

SISIR KUMAR BHADURI AND DRAMATIC TRADITION OF BENGAL

By

Sachin Sengupta

SISIR Bhaduri is dead. It is an end to a trend of Bengali drama which sought its fulfilment in mass contact since the sixteenth century when Shri Chaitanyadeva gave it a form unknown to makers of Sanskrit plays. Sisir Kumar boldly held tight to the tradition, although he was a Shakespearian scholar, and a keen connoisseur of English poetry. He had to his credit the M.A. degree of the Calcutta University. He had worked for some time as a professor in a first grade Calcutta college. But drama, particularly Bengali drama, was his first love. And he stood deeply attached to it till his last breath was out. He was a great actor.

A great actor does not attain greatness by dint of his histrionic skill alone. He is great because he has the power to bring out, by the application of his art, the inner feelings of his auditors, which, unknown to them, constantly seek a way out for an expression. An actor's business is to knock open the lock-gates of his auditors' minds by hurling at them the emotional waves of the play. A confluence of the emotional currents of the play made irresistible by the art of acting and the released streams of the inner feelings of the auditors creates drama which has no visible shape but is capable of soothing parched souls and of generating a zeal for a dynamic creativity. Sisir Bhaduri had succeeded to do it by his superb acting which was immensely emotional but no less spiritual. Bengal has yet today some stalwarts left in the theatre, but none of them possesses that spell which Sisir Bhaduri possessed and used with an ease of a master-conjurer.

He had a voice which roared and moaned and melted into a melody as occasions demanded. It helped him to build up a vocal symphony that carried to his auditors experiences of mental tempests, as well as the blisses of beauty in life. Fascinating were his silvery smiles and frowns awfully frightening.

Verily, he was a master of his art and a conscious conjurer who enjoyed himself by playing with the emotions of his audience while he played to them.

The great Russian actor Cherkassov told us once in Leningrad that he was greatly impressed by the sensitive quality of the great acting of Sisir Bhaduri. The great Russian director Pudovkin also expressed similar admiration for the superb quality of his acting. Dame Sybil Thorndyke and her illustrious husband visited India very recently. While they left its shores for their home they feelingly expressed their appreciation of the greatness of the acting of Sisir Bhaduri. And yet none of the masters mentioned above had seen Bhaduri when his splendid powers were in full bloom.

An indomitable will, an inexhaustible energy, a stilted egotism along with a love for poetry and a spiritual fervour for the cultural heritage of the past made him what he was. He was a hundred per cent Bengali bearing with a pride all the vices and virtues of the Bengali race. That is exactly why he was loved even for his indiscretions and excesses, found to be annoying none the less.

But he was more than an individual, he was more than a genius, he was indeed a cultural link lost from the chain of Bengali culture while the society had disintegrated due to political turmoils at the first instance. But subsequently this disintegration was designedly encouraged by the colonial rulers to demoralize and denationalize the people thoroughly with a view to harnessing the country's man-power to their engines of exploitation. The links that got lost did not get rusty. Luckily, a lot of them retained their lustre. And a plenty of them glimmered in the depth of darkness. Bhaduri was one such link. There were, of course, bigger and brighter ones in other fields. To realize this one has to recollect the

development of Bengali culture and its expression through drama and theatre.

Bengali language is a language of the masses, composed of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and subsequent foreign settlers. Its literary form originally took shape in verse borrowed from non-Bengali sources such as Maithili, Brajaboli, etc. Sanskrit and Prakrit or Pali were no extra-territorial languages to be imported into Bengal. She had long ago mastered them, and has tempered them in a way as to make them her own. Jaydeva in the twelfth century had so acclimatised Sanskrit that it almost sounded like Bengali language. His songs and poems were metered and rhymed so closely to the beatings of Bengali hearts that many a Bengali poet lost no time to use them for their poems. Their devotional but at the same time humanistic contents appealed to the people. Bards sang them, men and women, mostly unlettered though, recited them. This is how a culture permeated into the very core of the society as an effortless process. It was intensified by numerous contributions of Muslim poets who introduced Persian and Arabic fables. Obviously, drama in some form or other must have had a role to play in the process. But, unfortunately, no script of Bengali drama could be discovered although script of numerous Sanskrit plays written between twelfth and sixteenth centuries could easily be collected. Nevertheless existence of a particular type of drama in songs and dances and improvised dialogues could not be ruled out. Devouts both of the Vaishnava and Shakta cults and also Buddhist *Nathas* and the *Auls*, the *Bauls*, and the *Derveshes*, in fact, representatives of every community and sect took active parts in popularising the culture they intended to use as bed-rock to build up social life. All these happened far away from the seats of governments, mostly in the countryside. And it is a wonder that many of the participating poets could not read or write. The characteristics of the Bengali poems and ballads of this period are: (a) The devotional themes always humanised the gods and goddesses to whom they attributed divine powers. (b) Nature was portrayed to be the guiding and correcting phenomenon. Her smiles and gloom and fury were to be watched with respect, hope and awe. (c) Sympathy for man in distress is the supreme test of manhood. Surely they were no mean expressions.

