

Contemporary Theatre In Bangladesh: *A Critique*

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The major trends in theatre of Bangladesh today can be broadly categorized as (i) rural-based indigenous theatre and (ii) urban-based socially and artistically committed non-professional theatre. The indigenous theatre of Bangladesh belongs to the tradition of the Indian sub-continental theatre practice and has a history of at least thirteen centuries. On the other hand, the urban-based theatre coincides with the British colonization of the sub-continent in the 18th century.

The indigenous theatre of Bangladesh today exists in two distinct performance styles created and supported by the people. These are the *Katha-natya* and the *Naat-geet*. The *Katha-natya* is a narrative performance in which a single performer (*gayen* or *kathak*) narrates in verse or prose, often dances, and always enacts the various characters of the narrative, with vocal and musical accompaniment by a group of chorus members. Contrasted to the narrative acting of the *Katha-natya*, the *Naat-geet* incorporates character enactment. In the latter the character's dialogue with lyrics, accompanied by a chorus-orchestra and a narrator links the enacted episodes with narratives and commentaries.

The performance of both the *Katha-natya* and the *Naat-geet* are usually given in the open-air court-yards of rural homesteads, temple yards or public fair grounds, where the spectators sit on the sides or all around the performers and the latter usually perform either on a mat spread on the ground or on improvised raised platforms. These temporary platforms (of earth, bamboo or planks) are usually open on all four sides, mostly square in shape and are seen in large gatherings. For smaller gatherings, homestead court-yards suffice, in which case the performance space is shaped in a circle (often irregular). The performances given at the temple court-yards are usually those connected to the religious worship of the Shaivite or the Vaishnavite cult figures. In the more affluent temples a permanent structure, called the *nat mandir* (or *nat mandapa*) is specially constructed for the purpose. Situated opposite the *garbha griha* or the cella which enshrines the deity, the *nat*

mandir is an oblong plain floor, open on all four sides and is roofed with the help of a number of pillars raised on the floor. The space is also used as a community centre for the locality. These structures were developed after the 11th century and can be identified as the indigenous public theatres of Bengal as a whole. Extremely flexible, the *Nat Mandirs* are used in a manner similar to the open-air performances.

All the indigenous theatre performances are given both in the day time, specially during religious festivals and fairs, as well as at night. The natural daylight provides for the day time performances, whereas simple bright illumination facilities, such as the petromax lanterns, provide for those given at night. In most of the religious *Katha-natya* performances, the narrator is attired in white *dhoti* and *kurta* with a long *chaddar* (shawl) around the shoulder. He also carries a pair of small cymbals, a short religious staff topped with a tuft of hair and wears ankle bells. In the secular *Katha-natya* performances, the attire of the narrator can be anything ranging from *loongi* and pajama with a *kurta* and he is usually without the accessories mentioned above. The *Nat-geet* performers don special costume and simple make-up befitting the characters.

The performance styles of both the *Katha-natya* and the *Naat-geet* are based on religious as well as secular themes. The *Katha-natya* performances, both secular and religious, can broadly be divided into four categories. These are:

1. Tales of the Aryan pantheon and legendary heroes as in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These tales have given rise to three important genres, which are the *Panchali*, the *Kathakata* and the *Padabali Keertana*.

2. Tales of the indigenous pantheon as in the *Mangal-kavya* and the *Nath* ballads. These have given rise to the *Royani-gaan*, based on the *Behula-Lakshinder* episode of the *Manasa Mangal*, the *Manasar-gaan* also from the *Manasa Mangal* and the *Gorakha Nather Gaan*, based on the legendary exploits of the *Nath siddhyacharya Goraksha Nath*. The latter clearly shows influence of Tantric Buddhism.

3. Tales of Muslim legendary heroes and saints as seen in the *Punthis*. These have given rise to the *Jari-gaan*, the *Gazir-gaan*, the *Madarpeerer-gaan*, the *Manikpeerer-gaan* and the *Haster*.

4. Secular tales of love and romance as seen in the *Mymansingh Geetika*, and translations of Persian legends. These have given rise to the *Pala-gaan*, the *Keccha-gaan* and a few other genres. Interestingly, Persian legends such as *Gule Bakawali* are extremely popular.

