

THE OTHER THEATRE IN CALCUTTA

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The glory that Calcutta theatre had earned with Sisir Kumar as its guardian-angel was gone by the end of the '30s for Sisir Kumar had already passed his heyday by this time. Convention-ridden productions of antiquated historical pieces and superficial social dramas of the Saratchandra School became the major pre-occupation of the theatre-wallahs. Theatre ceased to be a social act even in a limited sense; it no longer reflected the pulse and the throb of the time. It had become sheer spectacle, a soul-less showpiece. Theatre and commerce became one and the same thing. For some time it seemed that theatre of this city was destined to die an inglorious death. But this was not to be.

In 1944 *Nabanna* was produced by "Anti-fascist writers and artists association" and a new era was ushered in. *Nabanna*, written by Bijon Bhattacharyya and directed by Sombhu Mitra, set the ball rolling and it was only a matter of time for the latent unchartered forces to combine and coalesce into the formation of I.P.T.A. Pledged to the search and representation of social reality, dedicated to the cause of social amelioration, I.P.T.A. very soon became a viable force in the world of theatre. Almost all the theatre-personalities of today came to work under its banner. But the very conception of I.P.T.A. unfortunately had seeds of its own disintegration. The artists were all very dedicated and sincere but the organisers held different notions. These Zhdanovite organisers knew or thought they knew their Marx better than anyone else. And they believed that knowing Marxian doctrines was enough to cope with problems of art-organisation and the dilemmas of aesthetics. Some of them were well-intentioned bullies, some were natural bullies, but bullies they were all. Here was something that hypersensitive artists could hardly agree to countenance. Consequently disintegration started. And that is how and when group theatres one after another started to

emerge. In the course of last 25 years about 2,000 theatre groups have been born and many of these have come to stay.

Diverse Groups

Twenty-five years of dedicated service by these groups has created a theatre in Calcutta that is rich in its diversity, wide in its range, venturesome in its spirit and artistic in its quality. It would hardly be a hyperbole to suggest that the living theatre in Bengal is now the monopoly of these groups. They alone have redeemed Bengali theatre and they alone can bring about its salvation. This theatre, the non-Commercial artistic theatre, the "other theatre" is doubtlessly the representative theatre of Calcutta.

The prime feature of this new theatre movement is the intellectual discipline that has all the while guided its activities.

The organisation, choice of play, rehearsal, production and the whole approach to theatre have been largely governed by intellect. Another distinctive feature of this 'other theatre' is its social commitment. Sociological awareness, a sense of social obligation, have nearly always been the motivating force behind this theatre. Of course the workers in this field are at great variance with each other regarding the scope and nature of social commitment; they often hold widely divergent opinions about the modes and methods of representing this commitment. The theatrical scene is often crowded by all possible colours of the socio-political spectrum. But a sense of social obligation is unmistakably and persistently present. This is again a theatre that refuses to beat the convention-ridden tracks and delights in venturesomeness. To these groups no form is sacrosanct, no technique is taboo. Then again the glory of discovering Tagore's greatness as a dramatist, belying the earlier assumption that most of his plays are fit for the closet only, rests with the group theatres.

This 'other theatre' has acted as the cradle for the growth and development of dramatists like Bijon Bhattacharyya, Badal Sircar, Sombu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Mohit Chatterjee, Chittaranjan Ghosh, Jyotirmoy Dutt, Ajitesh Banerjee, Nitish Sen and Botuk. Through the endeavours of these groups, theatre-lovers of Calcutta have come to know the great drama of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Pirandello, Sartre, Beckett, Anouilh, Ionesco, Brecht, Durrenmatt, O'Neill, Miller, Albee and Wesker. Finally, 25 years of group-theatre have succeeded in creating an audience of its own. And these have been years during which Bengali theatre has reformed itself into something artistic out of the commercial rag-bag.

Creative Years

On these 25 years of the 'other theatre', the period from 1960 to this date has been most intensely active and creative. In fact it wouldn't be making tall claims to suggest that theatre during this span of time has shown more vigorous signs of creativity than any other branch of art. A comparison with cinema, for example, will drive home the point. With the virtual retirement of Ritwik Ghatak from film-making, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen are the only directors in the present Bengali cinema who

can claim to be experimental film-makers. Whereas in the field of theatre as divergent and disparate personalities as Sombhu Mitra, Bijon Bhattacharyya, Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Banerjee, Shyamanand Jalan, Badal Sircar and Shyamal Ghosh are continuously working and experimenting to widen the theatrical horizons. I distinctly remember Satyajit Ray saying that Bengali theatre today is more active than all other branches of art. It was complimentary but he was also just stating the truth.

How creatively active this, 'other theatre' has been since 1960 can be well understood even from a brief analytical record of the performances of the major theatrical troupes of Calcutta.