Shri Chaitanyadeva (sixteenth century) was a great Sanskrit scholar. He had no peer in contemporary field of logic and metaphysics.

He soon grew sick of erudition and the dull monotony of mundane life. He sought for Divine Light. And he believed he had found it. He realized that man's fulfilment lies in love for man and a perennial source of that love lies in the spiritual body-free love of Radha and Shri Krishna. He believed, if man could be made lust-free, greed-free and power-free, and if a self-less love and a sense of humility and faith in the union of hearts and desires could be grown in man, no power on earth would have any strength to keep man crippled. He thought he was ready to carry this message to the people.

He was a lover of drama. He evolved a kind of drama made of song and dance and an accompaniment of simple musical instruments. It needed no hall, no platform, no scenery, no costume and make-up. He carried it to temple yards, village greens, and open marts, at a time when Shakespeare was being played in England before royalties and nobilities only, keeping the rest of the population ignorant of it.

Without taking a pause to know which of the two was really progressive, I would like to tell my readers how Shri Chaitanyadeva's venture had reacted to Bengali mind. It aroused at once an urge for efflorescence. It stimulated the creation of a sweet and sonorous lyric demanding an expansion of life's horizon. It released a deep emotional sympathy for man that defied casteism and racial prejudice. Last, but not least, it stimulated the flight of imagination.

This intensive mass approach along with similar earlier expressions through various kinds of Vaishnava and *Mangala Kavyas*, ballads and narrative poems, dramatic forms of *Krishna kirtans*, *Kali kirtans*, *Krishna jatras*, Puranic fable presentations effected a cultural homogeneity of India enabling us to claim today, that India has many languages and diverse races and religions but she has one literature and one culture.

The statement I have made above may be mooted by a cross-question that if the masses were really united and revitalized, how could they succumb to foreign invasion which followed immediately after? My first reply to it is that there was no invasion but gradual infiltration. The European colonialists at the outset established trade-centres in different parts of the Indian sub-continent under the protection of the Mughal emperors. Subsequently they started quarrelling among themselves leading to occasional armed conflicts.

Suddenly the British East India Company came to power. The people were taken unawares.

But when they realised what had happened, they revolted—not once or twice, but on several occasions during the entire period of British rule in India. The weavers of Bengal, the Wahabi Muslims, the indigo cultivators (both Hindus and Muslims), the Santhals, the Ahomis, the sugarcane growers, the workers in the coffee and tea plantations and last of all the Indian Sepoys revolted against the system that was almost surreptitiously put in action. The people did never succumb. Only the bulk of the newly created educated community who had willingly cut themselves off the moorings of the past traditions of Indian culture betrayed their people, and worked as agents of the British Imperialists.

No, Indian people, as a whole, did never succumb, although they were illiterate and horribly poor. They had not lost their human dignity. Mahatma Gandhi did realize it. He built his movement on the basis of his knowledge of the invincible spirit of the Indian masses. He advocated boycott of British goods, boycott of educational institutions founded by the British Government in India, and boycott of law courts. He carried the Congress to the masses. And he was amply rewarded. When he was put behind the prison bars along with his lieutenants, the leaders of the present Government, and when the Congress was outlawed, it was the masses that rushed forward to fill the vacuum and carried forward the struggle for liberation and freedom till the issue was settled forever on August 15, 1947.

When the British Imperialists had settled comfortably in this eastern region of India, mainly in Calcutta, they wanted to re-educate the intelligentsia while Christian Missionaries thought of lending light to the people whom they took to be totally blind. They planted a system of education which was apparently liberal but inherently a measure to manufacture clerks and agents and slaves to be harnessed to the State-Chariot.

