

# Theatre and Indigenous Culture in the Context of Globalization

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*In the context of rapid globalization and development of communication technologies, cultural change in East Asian societies is quicker in pace and intensity. It would be naive to pretend that it is possible to preserve or protect indigenous culture intact, (although the claim that indigenous culture or people need to be promoted in a special way has been used in the past to implement policies that discriminate against the minority in some cases) many do worry about the dominance of American popular culture in non-western societies. American music and television, books and magazines, and specially movies, seem to have spread to every corner of the world, becoming*

universal. The American movie industry has a 4 billion dollars trade balance, and earns more than 40 percent of its revenues from abroad. From Biman Bangladesh Airlines to Air New Zealand, almost all airlines in Asia and the Pacific show American movies, rather than local films. In fact, it is not only Asians who are concerned about such overwhelming 'aggression' of American films, even the French are seriously worried about it. At the 1995 G-7 ministerial meeting in Brussels, the French pushed for quotas against American movies to ensure that at least 50 per cent of films viewed in Europe come from there. Two thirds of the 15 million copies of Michael Jackson's latest album: 'Dangerous' were sold outside the United States. As many as 109 countries in 1993, broadcasted the American National Basketball Association Final in Chicago, in 20 languages. Telecommunications Inc., the world's largest cable company, headquartered in Denver, recently announced plans to upgrade its system enabling it to offer 500 channels. Needless to say, many of its products in time will also flood the world.

#### *The World of Global Communication*

In the world where television and computer trap us into the gigantic network of global communication, how is information distributed and consumed? Does access to the information superhighway means access to equal opportunity? If so, what measures need to be built in to ensure that nobody is left out?

Will we witness a return of intolerant colonialism that makes indigenous cultures lose their self-confidence? Will economic and technological progress destroy the cultural diversity and pressure-cook our cultures into a single mush? Will there be more intense competition for space between the indigenous and the imported? Who would occupy the centre stage and be in the limelight in the 21st century, indigenous actors or imported pop singers? These questions surely are some of the key concerns regarding the future of cultures in Asia.

#### *Culture as an Obstacle to Development*

Begun as a process of decolonization, "Development" became in the Third World countries an ideology for rapid, planned, and directed social engineering. Newly independent nations began to move in the predetermined direction with defined economic goals and industrialized targets and development strategies. The administration took on the role of planners of future. Governments in East Asia struggled to fulfill the rising expectation of the peoples as they established the principle of shared growth, promising that as the economy expanded, all groups would benefit. The west served as the reference group and even proxied many development decisions and that raised complex problems. Westernization and modernization became synonyms of development.

Cultural specialists hold the view that the cultures of developing

countries have become the victims of development as the contract-based structure of the market economy disintegrates the social fabric and brings with it enormous influence over the ways individuals make sense of their life. Social harmony has been replaced by individualism and heavy borrowings of loans by the young graduates to purchase luxurious goods or property. The participatory traditional theatre is replaced by the market system: one has to buy tickets in order to see a show in a theatre building, thus the new relationship of sellers and the buyers. Many complain that the values, perceptions, behaviour patterns of the west brought in via films, television and advertising as a result of development are exerting negative influence on the peoples. In traditional societies, where social change was rather slow, and brought about from within, socialization did not pose any problem. New members of the society were trained to enter into the patterned future.

But rapidity of changes in the modern world and speedy development of information technology have enlarged the range of possibilities and uncertainties. A case in point is the mother in a well-to-do family in Singapore who was very happy with her children's intense interest in their computers but was shocked when she discovered that what the children had been engrossed in were interactive pornographic programmes! It is in this context that we want to look at how indigenous culture will be featured in our future. There are indeed numerous possibilities of unintended consequences that deserve attention. The development specialists on the other



*Students of Jahanginagar University presented a Marma folk tale "Princess Monori and Hunter Sathanu" directed by Selim al Deen.*



*"Undercurrent" by Mannan Heera was directed by Azad Abul Kalam, which dramatised the intense emotion of revolutionaries under interrogation.*

hand, have attributed all the failure of planned development programmes to culture as they regard indigenous culture as an obstacle to development.

#### *Globalization, Localization and Internationalization*

In the world of information technology and telecommunication revolution, there is no chance of going back to our cultural shells by isolating and insulating indigenous cultures from external influence. It would be unwise to believe that indigenous culture is static as the truth is that its social and economic underpinning have in many cases disappeared. The opening up of intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural fertilization have brought into play two seemingly contradictory processes of globalization and localization or indigenization.