The religious and secular narratives of the *Naat-geet* style of performances can broadly be divided into five categories. These are:

1. Tales of the Aryan pantheon and

Contemporary Theatre In Bangladesh

legendary heroes which have given rise to the *Oshtak*, the *Dhap Keertan*, the *Krishna Leela*, the *Jhumur* and the *Ram Jatra*. Of these, the *Jhumur* and the *Ram Jatra* deal with legends related to Rama, while the rest, with that of Krishna.

2. Tales of the indigenous pantheon which have given rise to the *Bhashan* and the *Padma Puran*, both of which deal with legends related to the snake goddess Manasa.

3. Tales of Muslim legendary heroes and saints which have given rise to *Gazi Jatra*. These performances are extremely rare, possibly because of inhibition regarding impersonation prevalent among the Muslim community of the rural area. I have seen only one troupe from Jessore playing the legend of *Gazi* with direct representation.

4. Secular tales of love and romance which have given rise to the *Ghatu-gaan* was originally based on the Krishna legend and performed with religious devotion but was subsequently secularized and today it is popular primarily for its erotic appeal although the Krishna legend has been retained.

5. People's humour which have given rise to the *Shong*, the *Gambhira* and the *Alkap*. What is most impressive about these genres is the use of humour in a people's forum which is extremely powerful in criticising the ruling elite and functioning as an effective means of people's resistance. The *Alkap* possibly has developed out of Muslim influence, whereas, the *Gambhira* is definitely rooted in pre-Aryan yearly masked festivals related to the harvest.

During the second half of the 19th century, an important cross-cultural interaction between the *Naat-geet* tradition of Bengal and the Victorian Shakespeare of the English proscenium theatre effectively changed the 19th century *Jatra*, which was then popularly known as *Kaliodaman Jatra*, *Vidya-sunder Jatra* etc., which in course of time obliterated the narrative and heavily reduced the abundance of song and dance. Currently, the *Jatra* performances are based on scripted prose dialogue, although traces of the *Naat-geet* tradition can still be seen in the presence of live orchestra, numerous songs sung during climactic moments and a few dances. Most of the songs and dances today are presented as interludes between the acts and are extremely vulgar. The *Jatra* play-texts have also effectively assimilated the European dramaturgical technique of plot construction based on exposition, rising conflict, climax and resolution. The performance, too, shows clear signs of 19th century melodramatic style of acting of the English stage. But it is still given on an open and square platform with the spectators sitting on three sides or all around.

Besides those mentioned above, a few hybrid performance genres, which do not incorporate role-playing by the performers, narrative or character impersonation, nevertheless demand attention for their interesting characteristics. Two of these are the *Kabi-gaan* and the *Patua-gaan*. The *Kabi-gaan* is a form of debate between two professional minstrels who improvise their verses and sing with musical and choral accompaniment. The *Patua-gaan* performances are given by itinerant bands who travel door to door giving their show which consist of exhibiting painted scrolls depicting a narrative and accompanied by explanatory

songs. Interestingly, the performers do not belong to either the Muslim or the Hindu community, although their customs bear resemblance to both. Mention must also be made of string puppetry which has been extremely popular with the people of Bangladesh since ancient time.

Judging by all the evidence that can be gathered, it is quite clear that the indigenous theatre of Bangladesh does not follow the mainstream Aryan Sanskrit theatre tradition. Rather, it can be broadly characterized as following *Abhinava Gupta*, *Nrittatmaka-prabandha Uparupaka*, i.e. performance genres which emphasize the use of music, song and dance. And because music and dance play such a predominant role, the musicians remain constantly on the performance space, in full view of the spectators. This then, is the first characteristic pattern of the indigenous theatre. The second pattern is that the performance style is extremely theatrical and non-illusionistic, where the performer, with his/her dynamic presence, the "dilated body," versatile skills and the use of the poetic speech transforms the real space of the performance area into the virtual magic space of the enacted narrative. The set and props are kept at a bare minimum and the indigenous lighting arrangement aims only at visibility. Highly exciting is the multiple use of the props: a stick is used as an arrow, later as a body and at other times as a sword, a regal staff, a tree-branch etc. Apart from character impersonation as well as narrative enactment seen in the indigenous theatre, both male and female performers enact both male and female roles.