While I do emphasise this aspect of education introduced by the British rulers in India, I do not refuse to recognise the selfless services rendered to the cause of Indian education and social amelioration by some individual representatives of British culture. It were they and the English literature itself, that compensated to

some extent the intolerable situation of a foreign domination. We gratefully remember those rare friends of mankind. We do still study English literature for our benefit. We cherish love and respect for the English letters and English men of letters although we condemn all shades of Imperialism and Colonialism.

The educational designs of the British rulers, the Christian missionary zeal for illuminating heathen souls, and the excesses of the disciples of D'Rozario brand of liberals reacted against one another. And the resultant brought about a renaissance in the middle of the Nineteenth Century which brushed aside all superfluous claims of the rulers, the missionaries, and the Young-Bengal rebel-group. It sought for a synthesis of the two civilizations—the imported and the indigenous—based broad on the traditional culture of the people which was in no way inferior to any other culture.

Started by Rammohan (1774-1833) the movement for national resurgence gathered force ever increasingly through moral, intellectual, material and spiritual guidances of stalwarts like Devendra Nath Tagore, Kesab Chandra Sen, Rev. K. M. Banerjea, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chatterjea, Bhudeva Mukherjea, Rajendra Lal Mitra, Raj Narain Bose, Ramkrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Hazi Mohammed Mohsin, Ananda Mohan Bose, Surendra Nath Banerjea, Bepin Chandra Pal, Vijay Krishna Goswami, a galaxy of religious heads, idealists, rationalists, romanticists and realists. It culminated in the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore in 1860.

Many a prejudice melted away and biases were balanced. Bengali literature grew not only in volume but in quality and in closer relationship with the society. Formerly it had no prose form. The missionaries at Serampur and the English directors of the Government College at the Fort William managed to build up a prose which was neither Bengali nor literary. Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar took up the stupendous task and succeeded to forge a literary prose (1847-69) which was further nationalized by Bankim Chandra Chatterjea and his contemporaries and successors, including Rabindranath Tagore. The current literary Bengali prose contains in its glossary a large number of words picked up from foreign sources, i.e. Arabic, English, Persian, Portuguese, Sanskrit and other languages. Bengali verse was freed from the shackles of measured rhymes

by Michael Madhusudan Dutta, and sooner it developed various shades of it as they are found in the compositions of Nabin Chandra Sen, Hem Chandra Bandopadhyay, Girish Chandra Ghose and Rabindranath Tagore. Bengali fiction made its conquests no sooner did it appear in the field of literature. Bengali drama, as we understand it today, also emerged as a great force. Believe it or not, all these were achieved in less than half a century.

Notwithstanding the achievements mentioned above, a gulf opened up, and gradually widened, to keep separated the new intelligentsia from the illiterate masses. It appeared as if two nations were residing within the boundary of one political unit. Rabindranath had deplored it in many of his essays, particularly in his letters from Russia, and also in some of his later poems.

The nineteenth century renaissance in Bengal vitally differed from the earlier renaissance in the Chaitanya period. The earlier one aimed at the efflorescence of the masses themselves, while the latter gave rise to an intelligentsia which assumed the moral guardianship of the illiterate masses with a belief that it had a right and competence to shape their destiny. But as the masses were mostly illiterate and the previous social relationship between the educated community and the masses had suddenly snapped, neither the messages of the Renaissance could be carried to the masses through literature, nor any other vehicle to aid mutual understanding could be contrived. The gulf seemed to be a baffling chasm. And it was Bengali drama that stepped forward to bridge the gulf.

The British rulers did never promote or lent any support to the growth of Bengali drama and theatre. They did, rather, consider their growth undesirable. No sooner had drama gathered force, it was shackled by the promulgation of a Dramatic Performances Act (1876) giving Police Chiefs powers to stop the performance of any play they thought objectionable, and to arrest its promoters and participants.

The modern form of Bengali drama was introduced in Bengal by a renowned Russian scholar named Herashim Lebedeff in 1795, thirty-eight years after the 'Battle of Plassey'. He had himself translated two of Moliere's plays into Bengali. He built up a theatre at his own expenses, and got his plays performed

by Bengali artists of both the sexes. He used as interludes some popular Bengali songs he gleaned from Bharat-Chandra's *Vidyasundar*, an erotic but a poetic story of a love-adventure. Lebedeff thought that they would give Moliere's plays a local flavour. But Bengali intelligentsia paid very little attention to this great effort of a foreign friend.

