

Bangladesh Plays its Part in ITI

ATAUR RAHMAN Interviewed by Sajedul Awwal

The 25th World Congress of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) was held in Munich, Germany from May 23 to May 29, 1993. This world congress of ITI sits once in every two years. The next one is likely to be held in Mexico in 1995.

ITI was established in the year 1948 under the auspices of UNICEF and currently 87 countries are enlisted as members of this international forum. This year a 6-member Bangladesh delegation led by Professor Kabir Chowdhury participated in the congress. The delegation included Ramendu Majumdar, Ataur Rahman, Nasiruddin Yusuf, Mofidul Hoque and Debprashad Debnath. It is a matter of great pride that Bangladesh was elected in the 14-member executive committee of ITI securing the highest number of votes jointly with Korea. It is also a matter of great achievement that Ramendu Majumdar who represents Bangladesh in the Executive Committee of ITI as the Secretary General of ITI Bangladesh Centre was elected as one of the Vice-Presidents of ITI by the vote of the members of the executive committee. A big surprise came when Ataur Rahman, member of the Bangladesh delegation was elected as the President of the Board of "New Theatre Committee", one of the permanent committees of ITI. Both of them are renowned theatre personalities of Bangladesh.

Ramendu Majumdar initiated the formation of ITI in Bangladesh through his international contacts. He is also one of the pioneers who created Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation, a federate body of different theatre groups of Bangladesh and became its first chairman. Ataur Rahman, on the other hand, has displayed a rare understanding of the craft of theatre. He has demonstrated great skill not only as a stage actor but also as a director, playwright and critic. In fact he has excelled as theatre director and at present he is one of the very few imaginative directors in the country. He is the former chairman of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation and is holding the post of General Secretary of Nagorik Natya Sampradaya, a pioneer theatre group of the country. He is also the secretary in charge of International Affairs, ITI, Bangladesh Centre.

Here Ataur Rahman in an exclusive interview expresses his views about the 25th World Congress of ITI held in Munich, Germany where Bangladesh achieved a great deal in the field of theatre.

Sajedul Awwal (SA): First, on behalf of the theatre practitioners of Bangladesh, let me congratulate you for becoming the President of ITI's "New Theatre Committee".

How did you gain this status? Through election or selection?

Ataur Rahman (AR): Thank you Sajedul Awwal for the feeling you have expressed towards me. Actually whatever has been achieved by me as an individual, or Bangladesh as a whole, I would like to give the entire

credit for the height that has been achieved by the present-day Bangladeshi theatre due to the undaunted spirit and untiring efforts of the theatre practitioners of the country. In the year 1991 and 1992, two successive years, Bangladeshi theatre scene was exposed to foreign theatre expert when they met in Dhaka to participate in international seminars titled "Theatre Journals in Asia: Cooperation through Communication" (1991) and "Impact of International Interaction in Contemporary Theatre" (1992). The foreign experts returned home with good feeling about Theatre practice in Bangladesh. Their feelings may be summarized this way — Bangladesh theatre although poor in its attire, nevertheless, it has a soul which is dedicated towards a meaningful theatre. In its inaugural speech the President of German ITI Centre on the opening day of 25th World Congress, categorically mentioned that Bangladesh although poor as a country but is rich in culture and the developed countries of the world may have something to learn from Bangladesh.

In the opening session of the "New Theatre Committee" of ITI I tried to deliberate on the concept of new and old. I said that in the field of theatre what we propagate to be new may not be all that new and same goes for the old. I further said that if we

end of the workshop during the World Congress, I expressed my reservation towards such formal workshop presentations. I said that these kinds of international workshops are more important for the interaction amongst the young people of different cultures so that they can break the barrier of inhibition and the artificial armour they may have put around them, and could be united as true human beings instead of putting up formal shows. All these things possibly helped me to get in to the Board of "New Theatre Committee" of ITI. To my surprise immediate past President of the "New Theatre Committee" submitted my nomination in the Board almost without asking me and I was elected in the 6-member Board unanimously. Subsequently, on the insistence of US and German representatives in the "New Theatre Committee" I was unanimously made the President of this committee for a term of two years. Isabel Quintanar of Mexico and Philip Arnoult of USA were elected as Vice-Presidents while Cesar Herrera of Uruguay was elected as Secretary. Gunther Beclitz of Germany and Christian Haller of Switzerland were elected as Members while Damian Popchristol of Bulgaria, Vesa Tapio Valo of Finland and Melina Sardi of Greece were elected as Corresponding Members.

committee, dramatic theatre committee, theatre education committee, communications committee, new theatre committee and committee for cultural identity and development. Each of the committees has a Board comprising of maximum 10-members elected for a 2-year term.