The third pattern which distinguishes the indigenous theatre from the Aristotelian tradition is that the former emphasizes the transmission of the *rasa*, i.e., the aesthetic emotional appeal, to the spectators and is often non-linear in structure, whereas the latter stresses linear development of conflict ridden action. Hence, the indigenous theatre genres progress vertically and expand more on the emotion, whereas the Aristotelian form progresses horizontally, principally ordering cause-and-effect arrangement of events. Add to this a very different philosophy of life—no Achilles but Krishna—and one is left without a tragic concept of theatre. The third pattern is not quite visible in the *Jatra*, which, as mentioned earlier, came in contact with the European model during the period of British colonization and assimilated much of the latter's dramaturgy.

The performers of most of the indigenous theatre troupes are part-time professionals who engage themselves in various means of livelihood for most of the year. The frequency of their performance depends on the popularity of the troupes. There are quite a few full-time professional *Jatra* troupes which consist of actors, actresses, musicians, dancers and stage-hands, often totalling over fifty. The Ghatu and the Chhokra troupes usually employ four young lads who are full-time professionals. Admission is usually charged at the gate in some of the secular forms like the *Jatra*, the *Gambhira* and the puppet theatre. But the usual practice is a payment made by the sponsor, as well as a voluntary collection from the spectators by briefly halting the performance at the climactic moment and passing the hat. The religious performances are considered sources of divine

benediction and are often sponsored by the more affluent farmers as a fulfillment of a religious vow. Almost all the performances based on secular themes are given at night, beginning sometime around 10 and ending before day-break. These are mostly given seasonally, between October and April (i.e., before and after the monsoon), other than a few exceptions such as the *Ghatu*, which is mostly performed during the lean period of the monsoon. On the other hand, performances based on religious themes are given during religious festivals all round the year, as well as special performances sponsored by individuals. Although these too are usually performed at night, a few exceptions such as the *Royani*, the *Bhashan* and the *Padma Puran*, all related to the snake goddess Manasa, are traditionally given during day time. Some of these and others (i.e., *Krishna Leela*, *Jhumar*, *Royani*, *Bhashan*, *Ram Jatra* and *Padma Puran* are also given in cycles, spread over a number of nights and/or days.

A striking characteristic feature of all the indigenous theatre performance genres mentioned above is a broad based humanism, couched in a performance language of unrivalled excellence, which encompasses all cults, sects and creeds, regardless of the faith each of the genres espouses. Generally speaking, the non-sectarian, non-dogmatic world-view of the indigenous find equal veneration for both Rama and Gazi. The religious fundamentalists, therefore, have viewed the theatre with distrust and the recent rise of fundamentalism in the country has proved to be a powerful impediment, so much so that the *Jatra* has been banned by the government on moral ground. On the other hand, one can seriously question the validity of the indigenous theatre for its

fatalism and dated world-view. Most of these, except a few such as the *Jatra*, the *Gambhira* and the *Shong*, preach either religious devotion as the answer to all crises or deal with aspects related to the pre-colonial society. Religion, uncritical and pseudo-mystic, bound with deep seated fatalism, is the sheet anchor. As a result of British colonization, which destroyed not only the economic infrastructure of the society but also reduced the people into a state of mental servitude, most of the indigenous performance genres failed to grow as effective tools capable of dealing with the socio-economic reality and coming to terms with a hostile environment. The social fabric has gone through a number of qualitative changes since the medieval age when most of these performance genres had crystallized. In most of these, a typical character is that of a *sati nari* (i.e., a woman, like Sita, devoted to her husband with unsurpassable fidelity), who is wronged usually by the husband and is exiled but survives extreme calamities and hardship through divine intervention. She gives birth to a son who rises to the stature of near perfection and undoes all wrongs. The farmers and other members of the non-elite class feature either as comic or as subsidiary characters. With the urgent problems of rising landlessness, violence meted out on women, urban migration, environmental hazards, population explosion and ever rising poverty threatening the already eroded social fabric, how much of meaning do these performances generate? How effectively can their redundant content deal with the current crises of the people? What prospect is left for the indigenous theatre, marginalized as it already was, but even more so with the

advent of the satellite TV? Faced with sweeping inter-culturalism, is the concept of a national culture fast going out of date? But again, if the indigenous theatre is ideally as a form of cultural action which seeks to scrutinize, analyze and demystify social reality, thereby trying to develop the quality of human life which seeks boundless freedom, then we certainly should search for ways and means through which the indigenous theatre can once again grow with effective vitality.

