly – Edited by Panchkori Bandyopadhyay

2. *Rangabhumi* (1901) – weekly – Published by Minarva Theater
3. *Rangamanch* (1910) – Edited by Manilal Bandyopadhyay
4. *Natyamandir* (1910 – 15) – Edited by Manilal Bandyopadhyay
5. *Natyapatrika* (1913) – Edited by Narayan Chandra Sen
6. *Natyapratibha* (1918) – Edited by Satyendra Nath Dutta
7. *Nachghor* (1924 – 1926) – Weekly – Edited by Hemendra Kumar Roy and Premankur Atarhi
8. *Roop O Rango* (1924) – Edited by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Nirmal Chandra
9. *Rangodarshon* (1925) – Edited by Amarendra Nath Dutta
10. *Natoraj* (1925) – Weekly – Edited by Byomkesh Roychaudhuri
11. *Bango Rangalaya* (1926) – Edited by Sailendra Nath Ghosh

Although the above mentioned publications were not of the same standard, all of them aimed for the developing the art form and connecting the theater of this part of the world to the global platform. Among these publications, *Nachghor* was a renowned name for its balanced coverage of general entertaining theatrical performances and intelligent productions and methodical directions. The paper was actively involved in creating public support for the initiative launched by Rabindra Nath Tagore, one of the glorious stars of Bengal theater, for establishing little theater in parallel of the *Sadharan Rangalaya*.

Repeating what we mentioned at the beginning of this session, the periodicals from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only intended to popularize the art form of the land, but also aspired for the theater achieve its national and international character. They always seek to find the resemblance between Indian and European theater performers. I am not sure if they could find any national satisfaction in terming Girish Chandra as a Shakespeare of Bengal or Amarendra Nath as Garrick, but that gesture reflected colonial inclination, no doubt. Any regional culture is ought to cry for national and international recognition when it starts to bloom in full form.

Even in Europe or America too, when a number of theater journals were published at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of international thoughts were apparent in their intent. Since 1911 The Drama League of America published a theater magazine named ‘The Drama’ for thrice a month. According to the publisher’s note, although the paper aimed “to cultivate a



deeper understanding, and appreciation for American Drama and Theater”, in the next years of their publication the paper opened discussion for Eastern and Western Europe as well. The Theater Arts Magazine (1916) – a thrice a month publication by Sheldon Cheni in the editorship – announced during the launch that it aims “to develop the creative impulse in the American theater” and as a result the paper had to move from Detroit to New York in 1917 for publishing write ups about German theater, as the city was known as war sensitive zone. However the paper was made a monthly publication since 1924, for strengthening its international understanding. In 1948 another paper named The Stage merged with Theater Arts and published as a joint paper.

Followed by the success of Russian Revolution in 1917, communist and intellectual theater artists of the capitalist countries like America and Europe took the initiative and formed theater for the working class. They came out with a number of publications for those communist theaters. Those writings helped them to spread the views and principles of communism as reflected by the theaters in their own land and beyond the boundaries.

India, under the dominance of British rulers, just began to form communist associations, trade union revolution and also Cultural Revolution, in parallel. A number of publications by the Federal Theater Project of America both directly and indirectly inspired the cultural revolution of that time. The young Indians who came to England or America for study and came back in the native land, turning communists, played an important in those publications to transform the style and form of Indian theater. The notable publications of that period were – Workers’ Theater published by Workers’ Laboratory Theater (1928), daily tabloid The Living News Paper (July 1936) published by Great National Theater or New Theater Quarterly, Guerilla Street Theater etc.

