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Star Theatre Company Research  
Growth and Development of Bengali Theater at Calcutta  
between 1770 and 1880

by  
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Star Theatre in Kolkata – 1773

*In this great city, a number of institutions have been established to enrich and help the citizens. But no arrangement has been made for their entertainment and hardly do they have any place, like the English to entertain themselves. .... The rich and respectable people can come together to set up a theater like the English and it would be placed under a salaried supervisor. It is indeed desirable that at least once a month a play would be presented. In this way all sections of the society could be entertained.*

*(Samachar Chandrika, 1826)*

Calcutta, Bengal in 1800, the Indian jewel in British dominated colonial Indiasaw the growth of the first public theater in India. The rise of Bengali theater in the 19th century was the direct offshoot of the British occupation in Bengal. Bengal was ruled over by Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan in 1765 that was taken over by British. On the site of the present Calcutta town, there were originally only three villages, Calcutta, Gibindpore and Sootalooty. Calcutta was the point at which the first settlement of the British that

was formed in 1686, by Job Charnock. The British brought these lands from the Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan and slowly they began to extend their dominions into the whole of Bengal. Bengal especially Calcutta, under the influence of the British saw the emergence of many societies and centers of learning and thus the environment of the city of Calcutta was conducive for intellectual growth. The major centers were the Asiatic Society of India, formed in 1784 and the Royal Asiatic Society in England formed in 1823.

Thus between 1795 to the last quarter of the nineteenth century Bengal witnessed an intellectual revolution whereby the Indian middle classes wanted to regain their won identity. Sympathetic colonialism, sympathy that the middle classes had to English learning and other intellectual pursuits directly or indirectly gave the Bengali intelligentsia a clear and open access to British cultural modes. Theater in Calcutta hence became one such medium that had the direct influence of the British. During the nineteenth century theater arose by a series of attempts made by the educated, liberal Indian intelligentsia to embody responses to the British rule.

## **Development of British Theater in Calcutta**

The local Englishmen in Calcutta often performed Shakespeare for their own entertainment and relaxation. As early as 1662, David Garrick ( 1717-79), an actor formed the Drury Lane Theatre, in Calcutta and formed it for those who loved theatre. Early public theater was done by the British and it was in the later years ( second half of the nineteenth century) that theater developed under the Bengali speaking Indians.

*The Playhouse*, one of the earliest theaters was established as early as 1753. This company was helped by David Garrick. However after the attack of Siraj ud Daula, the ousted Nawab

at Calcutta in 1756, this theater went out of existence. In 1775, after the accession of the British the new Playhouse was erected that was also helped by David Garrick. He sent a large number of scenes from England painted under his direction. The founder was George Williamson who is said to have spent nearly a lakh of rupees (about \$2000) on its construction, an astronomical amount in the early nineteenth century. Many of the patrons of this theater were high ranking British officials like Warren Hastings, Richard Barwell etc. This also seems to have been a very well equipped theatre, and the rates of admission were high, one gold mohur (coin) for the Box and eight rupees for the pit. Initially all the actors were amateurs and men, and women were not permitted to appear on the stage, which was soon lifted. Many other English dramatists besides Shakespeare were also staged which included Massinger, Otway, Congreve, Nicholas Rowe, Sheridan etc. Unfortunately due to financial restrictions the Calcutta Theatre was shut down by 1808.

However several other theater groups opened with few years of existence. Mrs Emma Bristow started her residential theater at her Cowringhee residence in 1789 and this opened with the production of "*The Poor Soldier*" on May 1, 1789. Some of the important productions were *Julius Caesar*, *The Sultan*, *The Padlock*. Ladies did male roles as well. When Mrs. Bristow left for England in 1790, this theater was closed.

Another short lived theater company was the *Wheler Place theatre*, Edward Wheler was a member of the executive council of Warren Hastings, the governor general of India. This opened on 21st February 1797, with the farcical play, *The Dramatist*. Some of the plays that were done in this theatre were *St Patrick's Day*, *Three Weeks after Marriage*, *The Mogul Tale*, *The Minor* and *The Lair*. However, this theater had to close by 1798.

