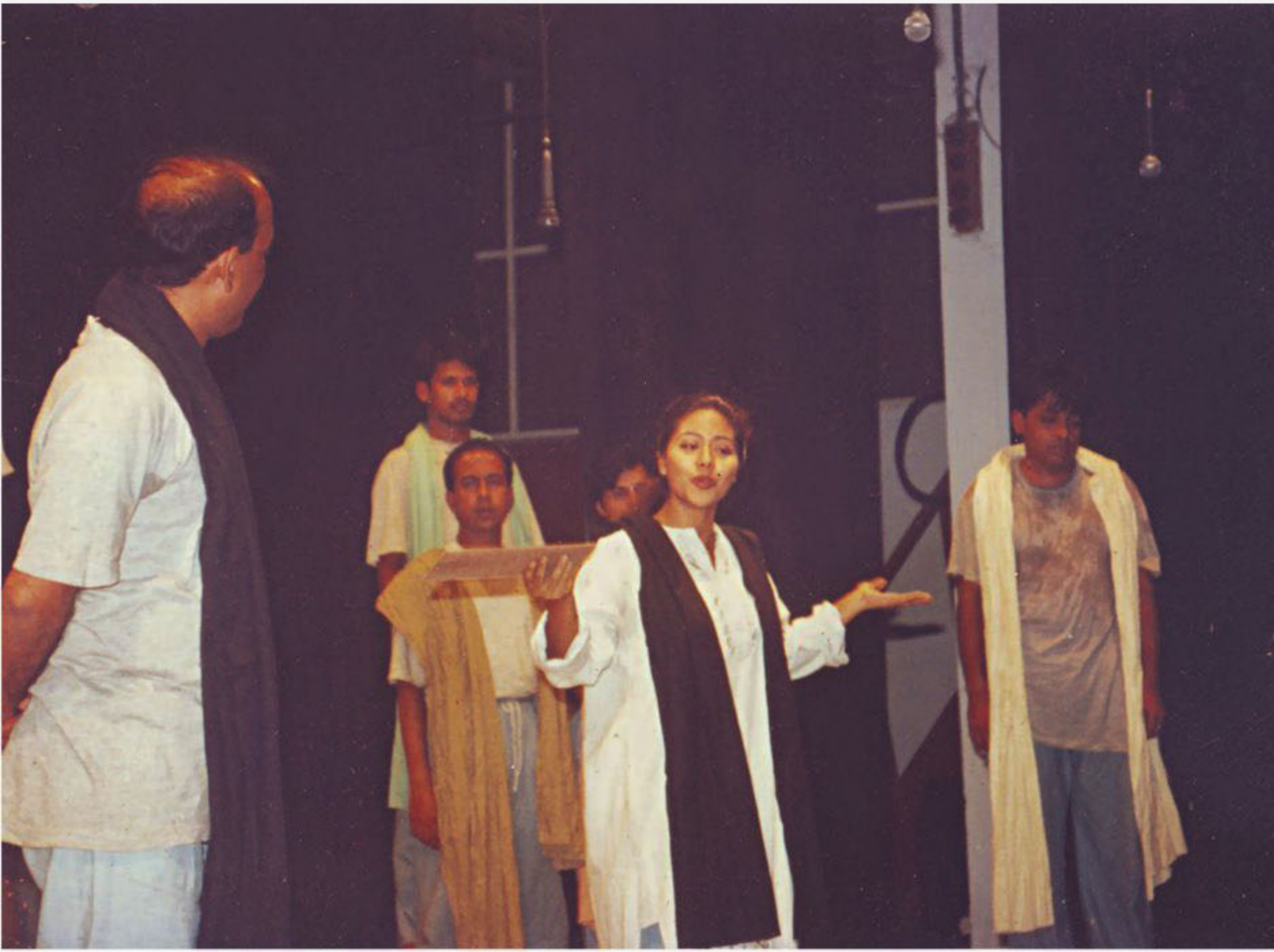




# Bangladesh Theatre and Liberation War Plays



Stage drama: 'Ekattorer Pala'.

PHOTO: BANGLADESH THEATRE ARCHIVES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

and *Payer Awaj Pawa Jaye*; Nasir Uddin Yousuf's *Ekattorer Pala*; Humayun Ahmed's 1971; Mannan Hira's *Ekattorer Khudiram*; Mamunur Rashid's *Joyjointi*; Babul Biswa's *Honon*; Alok Basu's *Ghorami*; Pritish Kumar Bal's *Kotha 71*; and Alamgir Mahmud's *Paharadar*.

In this connection, reference to yet another kind of theme dominated, in parallel, as an aftermath of the Liberation War—a devastating economic and social state where a decadent and pessimistic mindset prevailed. The playwrights in this group include: Abdullah al Mamun, Mumtazuddin Ahmed and SM Sulaiman.

However, we do not have enough space to discuss pros and cons of all Liberation War plays and as such I will go for three very representative plays: *Payer Awaj Pawa Jaye*, *Joyjointi* and *Ekattorer Khudiram* written by Syed Shamsul Haque, Mamunur Rashid and Mannan Hira, respectively.

## 'Payer Awaj Pawa Jaye'

The play was written in 1976 while Syed Shamsul Haque was residing in London, and theatrical group Theatre performed it in Dhaka the same year under the direction of Abdullah Al Mamun. The storyline runs like this: after 24 years of Pakistani persecution, in 1971 the Liberation War began in then East Pakistan, with the declaration of independence by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Save merely a handful of people, the entire country supported the war. Against that particular time and backdrop, the setting of the story is seen to be in a remote village of the country where the life and even daily chores of the ordinary villagers depend on the directives of the matbor—the village chief who happens to be a diehard supporter of Pakistan. He calls the fellow villagers to back the cause of Pakistan as it represents Islam, and resist the Liberation War. But the inevitability of the truth reveals in time and the villagers challenge the chief who is all at a loss to satisfy them. The Pakistan army too subjects the chief to cruel and degrading treatment and forces him to offer his daughter to be used by a Captain. When the entire village assembles

at his home for the rejoinder to his anti-Liberation stand, his raped daughter lets slip all his secrets and commits suicide.