SA: Where are the members of ITI Bangladesh placed in this structure? Was that also achieved through election?

AR: As already mentioned, Bangladesh was elected as one of the Vice-Presidents of Excom (Prime-committee) represented by Ramendu Majumdar. Then, I was elected in the Board of "New Theatre Committee" as President. Ramendu Majumdar, apart from being elected as the Vice-President of Excom, also was elected in the Board of "Communication Committee" as Vice-President. Nasiruddin Yusuf was elected as Board-member of "Committee for Cultural Identity & Development". Mofidul Hoque was coopted as Board-member of "Communication Committee". Bangladesh could have possibly more places in other five committees as well had those been represented by our delegation members.

SA: What is your reaction after gaining this impressive position within the permanent body ("New Theatre Committee") of ITI?

AR: I was first surprised and quite naturally became happy later on, as most probably I am the first Asian to have entered in the Board of "New Theatre Committee".

SA: As far as we know, only the theater professionals usually become the members of ITI. Why is Bangladesh treated differently in this regard?

AR: There is always an exception to the rule. Bangladeshi theatre practitioners are not professionals in the strict sense of the term as they are not being able to earn their livelihood out of theatre. Yet, in Bangladesh, theatre practitioners are involved in this performing medium with professional zeal and commitment. That is why Bangladesh received special consideration to have become the full-fledged member of ITI.

SA: You are already the General Secretary of Nagorik Natya Sampradaya and Secretary for International Affairs of ITI, Bangladesh Centre and now you have become the President of a permanent committee of ITI Central. You have a lot to do internationally it seems. Would you please explain some of your responsibilities in this regard?

AR: Most important of all, I am a busy theatre director involved in directing plays for other theatre groups of the country apart from my own group. In our country, a person has to be involved in multifarious activities not by choice but under compulsion as we live in a non-professional and non-ex-



Ataur Rahman

erts society. This contra-characteristic of our society has made us unusually courageous and as such we are not afraid of anything. I think I will be able to bring in new life to "New Theatre Committee" of ITI by organizing more international theatre workshops, seminar and meeting affording theatre practitioners of different countries and culture to exchange views and interact freely. My attitude in this regard might appear to be ignorantly blissful but I cannot help it.

SA: Given your involvement with both ITI and Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation (as special honourable member), will there be any conflict of interest? Please elucidate.

AR: International Theatre Institute is an organisation of individuals whereas Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation is a federate body of different practicing theatre groups of the country. The membership of ITI to an individual is given when he fulfills certain criteria relating to ITI activities, specially in terms of contributions towards respective fields of interest. Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation membership is given to a practicing theatre group after the group fulfills certain requirements towards stage activities. Both the organisations work for the cause of theatre and its development. May be the modus operandi is different and area of activities is varying but the goal is the same. So, there is no conflict of interest likely to take place as far as I can guess. Moreover, one is international assignment which is ITI's and the other is national responsibility. I shall have to make time for both.

SA: We know that in keeping with the nature of the central ITI committees, there should also be eight permanent bodies in each ITI local chapter. What is the situation in Bangladesh in this respect?

AR: There is no hard and fast rule in this respect. Well, if there are corresponding local committees keeping in the line of central ITI, it will be a matter of appreciation. For example ITI, Bangladesh Centre has already established a local body of "Committee for Cultural Identity and Development". In future we may have local body of both "Communication Committee" and "New Theatre Committee" as Bangladesh is represented in the Board of these three committees. It all depends, in what we would

try to do something new in the field of arts vis-a-vis theatre, it should come from within as a matter of creative flare and impulse but we should not try to do something new for the sake of new only or put up something new in order to sell the product, in this case the creative work. Any deliberate attempt to do something new in the field of performing art is usually boring and tiresome.



At the 25th World Congress of ITI at Munich: (L to R) Debprashad Debnath, Ataur Rahman, Ramendu Majumdar, Nasiruddin Yusuf and Mofidul Haq.

SA: What is the structure of ITI Central Executive Committee?