In 1812, the *Atheneum theatre* was founded and on 30th March with the performance of the *Earl of Essex* that was followed by

the farce, *Raising the Wind*. However despite its publicity the performance was poor and failing to attract sufficient audiences, the *Atheneum* withdrew from the theatrical scene of Calcutta within two years.

The best known English theatres in Calcutta were the *Chowringhee Theatre*, 1813-39. This was formed as the united effort of a large number of celebrated men such as Horace Hayman Wilson (1786- 1864), the renowned Sanskrit scholar, prof D.L Richardson and Dwarkanath Tagore, (1794-1846), the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore, who was the only Indian to be associated with this theatre. This theatre was inaugurated on 25th November, 1813 with a tragic drama, *Castle Spectre*, that was followed by *Cleopatra*, *Sixty third letter* amongst the few important ones . The contemporary newspapers gave very high praise on the on the acting, scenes, music costumes of the plays. They also had a galaxy of stars among them that included many famous actors such as Stokler and Capt Playfair. Many of the actresses belonged to many famous theater companies of London, such as Mrs. Atkinson, who belonged to the Drury Lane theatre, and Mrs. Chester who belonged to the *London Theater Royal*. The patrons included many of the governor generals, Lord Moira, Lord Amherst and Lord Auckland. However this theater was put on sale in 1835 due to financial reasons and was it was bought by Dwarkanath Tagore for rupees 30,100. A new management took over; within a few years and on May 31 1839, a disastrous fire devastated the theatre.

A few miles north of the city of Calcutta the famed *Dum dum Theatre* stood. This was mainly meant for the entertainment of the soldiers in the cantonments and the cast were often amongst the army personnel and wives of the high ranking officers. It was called the *Indian Dury*, named after having high standards of performances. Another famous theatre company was the *Sans Souci*, inagurated on 21st august 1839. As it was small it could not accommodate many people so soon a bigger

auditorium was funded. Many Indians like Dwarkanath Tagore, Motilal Sil, and Radhamadhab Banerjee contributed generously. A young Indian, Baisnav Charan Auddy played the role of Othello, and he since he acted to an English audience this was of a tremendous value for Indians at that time.

## **Private Theaters in Bengali**

With the emergence of the intellectual elite like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, it was felt by the Indians that they also could form their own theatre companies. To regain a respectful self identity the Bengali middle classes formed their own theatre and the first Bengali theater company to be formed was the *Lebedeff's Bengali Theatre* in 1795. This theatre was founded by Gerasim Lebedeff, a Russian, 1749-1817, who formed this theatre with the help of his teacher, Goloknath Dass. The players both male and female were Bengali. Box tickets were sold for eight rupees and the gallery at rupees four. Lebedeff translated Paul Jodrell's *The Disguise and Love is the Best Doctor* that was performed in Bengali.

There seems to have been some kind of distaste for the local forms like *Panchali*, *Kabir Ladai*, *Tarja* and *Jatra*. In 1826 in an editorial in *Samachar Chandrika*, a popular Bengali newspaper, the need for a theatre along the lines of the English model emphasized and it pleaded that the rich and the noblemen of the city should be shareholders and paid managers, and that professional actors and singers should be appointed. Prasan Kumar Tagore came forward and set up the Hindu Theatre, on 28th December, 1831. The inaugural opening was from portions of *Julius Caesar* ( Act V) and a Sanskrit play, of Bhavabhuti, *Uttar Rama Charit* (act I) that rendered in English by H.H Wilson, a renowned scholar. The cast included Charan Sen and Ram chandra Mitra of Hindu and Sanskrit College. These performances were private, and meant for a select audience of invited guests, both European and Indian.