The British residents of Calcutta used to invite British troupes to come over here for their own entertainment, and the English educated Bengalis rushed to witness performances given by those visiting troupes of English artists. Even in schools and colleges English teachers trained their students to the English way of acting while they gave them lesson in English dramatic literature. For a period of thirty-eight years since Lebedeff's venture nobody did ever think of writing or producing a Bengali drama after the new pattern. The Hindu Theatre founded by Prasanna Coommar Tagore in 1831 only produced English plays and English renderings of Sanskrit plays. It did not occur to any one that this aping was a disgrace to the entire intelligentsia.

One, Nabin Chandra Bose, a rich citizen of North Calcutta, rose up to the occasion. He was determined to remove the stigma of slave mentality. He organised a band of artists, both male and female, and arranged for several performances of *Vidyasundar*, the very same work from which Lebedeff had culled out songs for his renderings of Moliere. His venture was a great success and worked as an eye-opener. The aristocracy, for the first time, realized the possibility of getting Bengali plays written after the western pattern and also produced in the same way. Many of them engaged themselves to dramatic activities. Two outstanding playwrights emerged through their ventures. They were Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Dinabandhu Mitra who left for Bengal some plays that stood out as dramatic classics (1860-73). But the emergence of national drama had yet to come.

The theatres that the Rajas and the rich sponsored were sporadic enterprises not accessible to the citizens of the middle and lower-middle classes. And yet they had cultivated a taste for drama. They wanted a permanent theatre accessible to all, irrespective of caste, creed, and social status, on payment of entry fees.

The Baghbazar Dramatic Association was constituted of some notable young actors belonging to the middle income group. They founded a theatre in 1872 and named it the National Theatre. Girish Chandra Ghosh was the ace-actor of the group. He refused to join the National Theatre at its initial stage, but was prevailed upon to do it later on. Gradually the mantle of leadership fell on him. He was a great actor but no writer while he had joined the theatre. A regular theatre needed a constant supply of new plays. But they did rarely come. Girish was forced by circumstances to hold a pen. And he proved himself to be as great a dramatist as great he was in the art of acting. Bengal has not ever had a greater dramatist and a greater actor to surpass him.

He realized that whatever might be the forms of dramas presented to the public, they must resemble, at least to some extent, to the earlier dramas which were accepted as such. He found poetry, play of imagination, divine dispensation, songs and dances unavoidable in the making of a Bengali drama if it were at all to be accepted by the Bengali audiences of his times. But he had no suitable verse ready at his disposal as Shakespeare had Marlowe's. True, there was the blank verse that Michael Madhusudan had given a shape. But Girish found it not suitable for a drama. Michael himself did never use it for his 'dramas although he believed that poetry must be the vehicle of Bengali drama. Girish adopted a new form of verse and used it for many of his plays. But he wrote his plays also in prose. His prose like his verse was simple, free from the load of ornamentation and mainly local. His first play *Anande Raho*, a prose composition (1882), did not receive much attention. But his second one *Ravan Badh* in verse, written in the same year, proved to be a great success. He had to hang fire for two years, more to prove that he was all gold. His *Chaitanya Leela*, written and performed in 1884, knocked open the sluice gates of his auditors' minds and let loose gushes of emotion that had been seeking an outlet. Not only did it receive the blessings of Thakur Ramkrishna Paramahansa, but the entire people,—the city dwellers as well as the villagers, intellectuals and the illiterates, the rich and the poor—equally felt that to miss its performance would involve a great loss. The gulf was at last bridged. This is a very significant fact. It indicated what the people wanted from a drama. Girish continued to present plays written on fables from the great epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* one after another and also on the

lives of saints. Each one of them was rapturously received. Just for a test Girish translated Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1893). He opened the doors of the Minerva Theatre with an inaugural performance of it. European residents of Calcutta and its intellectuals spoke highly of its rendering and performance, but regular theatre-goers refused to accept it. It is said that *Macbeth* was too big a play for them and its inner conflicts too deep for the understanding of the usual play-goers, mostly illiterate or slightly educated. This appraisal may not be correct. We know that those play-goers could catch the subtle transformation of a *Vihva-mangal*. We know that *Buddhadeva Charita* and *Shankaracharya* did not freeze their zeal for such plays. The conflicts of those great minds were more or less intelligible to them. Otherwise, those plays would not have attracted them to the theatre. I feel that those play-goers understood *Macbeth*. But because they understood it, they did not like it. If this were not true, they would have for the sheer novelty of the settings and the costumes and the arresting acting of their favourite artists patronised it for, at least, a few nights. But they did not do it, and the play had to be withdrawn.

