



essay

Can Theatre Alter Society?

by Quazi Mostain Billah

TO many theatre buffs the title of this essay will appear to have a touch of blasphemy. Being annoyed and outraged by its implication, they might even suspect its exploratory manner as a vain polemicist's trick to kick up controversy on a question that has been debated and resolved conclusively. Haven't we heard it for the umpteenth time that theatre can change society? Some might argue that since the issue is already settled what motives other than specious ones can lie behind questioning the obvious? But my purpose is quite humble and straightforward and the question I have posed stems from a genuine interest in freshening up my understanding of the subject. Though I have seen many graffiti reminding me of the affective value of theatre for society and also read a good number of essays echoing similar power of theatre, I have never been able to suspend my skepticism about theatre for social change. When we indicate social change, we mean specific and identifiable change in human life and behaviour. For example, if the authorities in our country legislate against the littering of city streets and levy fine for such offence, it is very likely that city dwellers will discontinue the practice of dumping garbage on the streets. As a result, the city streets will become cleaner. This kind of identifiable and specific development can be called social change and I fear theatre cannot effect this kind of concrete change. In my view, practical as well as aesthetic considerations contradict the claim made by the proponents of theatre for social change. Let me first touch upon what I call the practical considerations that make the view that theatre enacts social change somewhat questionable.

At the outset, I must state that I don't deny the affective value of theatre. Good theatre, in the past, has affected its audience and will continue to do so. But when we say that theatre can change society, I am afraid, we can be accused of exaggeration. A society consists of many people and to engineer any meaningful social change we need to reach a respectable chunk of its members. But how many people go to theatre in Bangladesh each year? I don't know the

Where do we stand with regard to theatre for social change? Though it is imperative for us to change our society, how far has theatre contributed to the fulfilment of that objective? We, too, had our fair share of experimental theatre. Beginning from street theatre, there have been varied attempts to take theatre to the people living in both urban and rural areas. I remember seeing our kind of Habib Tanveer plays acted out by children and adults coming from the rather lower strata of the society and completely lacking in any kind of theatrical tutoring. But has the impact of these experiments percolated to wider audience? Have they succeeded in changing the minds of a reasonable number among the audiences?

exact figure, but in view of general low attendance in theatrical shows I can safely say the number is not really encouraging. At least it is not high enough to play significant role in moulding large-scale social changes. An individual or at the most a group may be changed here and there by theatre, but effecting significant social changes is beyond its scope.

We also need to remember another important fact about the status of theatre in modern times. There was a time when going to theatre was a kind of ritual in which everybody took part voluntarily. For example, in ancient Greece going to theatre carried religious and social values. But it does not occupy similar position in our life. No doubt it is a public event, but people participate in it only when they choose to and that does not happen quite often in our country. This infrequency of visits makes it even more difficult to inspire its audience to change either their lives or society. If theatre could be made a kind of social activity and every member of the society was made to attend theatre then we could expect to have some kind of social change.

The aesthetic objection to theatre playing a role in bringing social change is not wholly new. Creative artists have always resisted making art a purveyor of specific set of values. By prescribing particular objective for theatre, i.e. by saying that it should work for social change won't we be denying creative people the prerogative that is allowed to them by their craft? Don't we admire more the artist who creates than the one who preaches? It is true that art is not entirely for art's sake, but at the same time turning it into a conduit for specific values will strip it of both beauty

and truth. After all art can never take the place of propaganda. If we insist that theatre should have specific agenda on its hand, won't we be according it only half of its life? Hasn't good theatre been good art too? Did Shakespeare or Tagore write plays in order to change society?

However, we need to remember that theatre is something that we cannot take passively. Its very nature demands emotional as well as intellectual interaction with the sights and sounds presented during a show. But this kind of interaction is purely a psychological phenomenon and I wonder if it contributes to the kind of social change that a government edict can enforce. The impact of theatre is felt inside, and I think when we say that theatre can change society we actually mean that it contributes to shaping consciousness.

As we watch a theatrical show, it may provoke in us some feelings or emotions, which later may filter into thoughts or ideas and may begin to govern our opinions or judgements and allied matters. As a result, our thought and behaviour may be transformed and in the long run may influence society. I think only in this sense it can be argued that theatre changes society. But the length of the process, its indirect way of work, and the change as only a dormant possibility undermine the strong claim that is made about the affective power of theatre. Moreover, this role of theatre makes it far less radical than many theatre activists will be ready to admit.

My skepticism about theatre for social change is not quite novel. I found a pertinent discussion on this subject in Fintan O'Toole's review of the plays of Wallace Shawn, an American playwright. (O'Toole, Fintan. 'The Masked

Avenger'. *The New York Review of Books*. August 13, 1998.) With regard to the role of audience in left-wing theatre O'Toole says:

"The dilemma of those who saw theatre as a way of changing the world was that they were virtually certain to have the wrong audience. Almost by definition, those who attended the theatre were not those who might rise up and destroy the status quo. The wretched of the earth had more urgent concerns than sitting on hard benches in rough, fashionable black box theatres."

