The Professional Theatre in Bengal

AHINDRA CHOWDHURI

I have been asked to render an account of the professional theatre. At the very outset, I must say that my scope is limited inasmuch as I possess little knowledge of the subject outside Bengal. I shall therefore confine myself to West Bengal. The theatre here has a historic past, with great possibilities in the future. I have been closely associated with the Bengali stage for nearly forty-five years, first as an amateur and afterwards as a professional, so I feel I shall be able to say something useful.

It may be said without the least hesitation that our present form of dramatic performances is not the outcome of our old heritage, Jatra, but rather a copy of the English theatre. The reason why the Western drama held sway in the land is not far to seek. Calcutta, founded by Job Charnock in 1690, was nothing but a British settlement which grew out of the marshy land on the banks of the Hooghly, alongside the deep forests of the Sunderbans. Both Bengali and English settlers gradually assembled there for trade and commerce. The new city was then divided into two sectors, Indian and European. There were then no amenities of civilized life, particularly for the Indians.

The Europeans had their ale-house which contained a miniature stage for the entertainment of foreign sailors who visited the settlement, and for the officers of the East India Company. Bengali culture was embedded in such places as Nabadwip, Murshidabad, Krishnanagar, Burdwan and Halisahar, which were no bigger than ordinary suburban towns. The fate of the Muslim rulers was decided in the battle of Plassey and the English obtained supremacy in the land. In the wake of the political upheaval that followed the decisive battle came the great famine of 1770. The British, in the mean time, had obtained a firm footing in Calcutta, which was then but an assemblage of huts with a few brick houses scattered here and there. Then, as confidence returned, people gradually started building permanent houses which gave the town an appearance of a future big city.

Within fifteen years of this progress of the settlement, there came a Russian adventurer, Gerasim Lebedeff, who with his linguist collaborator, Goluck Nath Das, translated an English play, *The Disguise*, into Bengali, got hold of artists of both sexes, taught them the histrionic art, built a theatre, and finally opened it on 27 November 1795. It provided entertainment to a cosmopolitan audience of respectable Indians and Europeans, with an entrance fee of Rs 8 and Rs 4.

Everything required for a well-equipped theatre of Western style was there—stage, dress, scenes, and a perfectly arranged auditorium with a seating arrangement as can be seen today. It was a tremendous achievement in so early a time and indicated great organizational ability and energy on the part of the sponsor, especially in securing actresses in those days. Today it would be difficult to imagine the skill and perseverance required for making these untrained women stageworthy. Lebedeff thus performed a Herculean task

accomplished with great skill, for which successive generations of actors, actresses and theatregoers should remember his name with admiring gratitude.

Lebedeff, however, left the city as suddenly as he came and with his leaving, the theatre met with an untimely death. After this, no one knew anything about theatrical activities in the town till 1831, when Babu Prasanna Kumar Tagore opened the Hindu theatre. Though the name was 'Hindu Theatre', the whole structure and arrangements were in the style of the European stage and theatre. After Lebedeff's enterprise no one could think of any style or construction other than the European style, which dazzled the eyes of the elite of Calcutta. Babu Prasanna Kumar's Hindu Theatre carried the stamp of the Georgian theatre style in the minds of the Indian public, which could not be erased in the subsequent span of time. Besides this, the Calcutta Theatre, the Chowringhee Theatre, and other European theatres of the time bore the signs of the same Georgian style. Even the first Bengali public theatre's wooden pavilion was copied from the Lewis Theatre. So the Western style came to stay, and it is still with us as if it were our own. The Hindu Theatre was also shortlived. One or two enterprises came after this but none survived for long.

Real dramatic activities started from the middle of the nineteenth century, when in 1852, the first original Bengali stage drama was written; dramatic performances by amateur groups were held thereafter not only in Calcutta but also in Dacca, Hooghly, Barisal and other places. In Calcutta, groups or clubs were formed almost in every community or mohalla of the town. In spite of so many amateur activities, no organized movement was launched, nor was any real tradition created. Though the presentations were good and were praised by the elite, they naturally had imperfections in production and lacked professional discipline and polish. However, in course of time, an amateur theatrical group founded the first Bengali professional theatre under the name of the National Theatre in December 1872. Within a short time, there sprang up other theatres in the metropolis, which created a tradition of professional theatre and a taste for histrionic art. Public theatres used to produce plays round the year, sometimes four to five theatres running plays simultaneously. Many theatres vanished into oblivion and as many appeared to replace them.