While we discuss the fate of *Macbeth*, rendered into Bengali we must not think of the dramatic quality of the play alone, we must also think of the traits of the auditors' minds. Bengalis of those days, in spite of the Renaissance, were mostly athirst for *Bhakti Rasa* as their forbears were. It was a realization of blissful complacency by surrendering, oneself to his worshipped for strength and light to rise above worldly turmoils. It was no escapism. It was no asceticism. It was no religious dogma either. It was a spiritual belief based on the reality of man's eternal quest for fulfilment in unrestrained and total freedom. No doubt it created a social imbalance. Other forces too had been working against it giving emphasis to other needs of life. But, on the whole, Bengalis, both in the urban and the rural areas, expected from a drama a resolution of conflicts by means of transformation attained through *bhakti* or divine love. Whether it was good for the people or a degradation in man's dignity is a question, I do not intend to take up at the moment. Taking the people of Bengal as they were in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, it may be justly said that Girish proved himself to be the national dramatist of his age. Not only the city dwellers but illiterate villagers also were keen after the performances of his plays.

The social plays he wrote were realistic reflections. There was nothing romantic about them. Dissolution of the system of joint family, the evils of the dowry system, the widow remarriage problem and the economic helplessness of women were grave problems in his days. And he wrote several plays on them. The literary style of these plays differs a good deal from the style he used for his historical and *puranic* plays. But the nuances were, nevertheless, the same—i.e., receiving the inevitable in a placid mood. He was a rebel in his young days. But his works give us an image of a rebel who does not hit to destroy, but hits hard to open the closed doors of his auditors' minds. An attempt to rationalize the faith in divine dispensation is found in all his plays.

The Renaissance stimulated rationalism. Rammohan, Vidyasagar, and Bankim were rationalists in outlook. Of those three Vidyasagar alone was a realist free from any illusion of the divine dispensation. But the other two did not rule it out altogether. Even Michael the hottest of the 'Young Bengal' rebels wrote *Vrajangana Kavya*, and glorified the spiritual love of the women of *Vraja* (an imaginary location supposed to be present-day Vrindavan) who surrendered all that was precious in them to the Lord Shrikrishna realizing that their fulfilment lay only in it.

Bankim Chandra's rational thinking led him write *Anandamath* which contained the national hymn of *Bande Mataram*, and which was taken as a fountain head of the Bengali patriotism, and the source of an inspiration for political liberation. He too portrayed the motherland symbolized in *Durga*, *Kali* and *Dashabhuj* as manifestations of the past, the present, and the future of the motherland. The devoted band of 'generals' he created in this novel to lead the struggle for liberation, were to be so disciplined, he enunciated, as to be able to renounce all pleasures of the flesh, including conjugal relationship. He also gave them a war-cry which glorified Shrikrishna as a slayer of the demons Moor and Madhukaitava. Intellectually Bankim refused to recognise the divinity of Shrikrishna. He wrote *Krishna Charitra* to elucidate that Shrikrishna was, after all, a mortal being. But while he desired to catch the imagination of the people, he accepted the legendary attributes that were bestowed on Shrikrishna. It was not mere a writer's choice of a symbol only. It was more than that. It was a wise decision of a master-

mind to draw out the deeper emotions of his readers. But for it he would not have succeeded to substitute *Deshabhakti* (devotion to the motherland) for the traditional *Krishnabhakti* (devotion to Krishna).

Simply by the choice of a medium of expression and by an invention of a literary style which had a direct appeal to the people Bankim brought his people down from a nebulous state of existence on to the earth itself to face a reality. But lest the stern and the bitter reality scared off his readers, Bankim enthused them with a prospect of a resurrection which his readers believed could only be made possible by the favours of *Durga*, *Kali* and *Krishna*. Surely this was no scientific approach. But rallying the people to the country's cause was more important than building up a scientific form of literature. Bankim preferred the former to the latter. But as the people were still mostly illiterate the message of patriotism, he desired to inspire his people with, could not be carried to them. A vocal and visual representation of it was needed. Girish and his colleagues in the theatre dramatised Bankim's novels and performed them. Dramatic organisations which had sprung up all over the country lost no time to put them on their boards. It was thus that patriotism permeated throughout the society.

Girish, though younger than Bankim, was his contemporary and continued to write when Bankim had stopped. His last plays fervently appealed to the feeling of patriotism and also to the existing social evils. The former were banned one after another no sooner were they staged. The latter ones became immensely popular.