Theatre for social change struggles not only for finding enough audience as I have argued, but also, according to O'Toole, lacks motivated audience. He has observed that in order to circumvent this problem left-wing theatre or theatre for social change adopted two strategies:

"There were, in essence, two ways of dealing with this reality. One, tried by groups like the Living Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, was to develop new, nonliterary forms of drama and to take them on the road, attempting to meet the masses on their own ground. The other, which the Living Theatre also tried, was to take bourgeois audience as it came and to shock it into realizing just how contemptible it really was."

The title of Peter Handke's play 'Offending the Audience' quite succinctly describes the second method adopted by playwrights concerned with influencing their audiences. This approach to theatre may justifiably be called shock-theatre. But I have doubts whether this shock theatre yields the desired fruit of social change.

The fun-loving audience becomes a target for the playwrights who try to

shock them believing that the shock would be followed by abandonment of the status quo. Even though they cannot be changed overnight and roused to immediate action, the jolt received from the shock would stimulate the audience to think, if not act, differently. If this continues, the society will feel its impact one day. But in the fitness of things it seems that 'one day' will always be delayed for want of sufficient converts. Theatre has always capitalized on shock, but can that shock administer social therapy? Moreover, who can estimate how many among the audience should be shocked for changes in society? Considering the many forms of entertainment that now compete to catch audiences' attention, would it be unfair to say that the prospect of winning a sufficient number of converts will always remain a distant possibility?

Where do we stand with regard to theatre for social change? Though it is imperative for us to change our society, how far has theatre contributed to the fulfilment of that objective? We, too, had our fair share of experimental theatre. Beginning from street theatre, there have been varied attempts to take theatre to the people living in both urban and rural areas. I remember seeing our kind of Habib Tanveer plays acted out by children and adults coming from the rather lower strata of the society and completely lacking in any kind of theatrical tutoring. But has the impact of these experiments percolated to wider audience? Have they succeeded in changing the minds of a reasonable number among the audiences? It would be hard to judge the total impact for want of any dependable and verifiable evidence, but when I think about our

present response to theatre my doubts about theatre's social role harden.

Let's consider what draws our audiences to the theatre. Entertainment. I do not see any harm with it. After all, theatre is not a school where people should go for moral edification. But what constitutes the entertainment? In my view chiefly three things: the presence of stars, abundance of comedy and moderate degree of social criticism. That most of the theatre groups cannot afford to ignore these things is often betrayed in the language of their advertisement. Having a star or two on the cast or promise of fun and frolic makes a lot of difference in enticing the audience. The organizers cannot be blamed for using this extra bait to tempt the audience; they know the hard pinch of their dwindling coffers. Actually we suffer from a dichotomy here. On the one hand we talk of experimental group theatre, but on the other hand we rely on the mannerism of the known and popular stars to tempt the audiences. The comedy and social criticism only scratch the surface. But do we have any way out of this contradiction?

I think the answer to it is experiment. To really make theatre meaningful we need a kind of shift in the present paradigm and this is possible by opening doors to really experimental theatre. I will refrain from trying to define the nature of this experiment as it might lead to narrowing its parameter. All I know is that such experiment should look into all aspects of theater like acting, directing, etc. for possible overhauling. I myself have only vague notions of that experiment and to help construct a rough vision of it I can only suggest that it should be a theatre more of engagement than of shock. There should also be a new focus. Instead of aiming at changing society, theatre should aim at modifying the consciousness of the audience by engaging them intellectually and emotionally and in order to achieve its aim it needs to examine its current practices and replace them with ones which are more responsive to experiments. If we welcome free and bold experiments, we may succeed in alerting, if not altering people. That, of course, is not as radical as changing society, but my belief is that someday these alerted people will turn around to ask questions which will set the wind of change in motion.

impression

Calcutta Fortnightly *Desh* Undermines Our Literature

by A Z M Haider

CALCUTTA based fortnightly journal *Desh* played a predominant role in helping Bengali literature to grow, flower and flourish in pre-partition Bengal. Calcutta was then the sole literary capital of undivided Bengal. Naturally, therefore, literary activities in Bengal used to revolve round Calcutta during those days. Being the major literary journal of the period, *Desh* played the central role in encouraging poets and writers of pre-partition Bengal.