On 6th October 1835, in the house of Nabin Chandra Basu, the play *Vidya Sundar*, by the famous Bengali poet Bharat Chandra was staged. This play was set in the house and various parts of the house were prepared and the audience moved from place to place within the house to see the performed scenes. The performance lasted from 12 in the midnight to 6:30 in the morning.

Nothing really happened after this spectacular event for about two decades. The students of David Hare Acedemy and Gour Mohan Auddy's Oreintal Seminary established a theater. The *Oriental theatre*, was not an aristocratic one that existed in the past and it was open to the public on sale of tickets. The Aristocrats formed their own theater companies, the *Vidyotsahini theatre* in 1857 and the *Balgatchia theater* started with the plays of Micheal Madhusudhan Dutt in 1859.

## **Public Theatres in Calcutta: Star Theater Company**

The most important change that made the greatest difference to the hitherto amateur theatre productions of the past was the entry of business people and commercial ventures in theatre. The potentials of theatre as a new field of investment was seen and the increasing popularity of the new medium and the availability of resourceful people who decided to make this as a profession led to the growth of the public theatres in Calcutta.

The first businessperson to invest in was Pratap Chand Johuree who bought off the *National theatre in 1880*. A true businessperson, Pratap Chand tried to streamline the rather unorganized sectors in theatre and gave it a more professional look. For the first time Bengali Theatre assumed a professional look with its performers made to abide by the regulations as put down by the employer. Pratap Chand Johuree compelled Girish Ghosh, brilliant theatre artists to

leave his job as a bookkeeper to join his new enterprise. By roping in Girish Ghosh, Pratap Chand ensured the services of a galaxy of brilliant actors and actresses in his theatre company. As expected the new National theatre made huge profits. Theater hence was now seen as a viable venture.

*Star theater* was formed at 68, Beadons street in 1883. After a dispute with Pratap Johuri, Girish Chandra Ghose founded his own theater company called the star theater company. The formation of this theatre company is interesting. Bindoni, a popular actress under the guidance of Girish Chandra wanted to establish a theatre where she could find unrestricted place to grow and cultivate her name. Binodini is said to have given herself to theater and she agreed to become the mistress or a rich non Bengali, Gurmukh Ray who had agreed that he would support the theater, which she had been associated with. However, the company was named Star and not after Binodini. Binodini talks about this in her autobiography, (w)hen the theater was ready, everyone told me," this theater house will be linked to your name. Your name will remain long after you are gone... (T)his theater will be called the 'B' theatre." This excited my euphoria even further. But when it came to the brass tacks, they fell back on the promise-I do not know why.

The first play to inaugurate the theater complex was the *Daksha Yagna* in which Girish himself played Daksha and Binodini, Sati. It was in the play *Dhurna Cahritat* that Girsh Chandra used the conventions of Sanskrit drama in a unique way and had the Vidhusak (jester); make appropriate comments and using wit and humor.

At the end of 1883, the star theater was taken over by Amritalal Mitra for sum of 11,000. In 1884, the *Chaitanya Leela* was performed; Binodini played the role of Chaitanya. The great saint Ramakrisna Paramhansa is said to have witnessed the performance. This visit by the saint made theater popular and *Star theatre* rose into great prominence

and fame. The *biddhadeb charit* was performed that was translated from the work of Sir Edward Arnold (1832-1904). The newspaper Hindu patriot in 1886 records the words of Sir Arnold,

“I cannot leave Calcutta...without expressing the singular pleasure I derived from witnessing the performance at your theater on the life of Buddha, founded on my poem The Light of Asia”.