The coexistence of these processes is indicative of the resilience of cultures. That is the retention of cultural identities alongside of modernization, like the way bamboo bends with the storm without being broken. The samples of theatre productions featured in the three Bangladesh Theatre Festivals organised by the Bangladesh Centre of International Theatre Institute in the last five years clearly show the coexistence of these processes:

Like everywhere else, the great works of the playwrights of foreign lands are adapted to local situations to appeal to domestic audience in Bangladesh. William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* has become *The*

*Luxury of Errors* (*Bhranti Bilas*), Moliere's *The Gentleman* was translated as *Bhaddornok*, Anton Chekov's *Swan Song* was adapted as *Jaminir Sesh Sanglap*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Sezuan* was renamed *Sot Manusher Khonje*. Aly Zaker, well known for having adapted many foreign plays (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Moliere's *Intellectual Ladies*, and his performance of Brecht's *Galileo Galilei*) has his secret of success: to create a genuine Bengali mood so that the audience are able to identify with the characters. Likewise, successful adaptations in other countries follow the same rule. It is not the matter of just changing names of the characters and wearing local dresses but at times involves rewriting and reinterpreting to make it relevant in the local context. The only regret in all these adaptations is that because of the serious lack of translation of non-western plays, Bangladeshi theatre practitioners have fewer opportunities to introduce foreign plays other than those from Europe and America. This problem can only be solved if in the future, non-western societies can provide more of their better dramatic works translated into English.

#### *Traditional Theatre as Source of Creativity*

Like her Asian neighbours, Bangladesh's rich traditional theatre offers contemporary playwrights and directors sources of creativity. *Katha-Natya's* involvement of narrative enactment by a single performer, the

three character musical model of *Naat-Geet* composed in medieval Bangladesh, drew its material from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the night long performance of *Ghatu* on boat by young female impersonators and choral singers and musicians and the all male troupe *Chhokra*, as well as *Patuagaan*, the itinerant bands which travel from door to door singing narrative songs with painted scrolls, are some of the many traditional forms that continue to inspire contemporary practitioners. Techniques of the enormously popular *Jatra* which combine the dramatic and the musical elements are constantly borrowed by directors. Many of them are choosing folk tales and using traditional theatre elements as their tools and recreating the stories with contemporary reference. Some move one step further by not only borrowing the folk theatre forms but also introducing a contemporary theme. Some of the most frequently cited examples are Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghora*, *Pralap*, *Spartacus* and *Bhoma*. Among the theatre groups, Dhaka Theatre is particularly well known for its zeal in initiating a people's theatre movement under the banners of *Graam* (village theatre) and re-energising the folk theatre against all odds of modern time. The Bangladesh *Graam* Theatre, *Kendrio Parishad*, is an umbrella organisation of 163 theatre groups and has been active in printing a monthly bulletin which features plays written by theatre workers and plays in the oral tradition. It also organises folk theatre festivals in the villages. Several playwrights are known to have successfully used elements of

folk theatre in their writing. Pioneer Sayeed Ahmad, productive poet and playwright Syed Shamsul Huq, director and playwright Seleem-Al-Deen and Aly Zaker, all have at various times integrated traditional theatre elements in their plays or productions. Selim Al Deen, keeping close to the tradition of the narrative style of *Kathanatya*, wrote *Chaka* in 1990, directed by Jamil Ahmed played, to packed houses.

In the 1995 production of a Marma tribal tale, *Manori Mangt Sumui*, (Princess Manori), performed by the students of the Jahangginagar University at Savar, Selim Al Deen attempted to retain the music and songs of the ethnic folk theatre form. The play is the love story of the youngest daughter of the King of Heaven, Princess Monori and the hunter, Sathanu. The clever use of bamboo sticks and scarves made what Selim Al Deen called 'neo ethnic-theatre' very attractive. The sticks are manipulated as columns of a house, arrows, spears, wheels etc. The scarves likewise are used in a hundred imaginative ways.

#### *Integration of Theatre Elements*

To achieve greater dramatic impact, many theatre directors in Asia integrate freely their traditional theatre elements and modern approaches in theatre production. Stagecraft of western origin is found to be useful too in enhancing the effects of performance. Special lighting and sound effects are employed to make greater dramatic impact. Thai director Patravati

Mejudhon, for example, often liberally mixed Thai classical dance with non-ethnic dance forms whenever she feels it necessary. In 1993, she collaborated with Marisa Saenkulsirisak in staging a folk tale rewritten by a famous poet Sunthorn Phu, *The Tale of Temple* which centred on the story of Prince Singhakraiphob, for the Third ASEAN Theatre Festival held in Bangkok.

Singhakraiphob, born in exile, is a prince raised by a demon. Upon learning his true identity, he immediately abandons his foster father which causes the old man to die of heartbreak. He eventually kills all his opponents and regains his parents' kingdom. This story of greed and power was one of the many of Patravadi's experiments in adapting Thai classical music and dance to Broadway style musical. In *The Tale of the Temple*, she used masks, folk dance, Thai classical dance and modern dance to make it attractive to the young audience. Recently, in a production she called a rock-opera *Prince Inao and Joraka*, based on a folk tale from Indonesia, the dancers executed ballet steps as well as Thai and Indonesian folk dance. Clever set and costume design as well as special effects such as flying the main characters up and down with transparent ropes, helped her sell out many of her shows for months.