The urban-based theatre activities in Bangladesh is virtually as new as the country. And to speak very generally, its root is not the indigenous theatre, but the proscenium-based European tradition introduced in the mid-18th century. Since its phenomenal rise immediately after the independence in 1971, the regular urban theatre practitioners have been organized in various companies called the "group theatres," which are non-professional and non-commercial in character, aiming at productions distinguished by ensemble acting, social awareness, artistic merit, innovations and worthwhile content, not at box-office profit as seen in the commercial theatres. The group theatre model of Bangladesh has grown out of the post-Nabanna alternative theatre in Calcutta, 1944. It is important to remember that Bangladesh today has no urban-based commercial theatre apart from the itinerant *Jatra*, which is performed mostly in the rural areas, and that the group theatre is also the alternative to the soap operas and sensationalism offered respectively by the state run Bangladesh Television and the commercial film industry.

The group theatre companies usually generate their funds out of a meager surplus of the box-office takings which remain after meeting the running cost of each performance, donations made by different industrial/commercial houses against advertisements published in the programme brochures and, as is the case with not so well known companies, personal contribution made by fellow members. The performances are usually given in ill-equipped and badly constructed proscenium theatres. The groups based in Dhaka City usually perform in two small auditoriums, more suitable for seminars than theatre performances. The acoustics are bad, available lanterns for lighting are crude and the back-stage facilities are below average. The spectators perform the incredible feat of sitting through a hot and humid summer time show of over two hours. The average number of performances of each of the groups range from one to four, rarely going up to six, per month and usually the performances are given on non-consecutive nights. The tickets are not inexpensive—anywhere between taka twenty to fifty, where a kilogram of very ordinary variety of rice costs around taka ten.

A large number of the practitioners are students; the rest comprises of independent professionals engaged in advertising and other small scale ventures and private service holders—a typically middle-class milieu. Their time for theatre is usually the evenings, after office hours, starting anytime between four to six in the afternoon and

ending anywhere between eight to eleven at night. Other than a few highly gifted performers, the average proficiency of performance technique in the country, compared to the West, is not very high. But what abounds more than what is seen in the West can be summarized as (at the risk of sounding clichéd) commitment, dedication and sacrifice. Currently three universities offer theatre studies in their curricula: Chittagong University in BA (Hons), BA (Subsidiary) and MA, Jahangir Nagar University in BA (Hons) and MA and Dhaka University in BA (Subsidiary). At least three theatre schools also offer weekend classes as part of year-long certificated courses. But most of the training for the group theatre practitioners is organised through theatre workshop. Ideologically, almost all the groups profess social awareness and are generally speaking, opposed to religious fanaticism. Their plays voice concern and protest against political oppression and social unrest. Many of them believe that the necessity for theatre, in a poverty stricken country like Bangladesh, is not only to entertain but also to provide a critique of the existing reality and function as a tool for demystification. But none of the groups are overtly committed to any political party. There also have been a significant number of performances based on translations and adaptations of European playwrights including Shakespeare, Moliere and Brecht. The other significant focus of the group theatres today is the "search for the roots" whereby attempts have been made to integrate the indigenous theatre idiom with the dominantly Euro-American idiom of the urban theatre. Of about two hundred groups currently active in Bangladesh, around one hundred and thirty are members of the Group Theatre Federation, a platform for unified action.

