

Bengali Drama and Theatre

AMAR MUKERJEE

While it is difficult today to fix the dates of the earliest Bengali plays, or to state whether their origin lay in fertility rites or Shaivite rituals or even the Sanskrit drama, it is generally accepted that the oldest extant form of theatre in Bengal is the Jatra. Most probably, the very early Jatras were connected with various rites—what they were, nobody can tell precisely. But it is almost certain that they had music, recitative aria, the quality of ‘suddenness’ and declamatory utterances combined in a performance that was not a mere chant, nor a mere narration of a story, nor even mere lyrical effusion. The enacted narrative contained stages of crisis as in other drama. The performance took place in a square arena surrounded by the audience on three sides, with no stage, scenery, or curtain.

Right from the *GitaGovindam* and Srikrishna Kirtan to Bharatchandra and Vidyasundar, the Jatra has not only responded to the demands of every age, moving from a religious to a secular content, but has incorporated stories with better suspense, and has assumed a didactic, melodramatic tone. This is evident from the greater dramatic action and more pointed dialogue that characterize some of the later specimens of the ancient form. It required a foreign force to throw this thriving theatre overboard. A degenerate set of practitioners and a new sense of values have sealed its fate for ever.

The modern Bengali drama began with the impact of the West and the formation of a new gentry. The opening of a theatre in Calcutta by a European in 1795 and the performance of two Bengali plays translated from English in 1795-96 expedited the process of building a new Bengali stage. After a period of translations and adaptations, on the one hand, and efforts to go back to the old style, on the other, Michael Madhusudan Dutt came up with a number of plays that broke new ground not only in theme but in form and technique. Taracharan in his *Bhadrarjun* gave us the first drama on the English model with some sort of plot and discourse. Jogendranath Gupta's *Kirtivilas*, if more decisively influenced by the Western method, could hardly catch the spirit of European drama, while Harachandra was, in his preface to *Bhanumati Chittavilas*, more anxious to employ the new-found method in an Indian story, combining the technical advantages of the former with the dogmatic implications of the latter. Natuke Ramnarayan, in spite of his rather acute realism, took what Madhusudan would have called a retrograde step, though Ramnarayan's integration of social themes in his plays laid the foundation of the Bengali domestic drama and the problem play.

With Madhusudan Dutt, Bengali drama went forward as much as Elizabethan drama had with Marlowe. There was a ‘foreign air’ about Madhusudan's drama and that air blew away not only the older form but older ideas as well. His ideal was that of the romantic drama; he was attracted by its passion, vigour, and intensity. To him, tragedy meant the

struggle of a brave human soul against forces which in the end overwhelm him; drama had to show this in a manner that did not seem predetermined. If his stories were from Indian sources, they were so because of the needs of the theatre and his own riotous imagination. But not here as much as in development of plot, delineation of character, and manipulation of tension and suspense one can see the greatness of his art. The fact that he wrote all his plays for the Belgatchia Natyashala gave him a concrete sense of the theatre which can be seen in his deft handling of variegated speech, songs, soliloquies and asides, in the fusion of the tragic and the comic—even his handling of the unities which he broke to create an overall unity of impression. He breathed lyricism into the hardness of Bengali prose, giving the latter a dramatic quality which distinguishes it from *Alaler Gharer Dulal*. One has only to read Michael's farces to know the contribution he made to Bengali dramatic prose.

The almost logical development of the new-found prose style can be discerned in Dinabandhu's plays; an intense realism and a deep humanism are both the merits and demerits of his work. Where his realism degenerates into naturalism, his plays lose their verve, and where his humanism takes the form of pity, they deteriorate into melodrama. But even there, his acute observation of society can express itself in irony when it is combined with detachment. His laughter does not always attain the urbanity of a Molière. But what Dinabandhu lacks in humour, he makes up by his sympathy; his *Nildarpan* has lived by this quality more than any other. In fact, it kept the Bengali stage alive, as did his two subsequent farces, which expressed his resentment at the inroads European ways had made into Bengali society.

The new Bengali theatre was by no means a public theatre, patronized as it was by the elite. To the ordinary folk was available the improvised *gitinatya*, a sort of musical drama that combined the devotional and lyrical qualities of the Jatra with the theme, plot-structure and variety of the English-style drama. Here, drama went out of the confines of the elite to gain a shape later at the hands of many subsequent playwrights. This *gitinatya* emphasized the idealistic instead of the reformist spirit of the regular theatre; it also reflected the instability of the age and the desire in some to make a profit out of the stage. A temporary suspension of stage plays had created groups advocating a fully professional theatre, and protests were published in newspapers recommending the foundation of a public stage where there would be regular shows to which admission would be by tickets.