Religious fundamentalism, combined with bigotry, hypocrisy and chauvinism by persons with vested interests and personal gain, rampantly exploited the illiterate pious commoners during the Liberation War, which is the central theme of the play. Both physiologically and socially, the play deftly painted the state of affairs that prevailed during the war. Though the play is written in verse and was performed in 1976—only after two years of heinous and odious killing of Bangabandhu, and when the military rule was at full throttle too—audience response was remarkable, and the reason was Syed Shamsul Haque dexterously brought about the deep and in-built sensibility of Bengali nationalism, founded on our political history of the Language Movement of 1952, six-point movement of 1966, and Liberation War of 1971.

## 'Joyjointi'

Aaronyk first performed the play, written and directed by Mamunur Rashid, in 1995 in Dhaka. Theatre critics consider this play as an authentic documentation of the minority/ethnic and Bengali folk-culture cleansing operation run by the Pakistan colonial rulers during the Liberation War. The story unfolds in 1971. The Liberation War is already on. The sign of Pakistan's breakup is inevitable and evident. With the atrocious and vindictive motive, the Pakistan army carries on annihilating, raping and evicting the innocent unarmed people of Bangladesh, especially the minorities and ethnics. Nabadwip represents such a minority community who runs a group that performs *kirton*—Hindu devotional songs—on hire. The group members, most of whom are Hindus, feel threatened, so much so, that they all decide to cross the border to go to India, but on their way, they are all rounded up by the Pakistani army. Inhuman torture follows, symbolising how brutal acts in human history has irreparably harmed and destroyed the grass-root folk and indigenous cultures of a nation, time and again, in the pretext of preserving the



Stage drama: 'Payer Awaj Pawa Jaye'.

PHOTO: BANGLADESH THEATRE ARCHIVES

integrity of a country that never bothers about humanity and cultural heritage.

The play has a number of symbolic scenes, one such scene is, at the very beginning when Nabadwip conducts a practice session of *kirton* with his group in his homestead under a *shimul* tree, but it turns out to be filled with false notes indicating a prologue to the ensuing bad omen—the Pakistan army's atrocities. The play is a unique assimilation of the rhythmic lifestyle of Bengal where we find music, daily chores, as well as the indomitable struggle for existence—both for Muslims and other minority communities. The contrast between music and melee brings about a deep-rooted harmony in the composition of the play. Mamun in his play gives an infinite message that a nation exists not on its religious affinity, which falsely has given birth to Pakistan, but on its secular nationalistic identity, which, to us is Bengali nationalism—the very basis of our Liberation War.

## 'Ekattorer Khudiram'

*Ekattorer Khudiram* was written in 1995 by Mannan Hira, and performed by *Shomoi Shangskritik Goshthi*. The storyline of the play is: for the annual event of a remote rural school, a play titled *Khudiram* is being rehearsed. Like every year, all are enthused and excited, but deep within runs an uncanny restraint, and that is because of the political ambiance prevailing around. All over the country, all Bengalis are out on the streets calling for their economic, political and cultural autonomy and emancipation. Anti-Pakistan sensitivity is on the rise. The teacher responsible for directing the play parallels the British Raj's oppression and persecution with the attitude of present Pakistani rulers which is detested by the Urdu teacher who, being a fanatic *Bihari* Muslim, is an intransigent supporter of Pakistan. He, to counter the staging of *Khudiram*, writes a few plays upholding the Pakistani mindset and values and tries to convince the headmaster to perform them instead. He also bullies Khokon Bannerjee, the Hindu teacher responsible for directing *Khudiram*, and in collaboration with other *Biharis*

usher in the Pakistan army into the village to realise his vengeance. The army launches dreadful crimes and murders Khokon Bannerjee and many others.

The indisputable call for independence by Bangabandhu on March 7, 1971 got deeply ingrained and instilled in the hearts of all Bengalis so much so that not a single soul save some Pakistani collaborators feared or hesitated to engage in the Liberation War. The playwright, rightfully judging the need of the time, has narrated how indiscriminately good and bad students along with their teachers and mentors participated in the struggle for our independence and gave away their lives. That is the sacred, sacrosanct, yet secular spirit of our Liberation War, and that in particular requires to be upheld at any cost.

## Conclusion

Thespian theatre activist Aaur Rahman once said "*Muktijuddho* [Liberation War] is my glory, my pride. But not many ageless and enduring literary works have been created on *Muktijuddho*. No epic has been written as yet. A handful of literary works exist, that too are very disappointingly substandard. Nonetheless, there has been a great need for profuse literary writing on the history of our Liberation War. But it hasn't happened, and that grieves me a lot."

That is what has also happened in the domain of theatre—not very many plays have been written on our Liberation War, though we as Bengalis hold unanimous pride in it. Most playwrights have engaged themselves in writing on the aftermath of the war, perhaps because of the divided and blurred vision of the war caused by interludes of autocratic rules of vicious interest. If this trend lingers on, our new generation will inevitably be confused and oblivious of our glorious past.

**Abdus Selim** teaches English language and literature at Central Women's University. He is a Bangla Academy awardee for translation.

This article has multiple references from the PhD dissertation written by Muhammad Rezaul Alam Babul, 2019.