Significant developments in the recent theatre activities in Bangladesh are the Mukta Natak, the Gram Theatre, the Poribesh Theatre and Theatre In Education. Mukta Natak attempts to produce theatre by the rural population and to use it as a weapon for sharpening the consciousness of the oppressed. Also known as Popular Theatre and Theatre For Development, it stresses on the process of play-making rather than the end product of a performance. It is in the process of play-making that the performers seek to understand the structure of their surrounding reality, as though in a laboratory, through improvisations based on their life experiences. Under this programme, group theatre activists have travelled to distant villages, lived and worked with the landless farmers for a few days and transferred to them the techniques of play-making by using the material from their daily experience of poverty and exploitation. A few non-government development organisations have also been using Mukta Natak Popular Theatre as part of their consciousness raising, human development and solidarity building programmes. Undeniably, Mukta Natak has successfully raised questions that the indigenous theatre fails to and instead of the fatalism of the latter, it critically exposes the socio-economic contradictions of our society, leading to confrontation with the ruling elite. It is easy for the urban theatre activist to return back to Dhaka City, but the landless peasants, economically tied to the local elite, find it extremely difficult to continue with the programme of confrontation. As a result, Mukta Natak has been found to be a powerful tool capable of igniting an explosion but unable to channel and direct the possibility of a landslide. Perhaps it is best for political parties, with strong organisational base and

with strong commitment to work with the oppressed, to handle this explosive material?

The Gram Theatre (lit., the "Village Theatre") has built a network of nearly 150 groups located in small towns and villages of Bangladesh with a view to promoting a national cultural identity. It seeks to revive the dying tradition of village fairs and the indigenous performing arts. Not committed to any particular political ideology or overt party programme, the Gram Theatre seeks to build a national theatre idiom for Bangladesh rooted in its indigenous theatre, which will present a distinct cultural identity for the nation. A particularly interesting project of the Gram Theatre, materialized in 1987, sought to redesign an episode from the *Gazir-gaan*. But the Gram Theatre, with all its good intentions, have failed to create an organisation run by the people like the highly successful but short-lived Community Educational and Cultural Centre at Kamirithu, Kenya, initially organised by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirrii. If it has to initiate a national movement which is to revitalise indigenous theatre, what role can the middle-class theatre activists and intellectuals play? One possible answer is Antonio Gramsci's 'organic intellectual.'

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence and passions, but in active participation of practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator.

(Gramsci, Selection from Prison Notebooks, London: 1971, p.10)

Perhaps the organisers of the Gram Theatre need to play the role of organic intellectuals, actively participating in the practical life of the people whose idiom they wish to speak in their theatre, and at the same time helping to create an organisation run by the people. A national theatre idiom cannot be created by a handful of activists/intellectuals. It can only be created by the people.

The group theatre practitioners of Bangladesh, in their attempt to produce a more meaningful form of theatre for the wider section of the urban dwellers, have, in the recent years, shaped another powerful mode of expression: the street theatre. Sharpened with progressive political outlook, these groups, since the early 80s, have performed in the streets, free of cost, for any one caring to stop by and watch. Immensely popular, these street theatre performances have mostly been created around the theme of oppression and malpractice of the previous government. Street theatre has often faced criticism in Bangladesh for producing play-texts with low literary merit and crude performance. But it should be remembered that the street theatre is rough, meant to be rough and roughness is its strength. Moreover, its attempt to overcome esoteric artistic seclusion of urban experimental art theatre is commendable. On the other hand, the street

theatre practitioners should remember Ross Kidd's observation:

Theatre is a powerful catalyst, but on its own it cannot achieve social change. It must be integrated with the organizational capacity for action. Otherwise it will never be anything more than an interesting and exciting spectacle.

(Kidd, Development Communication Report, No.28, Oct., 1979)

Unfortunately, the street theatre in Bangladesh has hardly been integrated with any "organizational capacity for action." Recently, there has also emerged interesting productions shaped by the concept of the environmental theatre. Named Poribesh Theatre and built on existing environs, these productions are based on texts created by a group of performers which reflect their emotive reaction to the environ. It has also sought to break the performer spectator relation typical of a proscenium theatre. In view of the soaring cost of production and the scarcity of play texts in Bangla, Poribesh Theatre productions have been a useful development in the theatre of Bangladesh.