The National Theatre was the first public theatre to come into being in 1872. Once *Lilabati* has been staged there, the fate of all dramatists was to be reckoned at the footlights. The repertoire of the National Theatre consisted of the better-known plays of the time and the show days were now fixed. Dinabandhu was its main dramatist till Girish Ghosh entered the field, first with his dramatization of well-known novels, and then with plays of his own. The first phase of the National Theatre came to an end on 8 March 1893; it was to be revived later, but not until the parent organization had split into two.

Meanwhile, two intrepid dramatists were exerting themselves in search of a suitable form: Manmohan Basu, the author of *Ramabhishek*, *Sati Natak*, and *Harishchandra*, deal-

ing mostly with puranic themes; and Jyotirindranath Tagore of *Ashrumati* fame, who was seeking to fuse Western realism with Indian idealism. By now, the spiritual awakening that had overtaken Bengal had begun to coincide with national awareness, and not only our moral but our economic ideas were undergoing rapid transformation. Reformist zeal coalesced with patriotism, and a sense of this-worldliness together with social mobility created an empirical outlook that had its effect on our conception of good, evil, fate and the supernatural. In many ways, this gave rise to ideas of tragedy never possible in the older world, with its conception of a cycle of lives preceding and succeeding the present one. The new middle class, to which the theatre was now open, started responding to a clash of ideals made and marred by itself, and not entirely regulated by extraneous powers. The subsequent Bengali drama more or less vacillated between the world of objective thought and subjective impulse, between the individual and society, as it were.

In many ways, therefore, Manmohan's dramatic style could be considered retrograde, though his real desire was to evolve a musical form like the opera that would also be good theatre. In this he amply succeeded even when his idea of the tragic had not clearly defined itself and when his plays wavered between the demands of causality and predestination. His emphasis clearly was on characterization, and on the formation of a language that would be akin to the musical genius of the Bengali people. Not that his plots were well made or his characterization perfect, but his gods and goddesses were humanized and impelled to act from within.

To Jyotirindranath should perhaps go the credit of introducing a new form in Bengali drama—the extravaganza—and of providing inspiration to one of our greatest dramatists, Rabindranath Tagore. To Jyotirindranath should also go the credit of establishing a union between realism and fantasy and of rescuing Bengali dramatic prose from its rusticity and vulgarity. The beginnings of the patriotic-romantic drama in Bengal could well be traced to *Puruvikram*, *Ashrumati* and *Sarojini*, whose high fervour and intense devotion to the patriotic cause were enough to win for theatre the seal of public approval. The tone of these plays, as well as that of Jyotirindranath's later comedies, was elevated; the language had restraint even when the speeches were long-winded; and suspense was so handled as not to make the plays altogether melodramatic. His farces, apparently modelled on Molière's, had some of that master's sense of fun. Jyotirindranath's handling of dramatic devices and his understanding of character were in no way inferior to those of any contemporary dramatist. If he had only belonged to the public stage, he would have left a deeper impress on the Bengali drama—to its advantage.

In Girish Ghosh, Bengali drama found its greatest saviour. However, since he had first to meet the needs of the theatre to which he slowly gave a consolidated shape, he pandered to the tastes of the galleries to such an extent that in spite of all the ingredients of Shakespearean drama deftly integrated into his technique, his plays frequently suffered in terms of their total design. There is hardly any dramatic form of Bengal that Girish left untouched and, in a way, unadorned, but the emphasis that he put on a single idea, or a character, or a scene—

either due to the exigencies of the theatre or for an immediate, striking effect—did not allow any of these forms to attain dramatic perfection.

This does not mean Girish did not have a clear dramatic perspective or was not resourceful enough in planning his scenes. He never lacked a suitable story and had, at least in his bhakti plays, arrived at an integrated view of life that contained elements of tragedy. The flexibility of his language far exceeded the suppleness of Michael's and his language was, in many ways, more dramatic than Tagore's. He responded also to the demands of the age by seeing in Hindu revivalism a source of tremendous individual power, the thwarting of which could as well be a motif of tragedy. He was fully aware of contemporary social problems like the break-up of the joint family, the dowry system, polygamy, etc., discerning in them sources of conflict that could and did break human hearts. The religious drama had in him a stout protagonist, not because he took religion as the only fact of life, but because he sought to show its social and individual manifestations heading to a conflict. Conflict had also characterized his historical plays like *Sirajuddoula*, where a romantic individual is set against forces of historical disruption, much like what followed the partition of Bengal. He was not unfaithful to history, but he often lent his historical personages unexpected traits of error or guilt that had characterized the Greek drama.