Bohurupee, whose span of activities spread over nearly one fourth of the total period of Bengali theatre (regular theatre started here in 1872 and Bohurupee will have stepped into its 25th year in this May), must be mentioned first. Its long artistic tradition, discovery of the greatness of Tagore's dramatic values, disciplined production techniques and leadership of avant-garde theatre are things too well known to need reiteration. Let's examine specifically what this troupe has done since 1960. During this period it has produced *Kanchan Ranga*, *Visarjan*, *Raja*, *Raja Oedipaus*, *Baki Itihash*, *Pralap*, *Barbar Banshi*, *Tringsha Satabdi*, *Kimbadanti*, *Pagla Ghorah*, *Aparajita* and *Chope*, *Adalat Cholchhe*. Not a bad job to have produced as many as 12 plays in 11 years. This numerical consideration is not the whole story. Bohurupee has reaffirmed the greatness of Rabindranath and Indian drama for that matter by wonderfully mounting the highly metaphysical play *Raja*. It has also been instrumental in projecting Badal Sircar as a dramatist of a national stature by producing as many as four important plays of his. To choose Nitish Sen, a playwright hitherto unknown (author of *Barbar Banshi* and *Aparajita*), without caring for box-office reaction, has been an act of daring which truly becomes a group theatre. A meaningful step has also been taken by producing Vijay Tendulkar's *Chope*, *Adalat Cholchhe* (*Santata*). In spite of the fact that Sombhu Mitra has been at the acme of his directorial powers these years, *Bohurupee* has produced 4 plays under the direction of Tripti Mitra (*Kimbadanti* and *Aparajita*), Badal Sircar (*Pralap*) and Himangshu Chatterjee (*Tringsha Satabdi*). True to the spirit of group theatre and in sharp contrast to the prevailing star system of the commercial theatre, Bohurupee has more than once kept Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra out of the cast and has succeeded in nourishing a new set of powerful artists like Debatosh Ghosh, Kaliprosad Ghosh and Saonli Mitra.

Little Theatre Group of Utpal Dutt is or was another important name among the group theatres of Calcutta. When L.T.G. took over Minerva theatre in 1959, theatre lovers wondered if the group would be able to retain its experimental nature in the face of the competition from commercial theatres. Belying the anxieties of its patrons, L.T.G. produced *Othello* and *Neecher Mahal*. But as time passed, the professed leftism of the troupe often became a box-office bait, its flare for the bold and vivid spectacles frequently degenerated into unashamed spectacularism. While commercial theatres sold commodities like sex, nationalism

and happy home, instinct for survival often forced L.T.G. to sell politics and spectacle. This is not to deny the fact that this group believed in the need of a vigorous political theatre. In fact a change was noticeable in the late '60s. Being considerably chastened by the changing mood and reaction of the public, L.T.G. made a determined bid to restore its artistic integrity by producing *Manusher Adhikare*. This was a genuinely political and sensitive production without any of the earlier commercial claptrap. But ironically enough, this hour of redemption was also the beginning of the end. Internal rifts started to become acute leading to a total disarray and L.T.G. ceased to exist in 1970. Indomitable Utpal Dutt, unruffled by the accusation and desertion of his comrades, has again formed a troupe named People's Theatre Group. Productions like *Tiner Talwar*, *Surya Shikar* and *Thikana* of this newly formed group retain much of Utpal Dutt's earlier productional ingenuity, technical boldness and political slant. Yet lack of a competent set of actors renders these productions rather uneven. Let us hope Mr Dutt would soon recuperate.

Nandikar holds a very important position in group-theatre movement for various reasons. From the very beginning this troupe's tendency has been to reach larger audiences and perform as frequently as possible. In 1965 it performed as many as 127 times and in 1968 the number was 132. This must be fantastic for any non-stage owning troupe. After its entry into Rangana theatre, in 1971 alone, Nandikar has given 265 performances. This I believe is a record for any Indian troupe. On artistic side also Nandikar has its special contributions. Working on the conviction that theatre and drama in Bengal can reach fullest maturity only after the completion of naturalistic phase, Nandikar has continuously chosen naturalistic plays and practised naturalistic production-techniques. This group has also specialised in the production of adapted foreign plays. In the course of last 11 years Nandikar has brought over to Bengali stage Ibsen (*Ghosts*) Chekhov (*The Cherry Orchard*), Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of An Author and Henry IV*), Wesker (*Roots*) and Brecht (*The Three-penny Opera*). This young disciplined troupe under the leadership of Ajitesh Banerjee has combined quantity with quality, productional volume with artistic sensibility and has proved a challenge to the affluent and star-studded commercial theatre.