Theatre in Education is another area which also has engaged the attention of the theatre practitioners of late. Two interesting projects have been carried out in a rural and an urban slum area schools, where, besides improvisations, children's games, painting, music and puppetry have been used for teaching class-room texts and also for creative development of the children. In the near

future, it may be possible to create job opportunities for group theatre practitioners seeking full-time theatre employment. Contemporary group theatre in Bangladesh is often credited as one of the few areas in which the country has achieved tremendous headway since independence which is not without credibility when one acknowledges the tremendous energy in the field. Yet, at the same time, under the surface of apparent exuberance, one can sense the beginning of a stagnation, a loss of direction. There are problems, obviously, and the list can seem formidable:

(i) absence of a proper performance space or regular theatre building, although the government has promised to build one in the near future;

(ii) the lack of state support;

(iii) the existence of censorship mechanism of the police which was originally enforced through colonial legislation of the Dramatic Performance Control Act of 1876 which has not as yet been lifted by the present government that prides itself of democracy;

(iv) the rising cost of production which has tripled over the last six years;

(v) the non-availability of well-written play-texts, and many others.

But problems exist anywhere one wants to work. It is not the absence of a regular theatre building or the scarcity of play texts that generates stagnated or dead theatre. Moreover, it is naive to assume that state patrony will ever be available for any creative form of expression which questions and attempts to subvert the existing social order. Theatre as a live act of human contact, communion and confrontation, can happen in

any three dimensional space and its text can be created from any literary (i.e., novel, poetry and epic) or non-literary (oral) source. Its precondition is not visual illusion or splendour but dynamic performance techniques as is ideological commitment. It is this commitment, existential or socialist, which is their life-line and which generates their characteristic vitality unknown among the professional practitioners of the developed world. When they are fresh, as students, the practitioners soar high. But soon after, in about three or four years' time when they enter into a non-theatre profession and have to take upon themselves responsibility of their family entailed by other middle-class dreams, most of them are forced to leave theatre. Few that remain, find it extremely difficult to devote a major portion of their time in the afternoons and the evenings for the very demanding job of performance. There is hardly any time outside the rehearsals for them to work on their roles. As a result, the quality of performance never attains the level which they could have attained as full-time performers. This is the major contradiction: the group there is not economically viable with full-time professionals and therefore the practitioners have to seek alternate source of employment, thus failing to devote time and energy required to develop their technique. On the other hand, commercialized professional theatre is not the answer, obviously because it emphasizes box-office takings and high quality performance technique at the cost of search for new

directions and socially significant and worthwhile content.

But one cannot survive without the other. The commercial theatre feeds on the new directions explored by the alternative/fringe (group theatre). The latter, on the other hand, can never sustain the mainstream theatre of a nation. These will always come and go, meeting particular demand to search for the alternatives to the mainstream commercial theatre, disappearing with time as the urgency for search is over.

Perhaps the group theatre movement will soon be dead if it fails to meet the crisis discussed above. It is imperative that we look for alternatives primarily in terms of organization. It is also extremely important to foster the growth of commercialized professional theatre. Unfortunately, two recent attempts made in this direction by the Bangla Theatre and the Theatre Art companies have not proved to be quite viable economically. To sustain the movement, it is also important that the group theatre learns to speak a language, such as the indigenous Baul, capable of reflecting the rhythm, hopes and aspirations of the greater section of the society. If Sri Chaitanya's *Krishna Leela (Jatra)* is possible, if Mukunda Das' *Swadeshi Jatra* is possible, then it is also possible that we too shall witness our own popular yet meaningful theatre. But to achieve that, it is important that we tap the vitally agonistic issues which deal with the conflicting "indetermination" and "modes of determination" which exist in our society and make it possible for our theatre to function as a "redressive machinery" attempting to settle those issues. It is only then that our

theatre will attain its all important social function: to validate and scrutinize the very existence of a people called the Bengalis. (Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, New York: 82)

Before I conclude, I wish to rephrase Eugenio Barba in *Beyond the Floating Islands* with a view to posing a question which I consider to be of prime importance for the theatre practitioners in Bangladesh:

Often theatre appears to be meaningless, superfluous and non essential. Then one has to start again from the beginning and ask, "Who am I?" The answer obviously is, "A theatre practitioner." But somehow it is not sufficient. What does it mean to be a theatre practitioner amidst all this misery and poverty and hunger? It is a challenge: if we are theatre practitioners, if we have chosen the condition of theatre practitioners, how can we demonstrate it? And again, what does our condition become faced with all the hunger and violence that our age offers us? Will we be like mountebanks who entertain? Like propagandist? Like missionaries? How can we justify the fact of being theatre practitioners, alien and different, doing what we do?