

Calcutta and Birth of Theatre

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Abstract

It all started with the three villages: Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur. Even the embryonic form of the city Kolkata was not visible. Aurangzeb had invited Job Charnock, the Kuthial of East India Company who landed on Sutanuti. Soon it got transferred to trading centre for the East India Company. The people from distant areas started arriving there in search of some kind of vocation under Company rule. A large number of potters from Krishnannagar area came and settled down here. Their products got a large market owing to the ever-increasing demands for earthen utensils among the new settlers. The area came to be known as Kumartuli. However, there is some kind of confusion regarding the origin of the name of Kolkata or Kalikata as a composite city. The poet Bipradas in his *Manasa Mangal* has referred to this place way back in 1495. However, that under no circumstances could be considered to be a city of any type whatsoever. The arrival of the East India Company under the leadership of Job Charnock paved the way for mobilisation of rural traders in and around the places of Gobindapur and Kolkata. A portion of such people had migrated from the silted-up port of Satgaon much before the arrival of the English traders. Very little could be said about the cultural milieu of the places referred to, as at that time religion, folklore or folk forms were virtually indistinguishable.

With the passage of time the East India Company's business activities led to a consolidation of Bengali traders and businessmen in and around this emerging city in its nascent form. This was in nutshell the story behind the growth of Kolkata. In the process one would come across the emergence of a handful of extremely enterprising Bengali businessmen who had been able to amass huge wealth and establish themselves as socio-politically dominant persons. They started hobnobbing with the East India Company bosses for securing better economic dealings. They also tried to emulate the lifestyle of the 'Sahibs'. This new class of people tried to exclude themselves from the rest of the Bengali community. They were deeply impressed by the cultural life of these Europeans. The typical western music and plays mesmerized the Bengali babus. In the 18th century two British playhouses came into being. The Old Play House (1753) and the New Play House (1775) were patronised by none other than Warren Hastings himself and Sir Eliza Impay. The Private Theatre was established in 1789 and the Whaler Theatre in 1797. The Bengali Theatre however was not born as an initiative of Bengali gentry at that point of time. It rather bore the legacy of a Russian Gentleman called Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff. The Bengali theatre on a Proscenium stage was conceived by him for the first time in 1795. It was an adapted version of an English play called 'The Disguise'. Subsequently Bengali babus started taking the initiative. In fact, Bengali theatre passed on from these "Babus" to the middle-class intelligentsia. However, theatre initially in Bengal was more of a mode of entertainment rather a communicative medium of the present era. Slowly but steadily Bengali theatre evolved into a communicative structure which became politically significant notwithstanding its initial classical form.

In 1833 Babu Nabin Chandra Basu established Shyamabazar Permanent Theatre and Asutosh Deb (Satu Babu) established Simla Theatre in 1857. Bidyatsahini Ranga Mancha came into being as a stage in 1858 owing to the patronage of Kaliprasanna Sinha. In the following period Metropolitan Theatre (1859), Private Theatrical Society (1865), Banga Natyalaya by Jatindra Mohon Thakur (1865), Jorashanko Thakurbari Natyashala, Boubajar Ranga Natyalaya (1858)

National Theatre at Bagbazar (1872) came into being. The last one was formed on Professional footings.

Since the last phase of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th century Bengali Theatre primarily were based on mythical/religious or historical plots. They did have latent political overtone which virtually provoked the colonial rulers to enact Dramatic Performances act in 1876 for controlling the so-called seditious elements in Bengali plays. During the 1930s and 40s Bengali theatre matured itself into Peoples' Theatre into every sense of the term. The contents of the plays became more candid in representing the oppressed classes, and unmasking the Indian propertied classes and exposing the Indian comprador bourgeois class. The plays contained topics depicting the mode as to how they have negotiated with the colonial masters for preserving their economic interests and perpetuating their political dominance over the oppressed classes.

The principal object of this paper is to find out the development of Bengali theatre and the simultaneous growth of Calcutta city and the emergence of different economic classes. The author would try to locate the political position of the Bengali theatre as a whole and how it depicts the class relations through different theatrical performances. How the theatre groups posit themselves while depicting the people at the margins in this Bengali society in general and in this city in particular.