Along with the colonial rule in our country, World War II brought along black-out, black-market, communal riot, struggle for independence, epidemic and food scarcity as well. In such a condition, the public theater - established in 1872 – had to cease production in 1943-44. During that time a new form of theater emerged in Bengal in the name of people’s theater. Today this theater has more than 300 branches in all over West Bengal. Because of People’s Theater and its guiding principles, the drama culture of Bengal has been able to secure a position in the mainstream theater. After independence, few artists of IPTA formed a different theater group,

aiming for democratic culture. The first group was named – Bohurupi. There are number of groups in West Bengal today, known as group theaters. Nearly 95% of group theaters are influenced by communist principles. This people’s theater movement and group theaters revolution complimented each other in creating a democratic cultural revolution. A number of publications appeared during this time. Some of the notable names are:

1. *Gananatya* (1952) – Editor - Salil Chaudhury
2. *Gananatya* (new editon) (1964-90) - Editor - Chittaranjan Das; Present editor – Shaktipada Bandyopadhyay
3. *Lokonatya* – Editor – Digin Bandyopadhyay
4. *Padpradip* (1956) – Editor – Utpal Dutt
5. *Bohurupi* (1955-90) – Half yearly publication - Editor – Gangapada Basu; Present editor – Kumar Roy
6. *Gandharva* (1957-66) – Quarterly publication – Editor – Nipendra Saha
7. *Gandharva* (new edition) (1980-90) – Half yearly publication – Editor – Deb Kumar Bhattacharya
8. *Proscenium* (1962) – Monthly publication – Editor – Samar Sarkar
9. *Epic Theater* (1966-90) – Editor – Utpal Dutt
10. *Group Theater* (1978-90) – Quarterly publication – Editor – Nipendra Saha
11. *Theater Bulletin* (1979) – Editor – Ashok Mukhopadhyay
12. *Sudhu Theater* (1982) – Editor – Aranya Mukhopadhyay
13. *Natyachinta* (1981-90) – Monthly publication - Editor – Rathin Chakraborty
14. *Ananayudh* (1985-90) - Monthly publication – Editor – Swapan Roy
15. *Rangabarta* (1986-90) – Editor – Shamik Bandopadhyay
16. *Natya Aacdemy Patrika* – Half yearly publication and *Paschim banga natya akademi patrika* - Editors – Nipendra Saha, Ashok Mukhopadhyay and Rathin Chakraborty

Apart from these a number of publications were published by various groups and few theater journalists. Few well known names among them are ‘*Abhinay Darpan*’ which later became ‘*Abhinay*’ and made a prominent name in the history of theater revolution of the suburbs. As a political theater publication, *Abhinay* was local in its approach but carried a strong tint of international revolution. Another paper ‘*Gandharva*’ spoke about new theater revolution. It

became a half yearly publication after re-launch. ‘Epic theater’ was influenced by the revolutionary principles of Utpal Dutt. ‘Group Theater’ became one of the most popular papers in West Bengal and its surrounding areas.

In our opinion, no theater publication in West Bengal ever ignored the impact of regionalism on its art form, but it doesn’t disregard the principle of nationalism and internationalism either. Basically, in spite of carrying the flavor of local language and culture, a theater journal is also a journal of protest against socio-cultural conflict and bureaucratic anguish and thus it has to speak about national interest as well. And in the doorway of 21<sup>st</sup> century, even the UNESCO seminar couldn’t imagine the national culture of a certain land can limit its periphery only within the national boundary after surviving the competition from international cultural industry (electronic mass media). The way capitalist world is approaching to devour the third world, after partially demolishing socialism in the Eastern Europe, didn’t lower the demand for socialism in this part of the world. Despite the growth of cultural industry, theater is required to keep up the culture of democratic cultural practice and a bundle of theater publication has to be there for that purpose. Therefore we believe the theater publications should be open to international cultural exchange as well, to promote its own regional culture only.

We know the Marxist drama theory of Bertolt Brecht about internationalism, but an opposing theory by absurdist playwright Eugène Ionesco is not that well known.

Let us consider his view here, in this context;

*“Art. As the saying goes, knows no frontiers. The Theater should have no frontiers either. Transcending ideological divergences, caste, race, national outlook and individual countries, the theater should be a Universal country, the meeting place of all men who share the same anguish and the same hopes revealed, the imagination, and should be neither arbitrary nor realistic but an expression of our identity, out continuity and out oneness.”*

- E. Ionesco

March, 1976