In his social plays too, as in *Prafulla*, for instance, what appears to be sheer personal idiosyncrasy is in fact an inherent trait of character which comes into conflict with society. Girish did not lack in diversity of incidents or in ability to create moments of dramatic tension; but even when these were multiplied in number to the point of being merely episodic, in Aristotle's sense of the term, his intention was to drive the action of the drama inwards, as he confessed when he wrote that "the best literary art consists in showing internal action, only manifestations of which can be felt outside".

Here it was that Girish carried the Bengali drama several steps forward. This if Madhushudan was the Marlowe of Bengali drama, Girish surely was its Shakespeare. For, more than Madhushudan, Girish carried tragedy to an intellectual plane, making it a part of our innermost being. The endurance of Bilvamangal, the anxieties of Jogesh, the tribulations of Karunamaya, and the sufferings of Sirajuddoula would do credit to any dramatist concerned with the values of life. It is true that sometimes these get lost in upsurges of excessive emotion; but even then, it has to be admitted that of all modern Bengali playwrights, Girish alone could feel the full force of the passions of life—passions whose impact is great not only on an individual but also on society.

But unfortunately, such great moments are not many in Girish's plays. The demands of his audience and the speed at which he improvised plays did not permit him to achieve a form in keeping with his genius, in spite of his mastery of the various ingredients of drama. However, if his plays sometimes deteriorated into narration, he could also depict action; if he sometimes assembled only a conglomeration of scenes, he had some remarkably well-knit plays too; and if his language became didactic and heavy, he could also lend it the unmistakable dramatic vigour of *gairik chhanda*. But when several of these shortcomings

combined, moments of passion and flashes of profound insight into human feelings dissolved into melodrama; events went out of hand and great moral problems received only didactic solutions.

It was a pity that Girish fell a victim to Dryden's famous dictum:

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give
For we that live to please, must please to live.

But for anybody who had to keep the theatre going, there was no other alternative. Girish Ghosh did what he could for the stage firstly by giving it a permanent shape; secondly, by raising its public stature; thirdly, by making it self-supporting; and finally by introducing a standard of showmanship which has not yet been basically replaced at least in the public theatre. As a theatre manager, Girish's contribution was invaluable, for it was he who put actresses permanently on the stage and trained several dozens of actors and actresses. His own style of acting, characterized by an extreme freedom of movement and elasticity of carriage, could redeem otherwise dull pieces of drama, but his abilities were often used to attain only a sentimental effect.

So great was Girish's impact on the theatre of his times that his style of acting and dramatic craft remained in vogue for long, influencing actors like Dani Babu and dramatists like Rajkrishna Roy, Amritlal Bose, Kshirodprasad Vidyabinode and even D.L. Roy in many diverse ways. Rajkrishna, more or less Girish's contemporary, took the Jatra element from Girish's plays, reinforced it with bhakti, and gave his drama a musical structure. Resultantly, there was more narration than action in his plays, and more divine interference in human affairs was shown than ever before. His sense of realism was overwhelmed by the play of celestial powers.

Amritlal Bose, also Girish's contemporary and an actor-dramatist like him, did not attach any value to the 'modern' values of life. His recurrent target of attack was the new-fangled idea of modern Bengal. Like Girish Ghosh, he wrote voluminously for a stage which he once held in his grip. With apparent ease, he denounced the Brahmo Samaj, professional politicians, temperance workers, anglicized Bengalis, and self-appointed leaders of social reform in a series of plays which, in spite of their witticisms, did not always rise to the highest levels of comedy.