After partition of Bengal in 1947 Calcutta's preponderance in the literary scene yielded place to Dhaka which emerged as an alternative literary centre with its rise to pre-eminence as the capital of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). *Desh* possibly finds it difficult to reconcile itself with the changed reality. It seems to be still labouring under the impression that Calcutta even now continues to hold the paramount position in the literary world of both Bengals and hence the literary endeavour in West Bengal, whirling round Calcutta as its centre, should be taken into cognizance. Fur-

thermore, *Desh* is of the opinion that literary activities in Bangladesh are of little significance and therefore do not deserve mention in any literary review. *Desh* is, therefore, of the view that as a major literary journal of Calcutta it reserves the right to issue edicts which the literary circle of Bangladesh like that of West Bengal will endorse without question.

There would have been no occasion to rake up the watershed between the literary tradition of West Bengal and that of Bangladesh if the Calcutta based journal in one of its recent issues had not come up with a review on the whole range of Bengali literature to cause confusion in minds of its readers in this country. There is no gainsaying the fact that *Desh* has considerable readership in this country and its review of 50 years of Bengali literature starting from 1947 has created a stir among its readership in Bangladesh.

Nobody in this part of Bengal would have lifted his eye-brows if the journal had made it clear that its review remained restricted to developments during the past 50 years in the field of literature in West Bengal alone. In that case nobody in this country would have taken note of it. It has, on the contrary,

kicked up a lot of dust by including in its sweep two short story writers from Bangladesh, Hasan Azizur Haq and Akhtaruzzaman Elias. Hence the review in question gives one an impression that it relates to the whole range of Bengali literature encompassing that of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Before going into the merit or otherwise of the review one would like to question competence of the reviewer, Krishna Basu. We do not know her standing and stature in the literary world of West Bengal. But it will not be unwise to conclude that she has very little knowledge of the post-partition Bengali literature that has sprouted about Dhaka as its centre during the past half a century. Her survey, which merely makes a passing reference to two short story writers of this country and to none of its novelists and poets, testifies to the truth of this assertion. Krishna Basu's evaluation of Bengali literature from 1947 to 1997 gives one the idea that Bangladesh lacks literary endeavour worthy of note except the two short story writers mentioned in her review. By implication it seeks to indicate that what Bengali literature comes to mean during the period under review

emanates from West Bengal. Nothing can be a greater truth than this.

Does the reviewer of *Desh* know that Bangladesh is blessed with rich fertile land irrigated by copious rains of blood, toil and tears and inhabited by people full of vigour and vitality — people ever ready to face elemental fury of nature and fight all odds and adversities created by man. The spirited people of this country waged war for cultural autonomy which culminated in the struggle for national independence and finally to the war of liberation. In their struggle they suffered many jerks, jolts and reverses, but never lost sense of direction and innate courage to face up to all challenges. The vicissitudes of their chequered history of the last half a century provide ample ingredients for production of great novels, fine pieces of painting and sublime works of poetry, worthy of mention. During the past fifty years of its varied history this country has bred a galaxy of highly talented writers and poets who have produced a number of outstanding works which by reasons of their sheer literary excellence have carved out a niche for themselves in the history of Bengali literature.

Without dilating on novels and short stories, I propose to dwell briefly on poetry written in Bangladesh during the period from 1947 to 1997. If poets of the forties in Bangladesh are left out due to time bar (they belong mainly to pre-partition period which does not come within the purview of the review), one cannot but concede that this country has produced outstanding poets like Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Al-Mahmud, Alauddin Al Azad etc in the decade of fifties. In succeeding decades of sixties, seventies and eighties Bangladesh has also produced quite a few remarkable poets like Nirmalendu Goon, Mahadev Shaha, Abdul Mannan Syed etc who deserve mention in any review on poetry written in Bengali language. The poets referred to above not only equal but also excel their counterparts in West Bengal.

Krishna Basu, reviewing Bengali poetry from 1947 to 1997, picked up for brief discussion 50 works of poets all of whom without exception belong to West Bengal. On this side of Bengal poets like Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Alauddin Al Azad have produced works which should have found place in the list of works selected by Krishna Basu

for discussion since the range of her review extends the territorial bounds of West Bengal and covered literature produced in Bangladesh during the period under her review. She should have singled out 25 to 30 works, if not more, of Bangladeshi poets for discussion if she wanted her review to be truly representative and fair appraisal of the fifty years of Bengali poetry. She seems to have purposely precluded the poetical works produced in this country during the period under review in an effort to completely black out creative endeavour in its field of poetry. The reviewer seems to be unaware or perhaps pretends not to be aware of the fact that Bangladesh literature is very rich in poetry and that this country has bred a galaxy of highly talented poets during the past several decades. Krishna Basu's attempt at precluding poetical works produced in Bangladesh during the past few decades from her review seems to be quite consistent with Ananda Bazar Patrika group of publications' deep-seated conspiracy to ignore or undermine initiatives taken in this country in the field of literature, journalism, fine arts, music, may in all fields of creative endeavour. This is reprehensible.

fiction

A Disperate Yet Pleasant Perception

by A S M Nurunnabi

A man and a woman coming from different countries with different religions might be locked in situations which could not be thought to be possible in normal circumstances. But in life strange things happen.