Rabindranath started writing drama at a very tender age. But even then he conceived a pattern of drama which was not prevalent in the nineteenth century either in India or in the western countries. He thought of building up an Indian drama as a distinct form to be distinguished from dramas current in Bengal. He wanted songs and dances to play dynamic roles in the making of a drama as it was made in the past in Bengal since Jaydeva. His earlier poetic expressions were similarly influenced by the Vaishnavic poesy. But the form of drama he reintroduced was not accepted at once, for, the people had, by then, been familiar with a form of drama made after the western pattern. Rabindranath tried his hand

at the latter and succeeded to please the lovers of drama. But as for himself he found no pleasure in writing them. He reverted to the form he had introduced earlier, and evolved other forms as well. Whatever were the forms he explored, his idea of drama was an unbroken piece of poetry, even when he gathered his characters from real life and situations from contemporary social struggles.

Rabindranath did not believe that the legendary gods had any power to bestow on man any particular gift to equip him for a better existence in this world or beyond. But even then he had very often portrayed his native land as a mother goddess. One illuminating illustration is a famous song, the burthen of which runs like this: "When didst thou, O ! Mother, make yourself visible by coming out of the heart of Bengal with such a beauty that baffles description ? By thy right hand you holdeth a flaming sword, and by the left thou dispellest fear. Thy lips are illumined with a smile that assures protection. And thy eyes and brow are aglow alike the rising sun". This was a picture of his motherland he visualized while Bengal was heading towards a violent political revolution. He could portray no better a picture of Bengal that was seething with discontent and was seeking strength and encouragement for a final struggle for political freedom. Bankim had previously done the same. The only difference is that Rabindranath did not name this 'Mother' of his imagination as *Durga* or *Kali* the deities commonly known and worshipped by the Bengalis.

A lyricist though, Rabindranath was a rationalist none the less. But his rationalism alike Bankim's did not rule out the existence of a supernatural source of force. Wherever Rabindranath had referred to a *Kandari* (helmsman) and had sent out an appeal to him to carry the voyagers safely across the river amidst the furies of a storm, he did really seek the protection of a supernatural power. Whenever he had sung the glories of a Being limitless even in a limited space or whenever he implored his Master to sit on the throne of his heart and to play the lute of his soul, he did certainly think of a Being that had no physical shape and dimensions but dense enough to create some sort of image in his mind. An expression of a kind of personal communion with the unseen source of power suggests that it was not merely a literary imagery but something deeper than that, perhaps a faith grown through medi-

tation. This faith did take him nearer to Shri Chaitanya or, more correctly, to the Rishis of the Upanishads.

Rabindranath was a high-priest of Bengali nationalism that evolved when Bengal was partitioned by Lord Curzon in 1905 at the teeth of a severe opposition presented by the entire population.

But even then he had a doubt in his mind, if the upsurge could be described as national. When he expressed this doubt of his, he did not take into consideration the numerical strength of its supporters and opposers. That was a trivial matter with him. He was anxious to know if the term 'nation' could be correctly applied to India. He wrote several essays on this single question just to maintain that thinking of India in term of 'nation' would be historically incorrect, and by adhering to it Indians were likely to be following the footprints of the western nation-builders who thought that no nation could be built up without an exploitation of the weaker people through the expansionist tactics of Imperialism and Colonialism.

And yet did Rabindranath sing to the glories of *Bharatvarsha* that, he believed, had played a unique role in the past and was destined to play it in the future in the matter of growing a civilisation based on human dignity. When he had done it, he thought of the soul of *Bharatvarsha* and not of its physical shape and material resources. He was, after all, no politician. In many of his plays we find 'Kings' who are no mere sovereigns. *Dada-Thakurs* (beloved but revered brothers) who are no family relatives, poets who are no rhyme-makers. And yet they represent human beings. They feel, they see, they speak what the other characters do not feel, do not see, and do not speak. The former suffer with the sufferings of 'the latter. Even the 'Raja' of *Raktakarabi* does share the sufferings of *Nandini*, the Rajas in the *King of the Dark Chamber* and *Aruparatna* terribly suffer from their assumed sternness to correct their erring queens. The *Dada-Thakurs* and the *Bauls* and the *Vairagees* and the poets in his plays are always found to be in deep sympathy with those who are sufferers from social injustice, prejudice and mental slavery. What are they?