In fact, it is difficult to call his plays pure comedy—so much satire he had introduced in them. His plots were constructed in the style of the comedy of intrigue, but his scenes frequently overstepped the bounds of decency and good taste. It is true that Amritlal had a remarkable knack of observing the foibles of society, but his approach was too personal to be universal, and his stand too conservative to be sympathetic. He castigated society for its lapses vigorously, displaying a brilliance of dialogue and a hardness of style, but only on rare occasions could he deftly integrate these into pure comic drama. Some of his witticisms are indeed memorable, so are some of his puns. In fact, whenever he followed Molière, as in his two adaptations, and imposed a restraint on himself, he acquired a delicacy of touch; he

could then refrain from vituperation. Some of his prose dialogue reveals subtle nuances of speech and a delicacy of phrasing that compare favourably with Tagore, but far exceeding the needs of farce of which he was our greatest master.

Amritlal was popular with his audiences, and therefore the kind of drama he wrote attracted the talents even of a playwright like D.L. Roy. It is no surprise that Roy's first play, *Kalki Avatar* (1885), was a farce, satirizing not the modern but the conservative Hindu; Roy's nationalism, though, was never altogether free from the influence of Hindu revivalism. A product of Western education with a personal knowledge of the English stage, Dwijendra Lal Roy quickly saw the possibilities of introducing poetry in the romantic drama and of breathing into it the patriotism that had gathered force in Bengali society. His first contact with the professional stage was in 1901, when the admiration for Shakespeare in Bengal was akin to idolatry. The consequences of his entry into theatre were not only a marked difference in the whole approach to drama, but a change in its technique. To Dwijendra Lal, as he confessed in his *Kalidas o Bhavabhuti*, realism now became as important as idealism, and his hero was no more a person driven only by external forces; his outer conflict now had an inner counterpart. To this pattern Dwijendra Lal more or less adhered, whether in his historical plays or domestic dramas, though his favourite theme was romantic idealism destroyed by wickedness or tyranny or betrayal of faith.

It was in a series of historical plays, from *Rana Pratap* to *Chandragupta*, that he could express his idealism effectively, developing in the process a tragic view of life growing out of the glory of all human struggle carried on unmindful of consequences. Life to him was a meeting of opposites, and the tragedy of most of his heroes was caused by opposing forces working against them. Durgadas is baffled in his efforts to lift up his people, Nur Jahan is torn asunder between her ambition and her pride, Shah Jahan wails of his days of vanished glory. Whatever be the theme, it was always charged with a high idealism merging with intense humanism. Dwijendra Lal took liberties with history as required but whenever he did so, he infused through his treatment passion, elevated thought, and a love of humanity that transcends the limitations of religion and race.

Here was, in fact, the basis of Dwijendra Lal's tremendous contemporary popularity, which was enhanced by the beautiful language of his plays and the songs they contained. But, looking closely, Dwijendra Lal also had some other qualities of a great dramatist. For instance, his manipulation of plot and subplot, his handling of suspense, his appropriate use of tragic relief, and, above all, his knack for finding a suitable ending for his plays gave him a power very different from Girish's. Even in his social plays like *Parapare*, Dwijendra Lal presents a picture of the interplay of the most elemental human passions with such vigour that nobody observes some of its blemishes. Melodramatic to some extent, *Parapare* is one of the best specimens of domestic drama written in Bengali—domestic drama that verges on the problem play, though the 'problem' is given a rather philosophical solution. What is significant in the play is its effort at expressing those almost inexpressible ideas, emotions and instincts which belong to the inner world of thought, not the outer world of

action.

This development betokens the gradual process by which Bengali drama modernized, in spite of the demands of a theatre which yet believed in patriotic fervour, inflated heroic diction, a profusion of pathos, and overwhelming spectacular effects. These were, in fact, some of the qualities of Kshirodprasad's plays, once very popular with the Bengali audience. But in spite of the daring originality of his treatment of historical themes and his fertility of imagination, Kshirodprasad cannot be taken as the harbinger of the modern age, which mantle more appropriately belongs to Dwijendra Lal Roy.

It was he who founded the drama that we call 'modern', though Rabindranath Tagore had already brought to his plays, then privately staged, some innovations too daring to be practised in the professional theatre. With the publication of *Parapare* in 1926, Dwijendra Lal's dramatic method had come to be fully accepted, as is evident from the plays of Jogesh Choudhury, Nishikanto Basu Roy and Manmatha Roy, which were influenced by Dwijendra Lal's work. Each of these dramatists wrote plays of ideas—ideas sometimes veiled in the main action, sometimes didactically set forth—and sought to make social forces the protagonists of their plays. Even puranic themes carried symbolic meanings, as in *Karagar*, derived from a new knowledge of human consciousness, and informed by a new sense of social values according to which the individual was judged. The urban middle class increasingly became the subject of the drama, and individualism was now explored and asserted in dealing with various social problems. As this theatre of ideas emerged, there was also evidence of the better teamwork that characterizes present-day productions.