The professional theatre made a great contribution to the advancement of the country. It opened immediately with a challenge and gave fight to the British indigo planters who perpetrated inhuman tortures on the peasants of the country. The theatre also dealt with social reform and awakened political consciousness in the mind of the masses. The British Government was quick to realize its potential to foment protest and ultimately imposed the Dramatic Performances Ordinance of 1876 in which it was mentioned: ". . . the Government is of the opinion that any dramatic performance which is scandalous or defamatory or likely to excite feelings of dissatisfaction towards Government or is likely to cause pain to any private party in its performance or is otherwise prejudicial to the interest of the public, . . . Government might prohibit such performances."

It further provided: "If any Magistrate has reason to believe that any house, room or place is used or is about to be used for any performance prohibited under the Act, he may

by warrant authorise any officer of police to enter with such assistance as may be requisite by night or by day and by force if necessary any such house, room or place and to take into custody all persons whom he finds there for the said purpose." This was published in the *Indian Gazette* of 29 February 1876 and passed into law by Governor General Lord Lytton in December 1876. There was a countrywide agitation against the Act and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote in protest on 14 December 1876: "We are practically lifeless under the burden of the administrators and if Government continue to rule by the enforcement of such laws, we shall have to seek a region where the frowns of the present administration will simply fall on our deaf ears."

The sponsors of theatre along with the actors defied the law and were arrested and sent up for trial in an open court. The leading lawyers of the country led by the renowned Mr W.C. Bonnerjee defended them and they were released ultimately. So this fight went on and a rigid censorship was introduced. It went to such a length that no drama which mentioned words like 'motherland' or 'mother country' was allowed to pass without the censor's blue pencil.

In 1876, the professional theatre took a definite turn and was driving headlong to become a potent force in shaping public opinion. From that year on, it became a powerful agency to awaken mass consciousness in the desired direction. Our foreign rulers deeply felt this and thought of an effective check to curb the growth of the Bengali drama and theatre as a vehicle of public sentiment. In spite of the nefarious act that was passed for the purpose, the Bengali stage went on with its traditional potentialities, which became manifest in various directions. Thus, the drama presented on the stage depicted loyal creatures of the foreign masters, who were installed as Indian dignitaries but were really self-seekers, slavish in mentality, who did not hesitate to sacrifice the cause of the country at the altar of personal benefits and for acquiring power. The conduct and actions of these half-educated but wealthy band of self-seekers, on whom Government honours were bounteously bestowed without much discrimination, were criticized on the stage and received public acclamation. A further target were the absentee zamindars who left their homesteads and estates in charge of their agents, led an easygoing life in the glamourous city, pampered on wealth and pleasure, and tyrannically amassed money at the cost of the poor peasants without doing anything for their benefit. They were represented in the drama as bloodsuckers, whose misdeeds were beyond all atonement. These plays immediately became successes. The Bengali society which was then hovering between its own tradition and that of the British masters, with a great deal of leaning towards the latter, whose dress, manner and speeches were apishly imitated by them in the name of advancement of society, became the next victim. This anglicized Bengali society was extensively criticized in plays and the auditoriums thundered with cheers when they witnessed the depiction of such scenes on the stage. In an age when alcoholic drinks were not considered an offence, the professional theatre took up the cause of temperance, which the saner sections of the audience applauded. Our baneful dowry system was violently criticized and poor parents heaved a sigh of relief. All this left a lasting impression on the minds of the people. The professional theatre thus

not only became a centre of attraction for amusement and entertainment but exerted a tremendous influence over the public mind as an educational agency.

The theatre became an institution. Playhouses were frequented by visitors from all parts of the country who were people of different shades of opinion, big or small, rich or poor. The audience thus consisted of a cross-section of the society. High Court Judges, students and their professors, shopkeepers, lawyers and clerks, all the heterogeneous elements were present there.