AR: ITI has an executive committee comprising of 14-member — country is represented by an individual from the respective member-country. The Excom is elected for a term of two years. It is headed by President with 2 Vice-Presidents and 11-members. There is a Secretary General who is not elected but employed by ITI on 4-year contract. ITI's entire activities are manifested through eight permanent committees, playwrights committee, dance committee, music, theatre

committee, dramatic theatre committee, theatre education committee, communications committee, new theatre committee and committee for cultural identity and development.

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SA: What are your plans for the "New Theatre Committee"?

AR: Apart from participating in the Board meeting and other events of "New Theatre Committee" as per the proposed agenda drawn at the 25th World Congress held in Munich this year, we have a plan for Bangladesh. At the end of this year and in the first half of the next year, I would like to be in Mexico and Uruguay to attend "New Theatre Committee" activities. In January 1995 we hope to organise an international theatre workshop, atleast for the SAARC countries, in Dhaka when the Board meetings of "Communication Committee", "Committee for Cultural Identity and Development" and "New Theatre Committee" alongwith an international seminar and theatre festival will also be held in Dhaka.

SA: Are you getting any help from the State with regard to the work of ITI? Or are you raising any vital issue?

AR: Not as yet. We will first try to let the State know what ITI is, which the Government either do not know or do not like to know as "theatre" has not been a palatable commodity to the establishment. After having done the elementary task, we might consider to raise important issues with the government.

SA: We know that in many countries the state provides subsidies for promoting theatre. How would you draw the attention of the Bangladesh Government in this context?

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A Tome in Aid of Development Workers

BOOK REVIEW

Directory of Communication Materials of Development NGOs/Other Development Organizations Working in Bangladesh

Prepared and published by Village Education Resource Centre and Pact-Bangladesh, Dhaka.

Price: Tk 250, US\$20

Reviewed by Kawsar Hussain

W HATEVER may be one's arguments in favour of or against the non-government organizations engaged in development activities, these organizations or NGOs are an undeniable reality in the present-day LDCs like our impoverished motherland.

At present, a large number of NGOs, local and international, are operating in Bangladesh, covering a wide range of development activities. They work independently to materialise their purpose and objectives and reach their respective goals. Keeping in mind the important role they can play in the development of our country and the well-being of our people, we can hardly over-emphasize the need of a concerted and coordinated approach to the operations of these organizations in their respective fields.

Though this has been a long-felt need, not much has so far been done in this connection. However, we have recently seen the publication of a Directory which can be said to be a positive step to fulfilling this need. This Directory, with a rather longish title, *Directory of Communication Materials of Development NGOs/Other Development Organizations Working in Bangladesh*, evidently originated from desire to help development workers of various organizations.

As a part of their programmes, the development NGOs and other development organizations develop and publish a good number of communication materials every year with a view to catering to the needs of their own specific programmes, and also to the needs of their staff and client-partners. These materials can also be used as information materials by other organizations, non-government and government agencies, the general public and various target-groups. These materials may also be very valuable for, among others, the planners and policy-makers.

The Directory is an attempt to bring all these diverse materials under one roof, and has listed them for the purpose of ready reference.

Only the first volume of the proposed two-volume Directory has by now come out, and the publishers say they are working on the second volume. The objectives of the Directory, as stated in the 'introduction', are to provide support to manifold development activities of various organizations, avoid duplication of similar materials and thus save time, cost, energy, share expertise and skills in various fields in producing needed communication materials and, eventually, set up a Communication Materials Resource Library which will cater to the needs of all concerned.

And the very first volume has amply proved that it can achieve its objectives. Bi-lingual in nature, the Directory's first volume presents all sorts of information about as much as 39 leading NGOs and other development agencies in both Bangla and English, making it easily accessible for almost everyone interested in the workings of these organizations. This volume provides its users with the information about various types of development support communication materials (from books to leaflets to posters and stickers) developed and used by these organizations. But the Directory goes far beyond its avowed aim, too. It also includes short histories of those organizations, providing information about their establishment (including even the postal addresses and telephone numbers).

It was in his reign that the colossal statues multiplied, whose concept Ramses II was to develop later on, going so far as to have the face on the magnificent statues of Amenophis III modified and replaced by his own features. In the Grand-Palais, in Paris, superb royal animals (a pink granite lion, a huge blue granite ram and a little blue ceramic monkey) gaze at the scene in a neighbouring display-case.

The Pharaoh had appointed

a kind of chief architect to take charge of the big building projects of his reign. This was Amenhotep, son of Hapu (in order to distinguish