In fact, the foundations of a new, realistic style in the theatre had already been laid by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. With him the stage became lifelike and rid itself of its pictorial trappings. False glamour was eliminated for fear of disturbing the illusion of reality, and a high intellectual standard was applied to all interpretative acting. Apart from Sisir Kumar's own dominant presence, the theatre was now a cooperative effort: the designs of Charu and Jamini Roy and the lighting work of Satu Sen contributed to it, together with experiments with the revolving stage, the wagon stage, the shunting stage, sets and drapery work. In fact, most of the new generation of dramatists like Sachin Sengupta, Bidhayak Bhattacharya, and Mahendra Gupta responded to the new model of theatre by constructing their plays to suit its requirements. Action on the stage was speeded up by readjusting the earlier scenic division, by making the speeches short, and by deleting all soliloquies and asides. Four-dimensional settings came to be utilized, and dramatists now frequently wrote plays intended for a particular company of players or set of actors.

Of the dramatists writing today, the most outstanding are, almost in order of merit, Sachin Sengupta, Manmatha Roy, Bidhayak Bhattacharya, Mahendra Gupta, and Jaladhar Chatterji. They have sought to widen the horizons of drama by the number of plays they have written, the resourcefulness they have displayed in handling new themes, the efforts they have made in creating new dramatic situations, and the sense of rebellion that they have instilled in the theatre. More and more, they have substituted inner conflict for outer

conflict as the stage became the arena for a variety of ideas and impulses, frequently imported from the West. Whether these were theories of psychology or economics, of love or sex, of the conscious or the unconscious, they were grafted into plays to reveal what the dramatists thought were the most intricate aspects of the human spirit. The history plays of this period have sought a better understanding of contemporary times; the puranic plays have adumbrated modern ideas symbolically; the social plays have been frankly problematic and idealistic. Whatever be the measure of success achieved by these explorations, dramatists of our times have been aware of the complexity of modern life. They are also aware of characterization encountered in contemporary novels, and on occasions notable novelists have also made forays into the theatre.

The search for a new drama had one advantage. Even if, for a while, the stage delighted in the presence of slick, fashionable, ultra-modern women who were found pitted against men in new plays, a time came when, as in *Kalo Taka* or *Ei Swadhinata* or *Chhenra Tar*, immediate social problems were addressed in light of modern researches into the human personality. When this approach was applied in context of *Nabanna* or *Nutan Ihudi* or *Dukhir Iman*, the ground was prepared for the rise of a new drama which would steer clear of sheer naturalism as well as sentimental comedy. The return to the folk feeling that Tagore had anticipated years ago, and its proper employment in drama, as indicated in some Bohurupee productions, would alone create conditions for the birth of a new stage.

That the Bengali stage is not lagging behind is evident from the awards that Bohurupee producers received in the last Drama Festival. A further fillip from the Sangeet Natak Akademi would be desirable, as well as such seminars which also include displays of theatrical goods. A lower rate of entertainment tax for theatre shows, and patronage of theatre by the universities, are also a desideratum. We have then only to wait for the high priest of the temple of Thespis—the dramatist!

DISCUSSION

Mulk Raj Anand: It emerges, as I am sure you will agree, that the pioneering Bengali theatre about which we are talking indicates the approach or direction which the modern Indian theatre should keep in sight. I am not, of course, casting any aspersions on the great theatres of Maharashtra and of southern India when I say that the Bengali theatre yet emerges as the most important theatre today.

Balraj Sahni: I object to a sweeping statement of that kind. You cannot adjudge the Bengali theatre as the best of all theatres and so on. That is assuming too much.

Mulk Raj Anand: I was giving expression to my personal view. I do not judge as a Chairman would when I state a personal opinion.

Amar Mukerjee: It is not for me to say if Bengali drama and theatre have any claim to leadership of Indian theatre. In my paper I have never suggested such an idea. If you look into the history of Bengali drama, you will find that it has always gone through a self-correcting process. That self-correcting process has always stimulated the spirit of fresh endeavour [and experiment] in the field. [For example,] our plays have come down from five acts to four acts, three acts, two acts, one act, and even to one scene in some productions. I can name several such plays.

Mulk Raj Anand: Who wrote them?

Amar Mukerjee: I have named some playwrights in my paper.