It took up social, economic and political themes and fully discharged the sacred trust bestowed on it by the country. Mythology and history became greatly popular and were magnificently presented on the stage. Historical incidents in which national heroes were eulogized flashed before the eyes of the audience and they went home with their hearts full of national aspiration. There was no room for provincialism or parochialism in our dramas. Those who fought and died for the motherland became the subjects of dramas, without any discrimination of regions from which they came. Thus Maharana Pratap, Chhatrapati Sivaji, Tipu Sultan, Ranjit Singh, Bahadur Shah, Rani Lakshmibai and Sangram Singh became the subject-matter of popular dramas along with Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Qasim, Pratapaditya and Kedar Roy who hailed from Bengal. Even illiterate people who never cared to read history came to know of these heroes by witnessing dramatic performances based on their lives.

On festive occasions, people came from distant mofussils, and even those who came for a pilgrimage to Kalighat made it a point to visit the theatre along with other places of interest in the city like the museum, the Jain Temple, etc. Though the dramas presented in these theatres wore a European look, the sentiments expressed were Indian. Mythological dramas usually drew a large number of female visitors. A keen sense of religious fervour which was half-forgotten by the people was once more revived. The lives of Shri Chaitanya, Sant Tulsidas, Jagatguru Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, and their doctrines became a cementing force for the drifting Hindu society—as if the theatre had become a veritable religious pulpit. This drew the attention of great religious reformers like Shri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Keshab Chandra Sen. The theatre owed a great deal to the literary giants of the day, and their dramas were presented on the stage. In those early days of the professional theatre in Bengal, such men as Michael Madhusudan Datta, Bankim Chandra, Dinabandhu, Girish Chandra and others contributed towards its success. Later on, Jyotirindra Nath Tagore, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Dwijendra Lal Roy and others actively contributed to its growth and existence.

The theatre was visited by learned men like Sir Gurudas Banerjee and others who had a high opinion of the theatre as a great educative force. The great Hindu savant Shri Ramakrishna shared this opinion. Sir Gurudas, the fist Indian Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta and a judge of the Calcutta High Court, on witnessing the performance of *Macbeth* by Girish Chandra Ghose said, "To translate the inimitable language of Shakespeare is a task of no ordinary difficulty, but Babu Girish Chandra Ghose has performed that task very creditably on the whole, and his translation is in many respects quite

worthy of the original." Professor N.N. Ghose, a great scholar of English literature, observed that Girish Chandra's translation of *Macbeth* was better than the French translations of the tragedy. The newspaper *Englishman,* which was very critical of anything Indian, highly praised the performance of *Macbeth* in its edition of 8 February 1893. It said, "A Bengali Thane of Cawdor is a living suggestion of incongruity, but the reality is an astounding reproduction of the standard conventions of the English stage." Sir Edwin Arnold spoke equally highly of the performance of *Buddhadev,* an adaptation from his *Light of Asia* by Calcutta Theatre in as far back as 1885.

The professional theatre in Bengal not only became a centre of attraction for Indians but also for foreign dignitaries who came to the city for official and administrative purposes. It became fashionable for the highest government officials, when they first came to the city, to pay a visit to the theatre. On 18 June 1878, Lord and Lady Lytton accompanied by Sir Richard Temple, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, visited the Bengal Theatre and were highly pleased with the performance of *Shakuntala*. That was the first occasion on which a Viceroy visited an Indian theatre. Lord and Lady Dufferin along with the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal witnessed the performance of *Bibaha Bibhrat* on 23 January 1885 and said, "So powerful a presentation can scarcely be seen even in London theatres of these days." Lady Dufferin mentioned this in her reminiscences, *Our Viceregal Life in India.* In 1891, the Bengal Theatre showed a few scenes to His Royal Highness Prince Albert Victor, the eldest son of the then Prince of Wales. The theatre assumed the name of Royal Bengal Theatre after these royal visits.

The professional theatre also gave a lead to the innumerable amateur clubs and drama groups scattered all over the country. Clubs, schools and colleges, literary circles, offices and welfare organizations performed the box-office hits of the professional theatre and also copied its style of acting and production. They hired costumes which were faithful copies of the originals. The craze of copying the professional stage went to the extent of hiring scenes from the public stage where the drama selected for production had been performed.

The theatre fulfilled its tasks and progressed professionally with occasional highs and lows till the great famine of 1943 which shook the people of Bengal. This was followed by the tragic days of the War, bombings and blackouts. Many people left the city and when they returned, some of them became rich overnight through black marketeering. With them, theatres also became rich. The rich did not care for anything but spending, and dramas were presented for them without an eye to artistic or ethical merit whatsoever.