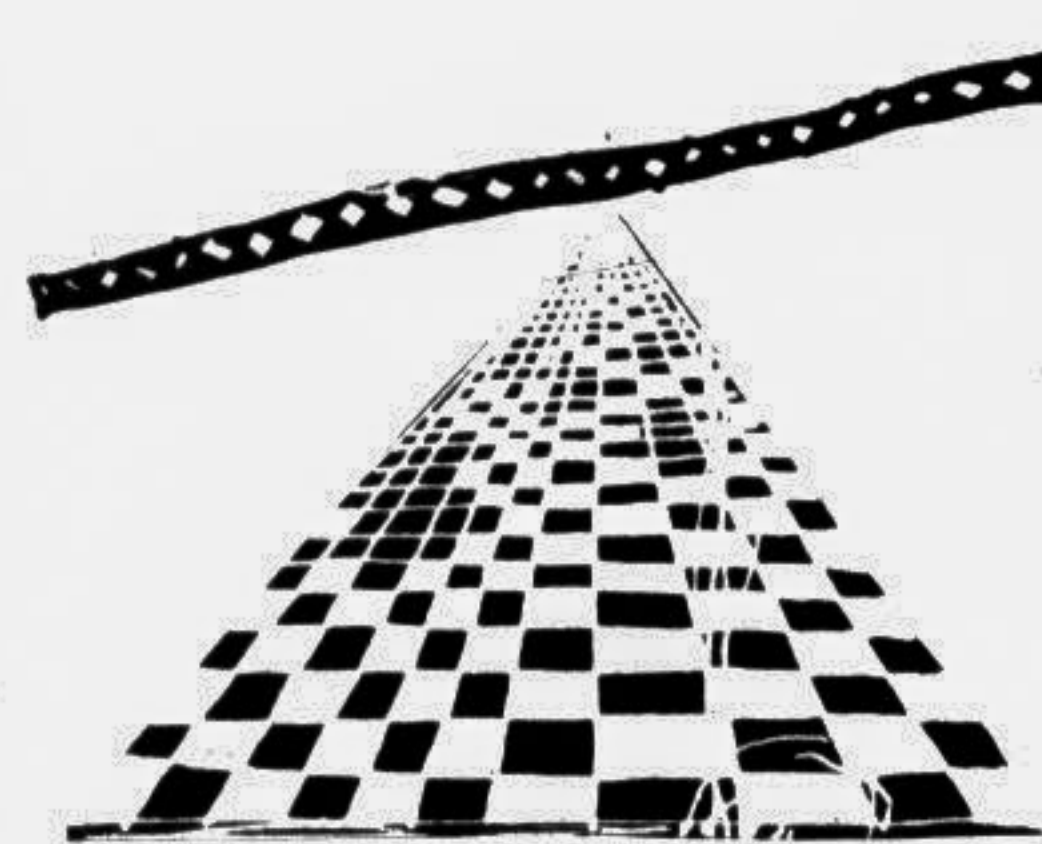
The story unfolded during the time when they met to participate in a short course of research at a research institute in a country foreign to both of them. The research institute had some

basic facilities, such as a big dining room adjacent to the lecture theatre where the research co-ordinators used to address the research scholars on various aspects of their research subjects. The research scholars came from different countries. During breaks in such discussions at the lecture theatre for such purposes as lunch, tea interludes, and dinner, the participants had obviously got opportunities to meet one another and discuss any kind of subjects under the sun.

When the research work at the institute had progressed a couple of months,

many opportunities arose in which the man say named Tariq came in touch with a woman say named Sharmila. Both of them had Master's degree in their respective subjects and were doing further studies for their MS degree. Both of them were in their early thirties. Both of them left their original homes when the country to which they originally belonged, had been divided long ago.

This was somewhat a sketchy background to their lives. Perhaps because of their close association at the institute for some time, they became intimate



with each other, and talked a lot about their own lives. Their intimacy somewhat intensified when they, in course of an excursion to a place of historical interest some miles away, felt themselves quite free any kind of inhibition and talked freely about many aspects of their family and private lives. As both of them were emotionally mature, none of them had any illusion about the nature of their relationship.

At one stage, in course of their return journey in the evening, Tariq heard the sound of 'azan' from a distant mosque.

He at once fell silent. At the same time, a thunderous din from falling waters from a dam over a nearby river mixed with the sound of the 'azan'. But in Tariq's ears, the sound of the 'azan' seemed to overpower the din of the falling waters. Sharmila felt intrigued by the sudden silence of Tariq. He, of course, explained the reason later. Being an educated woman with insight, Sharmila did not consider the temporary silence of Tariq as incongruous. She rather appreciated Tariq's religious attitude.

To be continued