Mulk Raj Anand: Are the names of all the playwrights given or have you left out some?

Amar Mukerjee: I have given only the outstanding names. Certainly I have left out many. I also have my personal views as you said you do.

Mulk Raj Anand: Are these plays staged at places other than commercial theatres? Are they played in the villages too?

Ahindra Chowdhuri: Till 1942, all the successful plays performed by commercial theatres used to be played by amateurs all over the region—that was the common practice. Office clubs, welfare clubs, clubs organized by lawyers, doctors, teachers, professors—clubs of all kinds and denominations—used to perform those plays. Dramatic clubs in towns and villages could not do without them. Even today, those products of the commercial theatre which have acquired the fame of classics are played everywhere, even by those who claim to be progressive. But the last few years have given us some playwrights who do not write for the commercial theatre, or who fail to get their plays accepted by the commercial theatres, and who have [therefore] formed group theatres. These group theatres do not possess any stage of their own. They take their companies to small towns and big villages and give performances of their own plays. However, even then, commercial success is eagerly sought by people in the theatre. Of course, there is an ever-increasing demand for plays which are called 'people's play'.

Balraj Sahni: I know of some young writers in Bengali who have written good plays—in spite of some exaggeration and other defects in their work.

Sombhu Mitra: There are scores of them; I myself know more than fifty such writers.

Balraj Sahni: What happens to their plays?

Sombhu Mitra: They are somehow staged. But one can think seriously about them only when they run for some time.

Mulk Raj Anand: Dr Raghavan had, in his paper on Sanskrit drama, referred to a quality of Indian thought—that it avoided tragedy, because the philosophical view of Hindu religion avoided tragedy. But now Dr Mukerjee has drawn our attention to an innovation—a humanist concept of life in which tragedy is involved as an important factor not beyond human remedy. This marks a break from the Indian school of thought. And you cannot call

the idea Indian. Tagore wrote for sixty-two years, and he changed his views. While paying tribute to the genius of Tagore for bringing about a synthesis between the impulses of Bengal and the India of his time and Europe, I would like to say that Tagore's synthesis is not an Indian synthesis.

Sachin Sengupta: Here in this hall we are hearing a lot about what my friend Dr Mulk Raj Anand chooses to call Indianism. He now says that because Dr Raghavan had said in his paper that Sanskrit drama had no tragedies similar to the Greeks, for the simple reason that Indians did not believe tragedy was a finality according to their concept of life, the humanist concept of life, as referred to by Dr Amar Mukerjee in connection with trends in Bengali drama, cannot be taken as Indian! I fail to follow this logic. Does the Hindu concept of life refuse to recognize humanism? Certainly it does not. On the contrary, it declares that from down below, from the blades of grass on the earth to the stars in the sky above, there is the manifestation of one life to be seen, which seeks fulfilment through all known and unknown objects.

Indian savants and saints, and men and women of arts and letters too, did not always keep their thoughts within the bounds of their motherland. Men across her borders were also to them manifestations of one single source of life whose glories they had always sung. That is the correct expression of the spirit of synthesis. Synthesis is bound to be extraterritorial. And there cannot be any distinctive Indian synthesis or un-Indian synthesis. Just because Tagore laid a particular stress on human love and international amity, it would not be proper to conclude that Tagore's synthesis was un-Indian or anything other than Indian. His concept of infinite life was undoubtedly Indian. And the synthesis he was able to arrive at was due to it.

There is no contradiction between his synthesis and the synthesis expressed in Indian philosophy or in Indian arts and letters. Even when he sang the glories of the soil of Bengal, the water of Bengal, the air of Bengal, the fruits of Bengal, the people of Bengal—he almost literally reproduced what has been said in the ancient Indian books of knowledge and what is chanted by millions of people when they observe rites and rituals. All of us present here, I believe, chant those mantras when we offer our homage to our dead parents. When we remember them, when we offer milk and water and fruits and food in memory of those departed, we also declare through the mantras that we are making those offerings to all the known and unknown dead and departed, not of India alone but of the entire universe. This synthesis is one hundred per cent Indian. It is something much more than the merely humanistic view of universal brotherhood, because it raises material and moral values to a higher spiritual level without attaining which no synthesis can be achieved.