Stiff competition and rivalry existed amongst the many theatre companies of that time. The intense rivalries among the theatre companies can also be discerned from the tremendous acrimony that ensued among them for recognition. There were even instances of mud slinging at each other through caricatures, satires and even direct personal attacks.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw several new playwrights flourishing in Calcutta. Girish Chandra Ghosh towered the fame, and besides being a pioneering producer, he was also the greatest playwright. He was a director/ actor, innovative designer composer and playwright. He wrote more than 40 plays, historical, social and mythological and had deep social commitment. He first started with adaptations of famous narratives but soon gained enough mastery to write original plays. The last decade of the eighteenth century seems to have been a landmark in his writings and he wrote two of his most dramaturgically correct play, *Siraj Ud Daula*(1905) and *Mir Quasim* during that time. He wrote the some major social plays like *Balidan* in 1905 and historical ones like *Chatrapati Shivaji* in 1907. He gave the resonant meter to Bengali poetic drama that was called “gairis”. Amrtilal basu (1853-1929) was the closest rival of Girish Ghosh whose forte was comedy and social satire and he did the Bengali adaptation of Molier’s *The Miser* in 1900, as *Krpaner Dhan*, the miser wealth.

Public theatres in Calcutta acquired a new look.



## Theater Organization

The system of regular staging of plays with paid performers under the banner of several theatre companies created an atmosphere of intense competition among not only the companies but also among the various categories of people employed in them. The proprietors often lured away the successful actor or actresses to their own group, even at the cost of offering them more incentives. The people recruited in the theatres were bound by a contract that made them follow the injunctions of the new employer, to stay for the stipulated hours of work and abide by the rules and regulations of the organization.

One of the positive impacts of commercialization of theater was that this medium offered specialized jobs to many people. The induction of actresses into stage on a regular basis, hiring various personnel to carry out the various backstage activities created a number of job opportunities for those seeking careers in it. There often ensued a competition among budding playwrights for recognition and work. Hence what actually gave the theatre owners' such an authoritative position were the economic vulnerability of the employees he hired and their craving to prove their histrionic potentials. While collaboration was achieved through persuasion of the employers, the employees retained their sense of agency and autonomy by registering their dissent through non compliance, manipulation, sabotage and sometimes through direct resistance, not in the form of collective action, but by resigning from their present employment and joining a rival theatre company. Binodini recounts in this in her memoirs, The excessive labor that I undertook every day took its toll and I began to fall sick. I applied for a month's leave; after much insistence, he granted me leave for fifteen days....

## Actors and performances

The early acting style employed in the Bengali Theater was highly influenced by the local folk styles of the region or the Jatra. With no background or scenery to suggest the locations, the Jatra had to rely on the words, music and songs to create the necessary effect among the audiences. In order to be heard and seen the movement and the dialogues of the actors needed to be exaggerated. The acting styles in the public theatres, highly influenced by the Jatra were loud and bombastic. Often producers of theatre companies also trained their actors. Girish Chandra Ghosh took great pains to train his actors; Girish Chandra had his own acting style described as being exaggerated. The diction and the dialogue delivery were slow and followed a set meter and rhythm style or had *Sur* (musical melody) in it. Little attention seems to have been paid to team work and individual actors were often the "star" performers who attracted large audiences. The acting style of the public theatres of Calcutta in the early years was declamatory, rhetorical with delivery of long speeches.

Many women now started acting and giving performances in Calcutta Public theatres. However they did not come from high social status and were often prostitutes. The introduction of these actors did receive criticism however some praised this effort. *Bengalee*, The newspaper in 1888 reports, It is the only Indian Theatre, in the town where there are no female actresses. No one objects to female actresses provided they come from the respectable classes of society. But in the present circumstances of the Indian society this is not possible; and the result is that women of questionable virtue represent the female characters. Those who have not the smallest pretensions to their purity and their womanly devotion too often represent the noblest characters in Hindu tradition, Sita, Sabitri and Damayanti. It seems to us to be an outrage upon Hindu sentiment that women of the town should represent such exalted characters in the Hindu legends. The Indian stage needs to be reformed and we are glad that the

Bina Theatre under the auspices of Babu Rajkrishna Roy, has set up an example which is worthy of all praise and is richly deserving of public patronage received intense training from their teachers.

