



Bangladesh Theatre and Liberation War Plays

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Prelude

Chronicling Bangladesh Theatre and Liberation War Plays inevitably persuades one to explore how proscenium theatre culture came in this subcontinent, especially in this part of India, that is Bengal, for, contrasted with our open-stage *Jatra* that does not divide the audience from the performers, a proscenium stage is the "arch or opening separating the stage from the auditorium together with the area immediately in front of the arch". This Greek tradition came to India sometimes in the mid-18th century and obviously it is a colonial cultural legacy. I believe a brief prelude to this would suit the discussion.

During the period between 1757 and 1947, one after another theatre or amateur theatre came into being thanks to the fancy initiatives of elite Bengalis. This succession took place following the translation and staging of the play *Disguise* written by a Russian adventurer, Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev, in Bengal, as the initiator of Western proscenium performance. These theatre activities had been practiced as a source of entertainment for the elite based in Kolkata.

It must be mentioned that no clear evidence are available as to what kind of theatre practices, if any, took place in Dhaka, what is now the capital of Bangladesh. Biswas (2019) rightfully mentioned in his doctoral thesis, "The distance between Dhaka and Kolkata is

knowledge about drama organisations and clubs, which were established towards the beginning of the 20th century, such as, *Sabzimahal Dramatic Club, Wari Dramatic Club, Tikatuly Dramatic Club, Armanitola Dramatic Club, Gendaria Dramatic Club, Sangattola Dramatic Club, Farashganj Dramatic Club* and the likes. Notably, *Vernal Theatre* (later *The Great Vernal Theatre*) was established in 1908 centring round Comilla Town Hall.

The 1947 to 1971 phase, that is, the Pakistan period, saw performances worth mentioning like *Tipu Sultan, Noshto Chele, Bijoya, Shabistan, Dui Purush, Shirajudoullah*, and a few more playwrights and novelists like Rabindranath, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya. There were also a number of Dhaka University sponsored productions that included stalwart playwrights of the time like Sikander Abu Zafar, Nurul Momen, Askar Ibne Shaikh, Munir Chowdhury, Syed Waliullah, Saeed Ahmed and Zia Hyder. Most of their plays had socio-political and religious bigotry themes. Thus there was a distinct tone of protest against social inequity, political and cultural oppression, and religious overplay in almost all the plays, and all of them outsourced from the Language Movement of 1952. That was the time when Munir Chowdhury's fabled play *Kabar* was written. A major step forward in the history of Bangladesh theatre was the establishment of Dhaka University-based theatre group Drama Circle in 1956. Banglapedia rightly evaluates, "This



Stage drama: 'Ekattorer Khudiram'.

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Group Theatre Federation in 1981.

1960-1970 saw an abundance in politically themed plays, which in turn helped find the rationale and logic for our demand for autonomy leading to independence. On one hand there were emblematic plays of Rabindranath—*Muktodhara, Raktakorobi, Raja, Acholaioton*—and on the other there were plays like *Odhikar aar Songramer Sphuron, Kritodaser Hasi, Jolche Aagun Kehetekhmare, Alo Aashche, Auronodoier Pothe, Poster, Shapoth Nilam, Songket, Shamne Lora, Ebarer Songram, Jago Bangali, Bhorer Swapno, Muktir Nesh, Swadhinota Amar Swadhinota, Swadhinotar Sangram*—all of which were loaded with plots of political autonomy and Bengali nationalism. That premised the ultimate establishment of group theatre spirit in 1972 with the launch of theatre shows in exchange of tariff.

Liberation War aftermath

Though in its initial state Bangladesh group theatre had its slogan-agenda "movement". Gradually it shifted to theatre "practice". Most of the plays staged during the phase of the ascent from "movement" to "practice" depicted the picture of the devastated society undergoing economic transitions. "Swinging between such disappointments and hopes, the themes of the Liberation War sometimes came to the fore figuratively in terms of the success of freedom fighters; sometimes in the form of criticism as to why the success of the war had gotten hijacked; at times through the misinterpretation of the Mujib-regime; and on other occasions under the patronisation of power politics and in the light of different ideologies" (Biswas, 2019). As a result, the theatre activities of Bangladesh were in a messy scene towards the end of the 20th century.

Bala (2019) said, at that time "plays tagged as 'exceptional', 'experimental' were written and staged. It's called the explosion of youth. Drama as a form saw a radical change. Subjects, styles, and applications attained novelty. Fresh dream and raw emotions for a new society and country occupied the mind of the war-returned youth. These manifested themselves in different forms on the stage. Group theatres came into being;

various crises of everyday reality surfaced on the stage as social responsibility. Due to the lack of quality Bengali plays, plays in different languages started being translated and adapted. These reflected the contemporary reality. Calls for class struggle too were made on the stage... The last three decades of the last century saw various experimentations regarding adaptations of plays." Bala also discussed the changed stagecraft of Bangladesh in the hands of Delhi National School of Drama graduates, and the application of dramatic forms based on oral tradition of local origin by Selim Al Deen. I concur with Bala's later observation, "The vociferous political and social thoughts of initial days gradually died down." However, different negative political factors are to blame for this.

The key feature of drama in the period between 1972 and 1975 is "a combined expression of struggle and victory, which is exclusively the legacy of our Liberation War. Not only content-wise and thematically but also stylistically, the Liberation War has been reflected in Bangladeshi drama." (Ghosh, 2011, quoted in Biswas, 2019). However, this tradition could continue due to political vicissitudes and regime changes. And whether we admit it or not, this has channelled the cultural taste of our people in a direction resulting in lower turnout of audience for stage plays.

Theatre practices did not stop in the adverse atmosphere. The history of theatre practices since the Pakistan era, as I mentioned earlier, had been built up institutionally and it gathered steam via the group theatre movement post-independence. No military regime could stop its strong current since the Father of the Nation had permeated an indomitable attitude of resistance and determination in the heart of every single Bengali.

Three representative Liberation War plays
It is extremely regrettable, yet true, that very few impacting and potential plays were written and performed themed on our Liberation War—neither during the *movement* phase nor during the *practice* phase. Readily the ones that I can refer to are Shantonu Biswa's *Informer*; Syed Shamsul Haque's *Tora Sob Joidhoni Kor*



Stage drama: 'Mukhosh'.

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huge... As a result, any news of cultural activities and entertainment remained out of documentation." (P. 87) Few erratic information is available. For example, a play titled *Swarga Sringkhal* was staged in Barisal in 1857 while another titled *Ramabhishek* was staged in Dhaka in 1872. The staging of *Nil Darpan* also comes to be known. Information on *Purbabanga Rangabhum, Nababpur, Elysium Theatre, Olympian Theatre, Crown Theatre, Lion Theatre* and *Diamond Jubilee Theatre* has also come to light. We also have

was an amateur group of passionately committed young theatre activists, who played an important role in introducing contemporary Euro-American design concepts and performance techniques through their productions of European classics, contemporary American and local plays." In fact youth-passion, and not amateurism, is still the vital life source of Bangladesh theatre, which in time gave birth to several theatre groups immediately after our independence, and another eventful milestone was the formation of