They are casually said to be symbols. And because they are found in most of the plays of

Rabindranath, critics of drama categorise them Symbolic Plays. Similar characters appear in many of the Sanskrit plays styled as *Kaunchukis* and *Vashyas*. They are no mere jesters, but friends, philosophers, and guides. Nobody calls them symbols. Those characters are ideas personified. More or less all dramatic characters are such. Even when a street-beggar is represented in a drama he is not exactly a beggar we find on the streets. If he were nothing more than that, he could have hardly been fitted in the form of a drama taking an active part to carry it to its desired end.

Most of the plays of Rabindranath, excepting the few comedies, are more or less imaginary compositions. But they are no phantasies. They are realistic so far as their contents are concerned. These realities are looked by a great poet who sees men and matters as no ordinary onlooker has the wisdom to see.

The contents of *Raktakarabi*, *Post Office*, *Achalayatan*, *Visarjan*, even that of *Kaler Jatra* are not fictitious but real problems of life represented by a poet-seer from a top-level. The very same problems posed by a lesser-writer would look different and would react in a different way than what the above plays were found to be doing. They reflect social injustice, ignorance, inequality, evils of avarice, prejudice, greed, lust for power, and an utter disregard for human dignity, but do not give rise to rancour, and hatred and intolerance.

On the contrary, they fill the hearts of their auditors with sympathy and compassion for the wronging and the wronged alike, and send them away with a serene but meditative mood of mind. By no trickery whatsoever could they be converted into *agit-prop* plays. For they do not hold responsible the social and political systems for the prevalence of the evils but probe deeper to expose cankerous sores that corrupt the minds of those who build up systems. This inner field which seeds of evils find congenial to grow is the stage where plays of Rabindranath really are enacted. Their projection to the auditorium are their acting and production parts. Any perfect reproduction of his plays, therefore, requires an exposition of inner feelings by expressions of genuine emotions through poetry, song and dance; effective vehicles for transference of emotion.

Rabindranath himself was a good actor and a great choreographer. It was he who had

demonstrated by producing his plays and by acting for them, how plays in India should be produced. As in the art of writing plays, so in the art of producing them he had not departed any long way off the tradition that was created by Shri Chaitanyadeva of Bengal and other exponents of drama in India. This tradition is sweetening the bitterness of the struggles of life by a poetic harmony of chords and discords to create a placid mind for the emergence of truth about life. Its trends are many. They are: (a) to seek fulfilment through supernatural aid, (b) to ease the inner conflicts, (c) to get rid of external paraphernalia, (d) to reach auditors directly, and (e) to explore the real causes that shape the realities. These trends invented forms suited to Indian conditions and minds. Even when non-Indian forms had been adopted, they were so metamorphosed as to lose their resemblance to original forms. Critics who look at our dramas from the western angle of vision do, therefore, complain that contemporary India has no drama worth the name. They believe that dramas of all the peoples must be made after the English pattern, which they were taught to be the very best in the world. I do not say they are not. I only say they are English, and therefore, they cannot be Indian as well. To give an Indian drama an appearance of an English drama would look like writing one's own language in the letters of another alphabet. We have specimens of it in our repertory. None of our great dramatists thought of it. They had never lost sight of the people for whom they wrote, nor the land where they were born. Rationalists or romanticists or whatever they were, they could not but follow up the tradition, consciously or unconsciously.

Sisir Bhaduri was not a writer himself. But he had a poet's mind and a poet's vision. Often had I asked him if he were a poet or an actor? He could give recitals from almost all the famous English poets for hours together without a break. I can recollect many a rainy night he kept us enchanted by his ceaseless recitals of Rabindranath's innumerable poems on the rains. When he was in the mood of an actor he would act famous soliloquies from Shakespeare and Girish and Khirode Prosad. His recitations were no mere declamations but creations of images of ideas; the pieces he recited did contain in them.