Tagore was not the only person in Bengal to sing the glories of man. Others, from whom Tagore received his literary and spiritual inspiration, both of Bengal and other parts of India, had sung and preached, throughout the ages, the glory of man who has stood unconquered and unconquerable. The great Indian epics, the Buddhist Jatakas, the Baul songs, the Vaishnavite literature, are not only the sources of Bengali literature, but also the sources of Tagore's stupendous literary creations and re-creations. To us in this century, Tagore's literature seems to be the concentrated essence of Indian culture. In spite of our unworthiness, in spite of our defects and drawbacks, we try to know Tagore, we mean to

follow his footprints for our own fulfilment as well as the fulfilment of our people. I do not think that by doing so we prove ourselves to be retrogressive reactionaries.

In the field of drama, in particular, we find that most progressives find it necessary to draw on Tagore's sustenance. Some of them say that paucity of plays compels them to take up Tagore's plays. But there are scores of good plays by Girish Ghosh, Amritlal Bose, Dwijendra Lal Roy, Kshirodprasad Vidyabinode and others! The progressive groups very rarely stage those plays, because they say the plays are unrealistic, romantic, declamatory, and burdened with unnecessary music and dance. Not all the plays of Tagore are different [in these respects]. And yet the progressives find in Tagore what they do not find in the creations of the playwrights named above. Tagore's romanticism, Tagore's symbolism, Tagore's mysticism—these do not repel the progressives, the standard-bearers of realistic drama. Why this difference? Because Tagore, more than anyone else till now, has been able to sound the human note in the bosom of the progressives, in spite of their zeal for absolute realism. I do not blame them. They cannot but do Tagore's plays. Nor can contemporary playwrights escape the influence of Tagore's plays, which is also the influence of traditional drama. That is why we hear so much about the paucity of stageable plays.

It would be interesting to know that two decades ago, even when the commercial theatre had successfully staged some of Tagore's plays, there were critics in Bengal who continuously and persistently went on saying that Tagore was not as great in his playwriting as he was in other forms of literature. But today there are very few people to make such a remark. It proves that the present generation has come to know Tagore better, and know Indian drama better, than their predecessors, and that they are freer from a bias towards Western forms which are admittedly not antithetical to all concepts of Indian drama. The process of synthesis still continues to weave a pattern, to which Dr Amar Mukerjee has referred in his paper.

Sombhu Mitra: Bengali commercial theatre failed to satisfy the public in the mid-thirties. Many felt that both the content of this theatre and the actual productions needed revitalization. When the man-made famine of 1943 took away as its toll the lives of thirty lakhs of men and women, the people of Bengal could no more rest contented with the romantic and mock-heroic performances on the commercial stage. They wanted something real that reflected the real picture of the people. The Indian People's Theatre Association [IPTA], at that critical juncture, presented *Nabanna*, a portrayal of the real situation in Bengal at that time. It was able to create a tremendous impression on the minds of the theatre-going public, which not only lent the venture every support, but also came to realize that drama might be something other than what they had supposed it to be so far.

But IPTA or, for that matter, any progressive group, had no stage of its own. The commercial theatre, fearing that its young competitors would win over the audience, made it extremely difficult to get halls on hire. The progressive groups hardly found any place to put up their shows. But they did not succumb. They started preparing their plays in such a manner that they could be performed outdoors on any kind of improvised stage. The number of groups and their performances increased. Hundreds of groups in the city of Calcutta and its suburbs, and in the villages, came up and started performing plays written by their own writers who had never written for the commercial theatre.

Not all these groups were associated with IPTA. There are a number of groups working in this manner which are independent of one another. But how can one expect the emergence of really good plays out of enthusiasm alone? There must be theatres where experimental performances can be presented. Who is going to give these groups theatres where they can stage their experiments, improve their productions, and thereby set standards? Nobody came forward to help them. But the enthusiasm was there. Want of help, guidance, and stage facilities made some of the groups something like wandering Jews. Wherever they went, they found tax-collectors and censors and permit-distributors putting them under unnecessary restrictions and hardship. Their plays deteriorated, the writers grew nervous. At such a time, Tagore's plays came to their rescue. Not only did the content of Tagore's plays suit their tastes, but the forms and technique of the plays also suited both their tastes and purses. They found that they could perform Tagore's plays without elaborate stage properties and settings. But the progressives have not given up the idea of giving the drama the realistic touch it needs. The absence of theatres of their own has compelled them to mark time. As soon as they get appropriate theatres, they will start work in that direction. They feel that the future of Bengali drama rests on their future activities. They have the will and the ability to give it the shape that is needed.