This went on till 1952, when people started losing interest in the public theatre, as no new dramas were produced any more. Only combined performances of old dramas with a galaxy of star actors and actresses were presented. The people who had been displaced from East Bengal after the partition arrived in the city and devoured any theatrical fare that was offered, as many of them had never seen a well-equipped or well-lighted public stage. As this craze wore off and the public started demanding new plays, the theatre failed to fulfil this need. We shall come to the reason for this later on.

To fill the gap thus created, some of the amateur drama groups came forward with productions of meaningful plays on contemporary themes. But as all the existing theatre houses were occupied by professional companies, there was no room for these progressive groups, and they were forced to hire costly European-owned theatres or, occasionally, cinema halls in or around Calcutta. These amateur groups deserve one or two theatre houses built and kept separate for their use. They should also be allowed to perform without paying the entertainment tax like the professional theatres which enjoy this exemption.

Many will perhaps be interested to know how a professional theatre is run in Bengal. It was formerly run as a stock company and repertory theatre controlled by one or two financiers, sometimes it was also run as a limited company. The sponsors naturally tried to have a well-balanced company with talented artists at the head of every department such as acting, dancing, music and stagecraft. As a stock company, a theatre comprised all the type characters—hero and heroine, songstress, fools, cheats and clowns, so that every drama could be cast with the same group of actors and actresses. Companies used to perform thrice a week, with extra performances on holidays. Sometimes, a theatre would have performances for five or more nights a week with a separate drama for each performance. This gave the artists sufficient scope to play various shades of roles within a short span of time, and also the scope for experimenting with new readings and expressions. They became proficient in a variety of roles. Those were the golden days of the Bengali stage.

Nowadays, everything has changed. Dramas are now performed five days a week with matinees and extra shows on holidays, and one drama runs for three to five hundred nights at a stretch. No other dramas are presented during this long spell. The cast is selected from freelance actors, contracted to perform in the same drama as long as it runs. The dancing master, the music director, and stagecraft technicians—all are freelancers. Their services are required only for a few days during the preparation of the play, and the rest of the performances during the play's long run are generally supervised by the head shifter or the assistant manager of the stage, who is more or less an officer doing liaison work. A successful play sometimes runs for two to three years without any further rehearsals or training. Even during the preparation, a few rehearsals are held, and such rehearsals mean only a coordination of different artists regarding entrances and exits rather than any training. The artists themselves cannot devote time for such training as they are heavily booked at film studios. Neither can the authorities allot time for rehearsals as the stage is overwhelmingly engaged by amateur clubs on spare days. Naturally, the finished production seems to lack vitality in acting and other technical aspects, whereas the old actors used to get ample time for rehearsals and practise as the stage was vacant on all the days except on the nights of performance.

Therefore, it may be said that nowadays the real professional attitude is wanting in public theatres. Actors and proprietors do not care for anything but money. Idealism has long deserted the professional theatre. Proprietors are interested only in squeezing out money from theatregoers and are essentially speculators.

To check this downward trend and to tackle the difficulties facing the professional theatre, a suggestion has been made that the state may take over the theatres and run them under its direct supervision or guidance; in place of five theatres, if one state theatre exists— it is argued—then bad management, shortage of capital, and such other difficulties can be overcome and drama might be reinstalled in its former glory. But I do not agree with this. Full control of the government over theatre is not desirable for various reasons. Money will be available no doubt, but available so much that this state theatre would be lavish, but dramas and their quality of production would surely dwindle because of absence of competition among rival theatres. We may have one state theatre and some private theatres so that there may be healthy rivalry. It would be better if the state contributes in the form of grants-in-aid to one or more theatres that are considered worthy. The best way, however, would be to have a cooperative system. Two or three proprietors of private theatres may be allowed to combine together and run one or two theatres with government aid or subsidy. Too many theatres would not only suffer from financial difficulties but also from dearth of good actors, actresses and technicians.

Then there is the challenge of cinema. Cinema houses were not so numerous in the old days. And even in those days, cinemas snatched away quite a large chunk of audience from the theatre, but the theatre still managed to survive and eke out an existence. But today the theatre has not only been deprived of its audience but also of its talent by cinema. All well-known theatre actors are heavily booked in the cinema. Even minor actors are tempted to go there because of better prospects. Technical experts too are hired by the cinema trade. It is time that we evolve some means to get rid of this problem.