By and large, he was a romantic actor. But he could, as if by a magician's skill, raise

his acting to a spiritual height. At such tense moments he would be hardly audible, but irresistibly convincing. This particular quality of acting he imbibed from Girish Chandra Ghose whose performances he took as practical lessons even when he was in his teens. In declamation he followed Rabindranath more or less. There was nothing of a *Bhakta* (dedicated to a deity) in him, but culturally he was more an Indian than many of his friends, although he was a Professor of English literature. He never associated himself directly with any political movement. But he was a patriot in the sense that he believed that freedom and fulfilment could only be achieved if his people could free themselves from slavish imitation of their masters' way of life, and could equip themselves with the wealth of the precious heritage left for them. A store of this heritage he discovered in the plays of Dinabandhu, Michael Madhusudan, Girish Chandra, Khirode Prosad and Dwijendra Lal. What he found wanting, he got it written by his colleague in the theatre, Jogesh Chandra Choudhuri. He never staged any play on contemporary political event save one, written by me, *Dasher Dabi* (What the people demand). A list of a few plays that gave him name and fame would convey to the reader his mental set-up. They are *Seeta*, *Pandava Gourab*, *Pandaver Ajnantabash*, *Vilwamangal*, *Visarjan*, *Tapati*, *Vishnupriya*, *Chandra Gupta*, *Sarama*, *Ravana* and the like of them.

In *Alamgir* (he had a hand in its composition) he did not emphasise the political deeds of the Emperor but his towering faith in Islam. In *Digvijoyee* (he got it written by Jogesh Choudhuri) he did not glorify the aggression of Nadir Shah but reflected the woes of Bharatmata in bondage.

He presented many of the renderings of Sarat Chandra Chatterjea's novels not so much for the protests they sounded against social injustice as for the note of tragedy in them of the passing away of a social system that could be, by little modifications, used as the bed-rock of socialism. Himself he was fond of the Joint Family System. And as the head of his pretty big a family of several brothers and other dependants he was an ideal patriarch, ever affectionate, tolerant and self-denying *par excellence*.

These characteristics and traits of the Bengali culture he bore in him attracted him more to

the bright products of the nineteenth century Bengali Renaissance than to the English men of Letters and Arts. Girish and Rabindranath were his guiding angels.

Rabindranath in his search after an Indian form of Drama discovered what was an ensemble acting and what did exactly represent an artists' theatre. He found both of them lacking in the theatres existing then. He, therefore, improvised theatres now and then, and gave performances of his plays presenting himself in the cast along with his colleagues in the Shantiniketan and the pupils studying there. These performances took away the intelligentsia from the professional theatres, but the society, as a whole, had nothing to do with them. No national drama could really be evolved by such exclusive enclaves of culture.

It was Sisir Bhaduri who wiped out the barriers not by demolishing them but by absorbing what were the best in Rabindranath's ventures and by founding what could be appropriately called an artists' theatre. He brought back all those who had left the auditorium of the commercial theatre and gave them an art that they could enjoy along with the less fortunate representatives of the commoners. Sisir Bhaduri's troupe not only gave entire satisfaction to the lovers of drama in the city alone, but also was earnestly sought for in the countryside. And Sisir Bhaduri had to be on constant move from the city to the towns and thence back to the city again. Rabindranath after witnessing one of his performances was convinced that the theatre Sisir Bhaduri had shaped would do justice to his plays, and generously offered his plays not only at its disposal but at the disposal of all the theatres that had, alike Sisir Bhaduri's theatre, adopted ensemble acting and had realized the responsibilities of the artists in the making of drama. This transformation of the Bengali theatre in the twenties of the present century is mainly, if not solely, due to Sisir Bhaduri. And that was the great contribution of Sisir Bhaduri to the cause of Bengali drama and theatre.

But Sisir Bhaduri had, in spite of an unprecedented success and popularity, grave doubts in his mind as to the national form of a Bengali drama. In regard to the contents of Bengali drama he was quite satisfied. He did not hesitate to go to America with *Seeta*. He definitely refused to put on show anything

resembling a western one. He knew perfectly well that even the *Seeta* he had produced could not be carried to the interior and made it understandable to the people living there. He was aware that the form of drama known as *Jatra* could deliver the goods. Should it not be the form of Bengal's national drama? And yet cities have come to stay in Bengal and to increase in number. What would then be the form that would be equally operative both in the urban and the rural areas.

He continually thought of a national theatre and often spoke of it to his close friends who believed he had been asking for a State Theatre. No, he was not. He was positively against the State handling of a nation's culture and education.

He believed that wrong decisions were bound to be arrived at if administrators were made guardians of culture and education. And yet he thought and spoke of a National Theatre. This is, indeed, no paradox. He desired the evolution of theatre to be truly national. And he wanted a theatre where he could work to help such an evolution. He did not get it. Neither could he make it clear what he really wanted. The want of a mutual understanding between a genius and his admirers is a sad tale. And not unoften a genius is found to be passing away with a complaint against those very persons who adore him. Shocking though, it does not arrest the process of regeneration. Love for him resurrects him.