Anamika has a peculiar place among the Calcutta group theatres. Being a Hindi theatre troupe it has to face various hindrances including the problem of audience. Yet despite these handicaps, this group has, with a unique zeal, proved to be as venturesome and experimental as any of the leading Bengali theatre groups. Its repertory consists of dramas as *Sutur Murg*, *Adhe Adhure*, *Panchhi Aise Ate Hain*, *Pagla Ghora* and *Evam Indrajit*. *Evam Indrajit* is one of the finest productions Calcutta has ever seen. The Bengali production of the same play by a prominent Bengali group has proved no match to this Anamika venture. Shyamanand Jalan, the director of this group, can be rated with the very first few Bengali directors for his catholicity of taste, clarity of approach, imaginative understanding and productional competence. The persistent zeal of this troupe under the bold stewardship of Shyamanand Jalan has already

won over a sizeable Bengali audience. Its frontiers of activities are growing to be further enlarged when Shyamanand's proposed venture of a Bengali *Tughlaq* with artists from Bohurupee, Rupakar and Nandikar, is realized on stage. This I believe is going to have far-reaching effects both theatrical and extra-theatrical.

Other Trends

There have been other groups besides the major ones contributing their mite to the cause of the 'other theatre' to make it a rich variegated affair. Drama about the lower middle class and the peasantry have been the major preoccupation with Bijon Bhattacharyya's Calcutta Theatre. This troupe's social commitment is unmistakable. This commitment has not fortunately made their choice of plays facile or their quality of production simplistic. Calcutta Theatre's *Devigarjan* is oppressed peasantry turned stage-poetry. Shyamal Ghosh's *Nakshatra* has added a new dimension to the Calcutta theatre with its off-beat productions. Of course Mr. Ghosh's obsession with the absurdist trends of Messers Ionesco & Co. has often led him to chose plays which are largely derivative, imitative and outlandish; his avowed anti-naturalism in production matters has often cast an air of obscurity and vagueness on *Nakshatra* productions. Yet his dishes are distinctly his own and sometimes delightful dishes at that. Shouvanik's artistic standards are at present not very encouraging. It often chooses plays erratically. Its productions these days frequently lack artistic cohesion. But much of the 'other theatre' wouldn't have been possible at all without the cooperation of Shouvanik for the intimate semi-permanent Mukta Augan owned by this group has been the seat of experimental theatre for more than a decade. Denied the facility of this stage, many troupes, including Rupakar and Nandikar, wouldn't have come to the lime-light at all.

Sabitabrata Dutta's Rupakar, with its emphasis on musicals, has provided a different kind of entertainment. A new name in the 'other theatre' is Silhouette. Birsan the 22 year old director of his group works with a band of 40, all teenagers. *Abritta Dashamik*, this troupe's maiden venture, has created a limited sensation among the theatre-goers for its daring and ingenuity. Having miserably flopped with a play on Paris Commune, this group has now gone out to perform in parks and squares. With a sort of Living Theatre, Silhouette wants to bring about a revolution both in theatre and society.

This then has been the 'other theatre' in Calcutta: a theatre that is the product of relentless labour of persons from sundry professions, social and age groups, a theatre that is vital, creative and bold. But all is not well in the state of theatre here. It is true that there are thousands of workers trying their best to make this theatre meaningful. But to suggest that all of them are consciously dedicated to the cause would be absolutely ridiculous. In fact many of them are not. A good many are drawn to theatre for narcissistic and exhibitionistic satisfaction or at best for lack of occupation.

There are other baffling problems. Properly equipped stages are very few in number. Rents of these houses are exorbitant. The example of Rabindra Sadan alone would sufficiently illustrate this problem. Hiring the Rabindra Sadan for a day means an expense of Rs. 1,000 whereas its Bombay counterpart Rabindra Natya Mandir may be hired at Rs. 450 only. Getting these houses is also a terrible job. About the noncooperative attitude of the hall-owners the less said the better. The part played by the critics is also far from satisfying. Some of the critics are terribly ill-equipped, some are high-brow and snobbish, and almost all are devoid of any sense of perspective. Again the civic body of this great metropolis is shamelessly callous about the happenings in the theatre world. So far none of the city fathers has even attempted to help the theatre a bit. The only thing they can think of is to impose taxes on the performing troupes. And one thing more: they are never shy of asking for complimentary passes. Compared to the favourable disposition of Maharashtra Government and Delhi Administration to local theatre, West Bengal Government's attitude in this regard has been so far entirely negative. These and many more are the hardships which this avant-garde theatre has to struggle against perpetually. It is only the near-monastic zeal of some theatre-crazy people that has kept the show on.

One encouraging feature athwart this pervasive gloom is the emergence of Bangla Natmancha Pratistha Samiti. The need for a home of their own has led Bohurupee, Nandikar, Rupakar and Anamika to form a federation. By holding festivals of plays and collecting donations from theatre-lovers, this organisation has already collected an amount of nearly 2 lakhs. If the Government can donate Natmancha Pratistha Samiti a suitable piece of land, this organisation would be able to build a theatre of its own. Theatre groups of Calcutta would at last find a place where they can exercise the most important right of all—the right to fail.