How the professional theatre has been harnessed in the National Welfare Scheme has drawn the attention of every right-thinking man and woman. Before we give our verdict on this aspect of the theatre, it must be borne in mind that the purely professional theatre is not burdened by the amusement tax as other theatres and cinemas are. It goes without saying that the professional theatres in Calcutta have contributed much towards shaping public opinion in this country. Therefore, in recognition of their services, the government has granted them this exemption. The Folk Entertainment Section of the government's Publicity Department, which has been recently started, has also adopted the village upliftment programme as its principal object. It proposes to give theatrical performances in villages, melas and fairs depicting the importance of the cooperative movement and other nation-building work. The plays would also portray the difficulties under which peasants work, and may have themes like the introduction of new methods of agriculture. The vexing problem of refugees has also engaged the attention of the government.

The Government of West Bengal has recently started an Academy for the training of artists in dance, drama and music, and has a plan for a state theatre. What the Folk Entertainment Section aims at will take some time to achieve as it has been only recently started. The Section is now manned by professional players, and when the students who are now under training in the Academy graduate, they will surely find a nook here. The Folk Enter-

tainment Section will then have many groups working simultaneously in different areas carrying the message of upliftment to every village in West Bengal. So far as professional theatres in the city are concerned, more arduous work is necessary for the training of artists and technicians. Students training in the Academy might well fill up the vacancies here.

Finally, I prefer the professional theatre to the amateur theatre, for the latter cannot pay full-hearted attention to the profession. Many a time, amateurs treat dramatic activity as a recreational pastime and not as a profession. Our only hope is that in between the two, there are semi-professional groups who in time might secure a place by developing cooperatives; if they succeed, the professional theatre can once again regain its former glory in Bengal. A hundred amateur clubs with thousands of performances will not be able to create and uphold professional values in the theatre. We must develop a religious devotion to uplift the dramatic art by constant practice.

I hope amateurs will one day be so hardworking as to become sincere professionals. They must take up theatre not only as a means of living but also as a sacred religion, rather than a recreation for their leisure hours.

DISCUSSION

Ahindra Chowdhuri: I take it for granted that you have read my paper. I have traced the growth and development of the professional theatre in Bengal, which is in fact the story of dramatic activities of the entire eastern part of India in spite of linguistic differences. While discussing the language papers, we have come to know how the drama movement which originated in Bengal eventually spread over the whole of the eastern part of India, *viz.* Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. Our colleagues in this Seminar from these parts have themselves apprised us of the fact. I will not bore you by repeating that part of the story. What I will like to tell you now is a painful fact. The professional theatre in the region from which I come is in a bad shape. It pains me to admit it. But I cannot ignore a fact which is too obvious to be denied. I feel we should put our heads together to find out the forces that work against the theatre. What are they? Some of you have already discovered them, and have told us how they have oppressed the theatre almost to the point of asphyxiation. They are, as you have said, the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, the amusement tax, the impact of cinema, the greed of the owners of the professional theatres, and, last but not the least, the present convention of censorship. I call it a convention because there is no law which demands submission of play-scripts to the police commissioner for his approval before they might be staged. The convention is not only obnoxious but *ultra vires* of the Constitution. I have given the history of the Dramatic Performances Act in my paper. I have also said that the existing professional theatres in Calcutta enjoy exemption from the entertainment tax in recognition of their past services to the nation's cause. The cinema has come to be a formidable opponent, no doubt. But the theatres existed and were quite vigorous even before the Second World War broke out. These forces had been working against the theatre

in pre-War days as well, but the theatre at that time did not dwindle into insignificance. We have proof to establish that it was still found to be fulfilling a progressive role. What then happened since the end of World War II that forced the professional stage into this torpid state of existence? That is what needs exploration. Some of us believe that the foundation of state-owned theatres would check the downward drift. I do not agree with them. Governmental control over theatres or cultural institutions is not desirable. The Vice-Chairman of the Akademi, Shrimati Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, has herself given us exhaustive illustrations to warn us against such control. From my personal experience, I have come to think exactly in the same way as she does.

Balraj Sahni: I want to put two questions to this great professional actor from Bengal. My first question is how do the theatres in Bengal react to the Dramatic Performances Act? Do they take it lying down or do they kick and bite?