When Jamil Ahmed reconstructed and directed Biplab Bala and Mostafa Heera's adaptation of the 19th century epic *Bishad Shindhu* (*The Sea of Sorrow*), he used both the

proscenium stage and the open floor to enlarge the space of interaction between the audience and the performers. The haunting quality of the production was enhanced by the powerful chorus singing, the impressive choreography of the fighting scenes, the inventive design and usage of props (horses and masks), the beautiful lighting design and the commitment of the well-disciplined cast. Nasiruddin Yousuff who directed several highly acclaimed productions, also employed similar tactics in combining the elements of folk theatre with modern approaches of theatre production. His productions of Selim Al Deen's plays: *Hat Hadai* (*Seven Purchases*) and *Jaibati Kanyar Mon* (*The Story of Jaibati*), were rich in imageries and metaphors derived from indigenous theatre. These approaches are indeed very similar to Asian directors who work in cultures that have exuberant theatre traditions.

Living in a multi-cultural social environment and having learned Javanese dance, Chinese dance and Teochew opera, it was quite natural for me to draw on techniques and modes of expressions in these conventions when I direct contemporary plays. The blending of elements is particularly applicable when dealing with period drama, epic and folk tales. In 1984 when I directed *Princess Jasmine*, an Indonesian folk tale rewritten for the Singapore Drama Festival, staged by I-Lien Dramatic Society, I found it workable to use movements of *Wayang Orang* dance, *Topeng* mask dance, Balinese dance in the production as they intensify the atmosphere of various





*Theatre, the group led by Ramendu Mojumdar, presented a play written and directed by Abdullah Al-Mamun called "Ekhono Kritodash," portraying the traumatic experience of a slave of situation.*



*Jamil Ahmed's prodction of the 19th century epic in prose by novelist Msharraf Hossain, called "Bishad Sindhu" (The Sea of Sorrow), integrating the narrative and musical elements of folk theatre.*

scenes which called for specific moods. The symbolic sets were further enhanced by the lighting design of western theatre. These examples confirm that the twin process of globalization and localization need not be mutually exclusive but can relate and cooperate creatively. But how to operate in different cultural settings has to be worked out by individuals.

#### *Problems of Inferiority Complex*

Any discussion on the process of globalization and indigenization in Southeast Asia would be meaningless without examining the experience of colonialism. Nine out of ten countries in the region had experienced colonialism. Differences though exist in terms of the source of colonization (British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, American) and the type of colonization (political, economic, cultural). There also seems to be a link between the type of communalism and the type of colonial experience. The trend of change in a given society is also associated with the exposure to the wider world during and after political colonialization. All these forces and processes will contribute to the extent of inferiority complex in the society. Inferiority complex of the colonised is often reflected in the marked difference in treatment of their own theatre, music and dance and those from the west. Almost in all Asian cities, western symphony orchestra, ballet and opera performances charge much higher prices than indigenous concerts, dance and drama. Aspiring actors and directors use London and

New York as their terms of reference. Piano teachers command a higher fee than *er hu* or *rabab* instructors and jazz dance lessons are much more expensive than *Bharatha Natyam* classes.

Some Chinese opera singers in China, think that mastering western opera singing techniques can 'improve' their presentation, not understanding that they are representing totally different styles. One can easily imagine the disastrous consequence of their performances. Selected Chinese opera directors were sent to Beijing and Shanghai Drama Academy to learn their craft from the teachers who are teaching directing for western theatre. Many of them fell in love with the multi-purpose platform and brought them back to the Chinese opera stage, used the ideas of blocking in western stage plays, resulting in disruption of the flow of movements which is essential for Chinese opera. These are some of the farcical examples of cultural contradictions and fragmentation. How can the problems be solved?

#### *Cultural Heritage and Cultural Autonomy*

In today's world of 184 countries, according to the United Nations, with over 5,000 spoken languages, only ten percent of the countries of the world are ethnically homogeneous. If we are going to make the world a single market, the parts have to be smaller. Minority languages all over the world are achieving a new status as people hold more highly to their heritage for the fear of

living in a boring culturally monotonous world. As many parts of Asia manage to break the vicious cycle of poverty and achieve high economic growth, Asians are regaining their self-confidence. While western patterns of consumption and pop cultures continue to flood in, many are trying to work out strategies to promote their cultural heritage and cultural autonomy. Artists must take the lead in showing society that traditional cultural forms are reservoirs of knowledge. Indigenous theatre, dance and music must be thoroughly researched, documented, taught and promoted in the mass media. For those societies that are blessed with multi-cultural heritages and sizable immigrant communities, they would be better off if they can tap the resources of their traditional knowledge. The immigrant communities often evolve their own mechanism to present their cultural identity and yet develop interfaces with the culture of the host society. Stable cultural plurality within communities is a great strength for human resource development. They must be understood in totality, in relation to traditional norms, beliefs, arts and culture. However, this must not lead to cultural isolation and become cultural chauvinism. Nor be construed as an anti-western bias. Some of the Asian theatre forms may have to respond to the life style of present day and contemporary situation, with the condition that they are evolved within the cultural boundaries without destroying the very roots which define their characteristics. The world will be more beautiful if we continue to strengthen our

ability to express ourselves in a  
thousand beautiful ways.