The *National Theater* argued that the introduction of the female actors should be seen as viable and of commercial advantage. This can be seen in one famous incident that took place in *Classic Theater* of Amarendranath Dutta. It was a normal practice those days that the theatre companies maintained one or two carriages. The actresses were brought to the theatre in those carriages. It was Amarendranath's strict instruction that the doors of the coaches would be kept tightly shut till the actresses had reached the theatre. After their arrival at the theatre, the actresses, with their faces veiled would directly head towards the green room. In his opinion the actresses were to be put up on the stage after adequately dressing them up, and if the public happened to see them in their natural self they would refuse to come to the theatre.

## **Advertisements and Ticketing**

A very interesting method that was adopted by the Theatre companies for faster sale of tickets was through advertisements. The various advertisements came out in the newspapers, journals and handbills and vying for attention not only gave details of the time and venue of the plays but also mentioned the special points of attraction. In extreme cases, free passes were given out to important personalities for the opening shows. These thereby heightened the social prestige of the Theatre. Some advertisements ran like this,

### **Star Theatre**

Saturday, 29th March, at 9pm

Babu Girish Chunder Ghosh's new drama ***Kamaley Kamini***

Grand, spectacular and romantic play  
Scenes, mechanism and scientific appliances  
Ship in storm, sun rises at sea  
Grand transformation scene  
*Chandi* and *Padma* in the air without the aid of wire, string,  
or any other support.  
Magical protean performance,  
instantaneous transformation from *Chandi* to *Kali*.

The contents of the advertisements changed when a repeat performance of a play was to be staged.

## **Social Reform and Drama**

Many of the Bengali plays that were performed in the public theatres were instrumental for spreading social awareness amongst the people. The plays had immense appeal and many of the audience came from the middle or the lower income groups. These groups welcomed the new theaters that were quite different from the folk forms like the jatra and the kathakata. Social and realistic plays seemed to have had enjoyed wide popularity. Fluent dialogues, long drawn speeches, plenty of songs and dances, sudden shocks and theatrical devices made theatre a drama for the whole family. Mythological plays and historical plays were characterized by deeds of heroism, suffering and sacrifice. The costumes, colorful scenery, thrilling escapes, brave sword play that were incorporated into the shows gave further popularity. Domestic dramas that targeted the English speaking Bengalis made theatre popular amongst the lower income groups and strata of society.

Leaving aside its very brief period of an elitist bias (the English educated youths and the Britishers), Bengali Theatre largely catered to an audience whose tastes and preferences were largely molded by their newly acquired English education

and their exposure to a colonial cultural system. While its novelty and superiority as a form of entertainment can be seen theatre came to be looked upon as a platform to deepen the moral fabric of society. Though in its early years theatre was a very potent medium that voiced the need for social reforms

Many of the shows were highly patriotic in content, like Chattrapati Shivaji (life story of an Indian King, Shivaji) and Niladraban (the story about the exploitation of the Indigo planters by the British plantation owners. This incited the sentiments of the people and the British proclaimed an ordinance against this. The Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, declared,

To empower the government of Bengal to prohibit certain dramatic performances... the primary object of this bill is to empower the government to prohibit native plays that are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene. The necessity of some such measure has been established by the recent performance in Calcutta of a scurrilous Bengali drama, to prevent which the existing law was found to be insufficient.

The emergence of Bengali Theatre as an enterprise arose stronger as the middle classes strongly resented their derogatory status vis a vis the British. Bengali Theatre was symptomatic of the bhadralok (the elite) to search for 'Indian' cultural identity. Strongly influenced by the western forms of aesthetics, the Bhadrakok began to loathe the prevailing cultural practices. They were on the look out for an alternative cultural ethos and in response to the need for an alternative high culture. It went far beyond colonial parameters and developed its own independent status. Bengali Theatre followed its own uniqueness despite some of its major inputs coming as influences from the west and from the British. The emergence of the Bengali Theatre was hence deeply rooted in the socio-political framework of the society in the 19th century that gave its own characteristics, be it acting style, management, advertisement or penning or

production of plays.

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