Ahindra Chowdhuri: If you come to study the history of professional theatre in Bengal, you will find that no sooner than this Act was promulgated, the entire theatre world offered it stiff resistance. The entire staff of a theatre courted arrest. But the theatres had to fight on other fronts as well for their very existence. They had to acquiesce in the end. I am proud to be able to say that the theatres acted quite honourably all through. I will not ask how theatres in other regions reacted to the Act, because I know they too were as helpless as the Bengal theatres.

Balraj Sahni: My other question is why the Bengali theatre, which we all agree is far ahead of other Indian theatres, is found to be poorer in settings and decor?

Ahindra Chowdhuri: I doubt if they really are so. There was a time when we used to copy the settings of the Parsi theatre. But very shortly we realized the folly of it. We then approached Abanindra Nath Tagore, Gaganendra Nath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and sought their advice in this matter. They were generous enough to respond to our request. Many of the settings of our theatres were designed by them. Jamini Roy, Charan Roy, and a few other renowned artists who were then young used to spend hours together in our theatres, morning and evening, to give us every help. Instances are not rare when they were found to be actually working for our theatres with brushes in their hands. Those are glorious recollections which we gratefully cherish. We used to stage more of historical and puranic plays than social plays. Nowadays professionals have switched to domestic dramas which represent the struggles and lives of persons belonging to the middle and lower-middle class. These dramas do not demand gorgeous settings. We are also losing faith in settings and painted sceneries. It is a pity that they are still there. It they have disgusted our friend Balraj Sahni, I congratulate him with all my heart.

Mama Warerkar: You said that you were against any state-owned theatre.

Ahindra Chowdhuri: Please allow me a second to correct you. I did not say I was against it; I only expressed my doubt if such theatres would in any way improve the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Mama Warerkar: Then what do you suggest as a remedy?

Ahindra Chowdhuri: The remedy lies in the foundation of theatre cooperatives of artists—half the expenditure to be collected by the artists while the other half is contributed by the State Government.

Mama Warerkar: You believe that state-owned theatres would be no good, and yet you hope that State Governments would come forward to help cooperative theatres?

Ahindra Chowdhuri: I do. Because I know that at least one State Government is prepared to help such ventures: I mean the Government of West Bengal. I know they are already working on a scheme like that. They are possibly prepared to loan half the amount while the artists procure the other half necessary for building a theatre. Once the theatres are started, it may be found, later on, that most of them are able to stand on their own feet. The few that face financial difficulties could be given grants-in-aid. The future of drama and theatre rests on the amateurs. They must be provided with theatre houses. If they can't survive, the professional theatre will not survive either.

Sachin Sengupta: Shri Ahindra Chowdhuri has given us the benefit of his experience which he has gathered by dedicated service to the professional theatre over a period of thirty years—a period of grim struggle, occasional glories, and not a few failures. He has also told you the painful fact that professional theatres in West Bengal have been on a downward drift since the conclusion of World War II. But he has not told us why this has been so. I expected to hear it from him. But he bypassed it. I feel that unless we know it, we will not be able to make a move in the right direction. What really had the War to do with our professional theatre? No theatre house was ever bombed. No theatre permanently closed down. Not a single playwright or artist lost his life in the battlefield. Then how did the War affect our theatres in an adverse way, particularly the professional ones? Before I probe into this, I would like to enquire, are the professional theatres really worse off than they were before the War? I will deal with the second question first. We find that since the conclusion of World War II, the existing professional theatres have changed for the better in many respects. They have remodelled their houses to look better, they have refurnished their auditoriums with dunlopillo seats, they have replenished technical accessories that modern theatres need to create illusions and effects. Two of them have produced at least two plays which ran for five hundred nights without any break, an event unprecedented in the annals of our theatre, and one is contemplating air-conditioning its house. These are achievements which, I hope, none of you will refuse to acknowledge. Then why do we say that the professional theatres are on the decline? Shri Chowdhuri has told you of this fact painfully, with his characteristic humility. I would use stronger expression. The theatres have fattened physically, but they have sold their soul. They have uprooted drama off the soil of theatre and have planted fictions there with a view to piling up easy money. But how did this come about? To find out, I would go back to the days of World War II. You are aware that while the War was on, every business in this country became a prey to the black marketeers and profiteers. They flocked to the theatres too. They started purchasing nights by paying a lump sum of money to the proprietors and earning more than what they were spending by selling admission tickets where they had influence. They created a craze for combination performances, meaning performances in which all the noted artists of the stage and the

screen were mustered together and put in the cast of one single play. The inflation helped them, and box-office returns rose to as high as Rs 6,000 and Rs 7,000 per show for a pretty long period. Profiteers became the masters in the field, and the owners of theatres and the artists surrendered to them, finding that they were earning three to four times as much as they had been earning previously. Nobody thought of new plays or of any renovation of theatres. When box-office returns fell, the profiteers decamped. And the theatres collapsed. Not a few of the old proprietors and artists retired. New financiers came in with film stars to make money with ease and without any risk. And as the film stars had hardly any time to rehearse for real dramas, only stories in dialogue were provided for their performance.

This is one side of the shield. The other side is not as dark and dismal. That is the growth and development of progressive groups who had no theatre of their own. Because they had no theatres, the profiteers could not exploit them. They progressed progressively. Please do not forget that the IPTA attracted public attention while the War was still on and Bohurupee is a splinter body of the very same IPTA. The professional theatres became jealous of these newcomers. They neither tried to absorb them in order to instil new blood, nor did they render them any help. On the other hand, they raised the rents so high that these new groups could ill afford to pay them. Over and above the rents, there was the entertainment tax which every non-professional group had to pay. The new drama groups had enough go in them. But they could not reach the cross-section of the public, i.e, regular playgoers. Failing that, each group gathered around it admirers with similar inclination of thought or ideological affinities. This is a tragic fall. There was an upsurge which had immense possibilities. The professional theatres and the ruling power saw this but offered no help. On the contrary, they joined hands to throttle the new organizations. The worst part of my story is that there are high officials and ministers and men of name and fame who encourage professional theatres to continue performances of renderings from novels, because they know that original plays, however ill-written, will represent contemporary life, which they do not like to be reflected on the stage for political reasons.

Mama Warerkar: Have you any remedy to offer?

Sachin Sengupta: None ready-made, I confess. But I envisage a chain of independent theatres. We cannot build them by our own efforts. Neither is it any business of our writers and artists. The state must provide us with well-equipped theatres.

A Delegate: Don't you feel you are asking for something which you will never get?

Sachin Sengupta: I am not quite sure about that. But I am sure of one thing. And that is, if we don't have what the nation sorely needs, then the Government will not have the public support it has today. I am a believer in democracy. I have faith in the force of logic and in the strength of persuasion. I believe a day will come when the Government will have to accede to what the people sincerely desire. I am prepared to welcome even a Ministry of Culture, because I find to my dismay that the theatres are today placed in a no man's land. There must be some agency to give them care and attention. I know the wheels of a ministry move in a way we do not like. But I do not also rule out a change for the better today or tomorrow.

Sombhu Mitra: I represent one of the groups which started work during the War. The group I lead has been working all these years with tremendous zeal and energy. It has, as you know, won public support. But I can hardly put plays before the public as frequently as I would like to do. Frequent productions are necessary not only to attain more skill and to gather fresh experience but also to keep the body and soul of each individual worker of the group together. It is a pity we cannot give frequent shows. For morning shows, we have to pay Rs 500 as rent for one performance. If we want an evening show, we will have to pay Rs 1,200 for the very same board. Besides the rent, we have to pay entertainment tax, rehearsal charges, and pay extra hands for shifting scenes and doing other odd jobs. We have to labour hard just to swell the purses of the owners of professional theatres and professional artisans while our own workers get practically nothing out of their hard labour, excepting of course applause and occasional bouquets. Surely we are not made of stone. How long do you believe we can pull on without a morsel to eat and without shelter to live under? We are ready to work as professionals, we have qualified ourselves to be professionals. We believe that playgoers will see that we live and flourish. But how and where can we show them our work and get our requirements from them in exchange? We need a house of our own. If we get it, we are sure we will not only be able to live as human beings but also as useful artists. Give us halls where we can show the plays we prepare so meticulously, and we will pay back your money with interest plus perform a devoted service to the people's cause. This I say not only on behalf of the group I have the privilege to lead, but on behalf of all the progressive groups who have embraced the art of drama both as a mission and a vocation.