

To Stage or Not To Stage:
Problematizing the Archive in the Productions of Tagore's Plays

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2017

DECLARATION

I, Rajdeep Konar, hereby declare that the thesis titled, **“To Stage or Not To Stage: Problematising the Archive in the Productions of Tagore’s Plays”** submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies, to the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University is a bona fide work. This work has not been submitted in part or in full for any degree or diploma to this or any other university.



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This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**To Stage or Not To Stage: Problematising the Archive in the Productions of Tagore’s Plays**”, submitted by Rajdeep Konar, of School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of Doctor of Philosophy is an original work and carried out by the candidate under my supervision. It has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University. It is hereby recommended that the thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Introduction

Within the dramatic theatre tradition, the decision to stage a play and to transfer it from the text to the stage is mostly arrived at through a series of dramaturgical considerations. Some of the decisive questions a serious theatre practitioner is compelled to ask when faced with the staging of any play are: “Can this play be performed now, can it be performed here, can it be performed in this way, or can it be performed at all?” In fact, within the dramatic tradition of theatre, a play is often thought to fulfil the objective of its creation through its performance. Seen in the light of this axiom, it remains a disconcerting fact that even after writing more than thirty plays in the span of sixty years, which have been produced in India and around the world over the last hundred years, there still remain serious misgivings regarding the stageability of Rabindranath Tagore’s plays. To quote from an interview by renowned Indian playwright Girish Karnad:

Tagore was a great poet but a mediocre and second-rate playwright. He produced his plays but those were never produced by his contemporaries. The contemporary Bengali theatre never accepted them. (*Times of India*, 9 November, 2012)

Even if we reject Karnad’s statement as prejudiced and ill-informed, the archive of productions of Tagore’s plays and discourses relating to them do reveal an anxiety regarding their stageability. While Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), the founding figure of Bengali commercial theatre, had a distaste for Tagore’s plays, as well as his writings in general (Chakraborty, 1999: 13), another stalwart of the Bengali public stage Sisir Kumar Bhaduri (1889-1959), who did produce a number of Tagore’s plays and was close to Tagore, allegedly commented when told that Bohurupee under Sombhu Mitra was planning to perform *Raktakarabi*, “That is half-theology, half-politics. Do theatre!” (Majumdar, 1988: 9).¹ It is pertinent to mention here Bhaduri’s refusal to produce *Raktakarabi* on several occasions despite Tagore’s insistence, a fact which will be dealt with in detail later, in the course of this dissertation.

Moving on to the political theatre tradition in Bengal, we find Utpal Dutt (1960–1993), considered one of the finest directors in post-independence, modern Bengali theatre,

¹ While Swapan Majumdar in his official history of Bohurupee titled *Bohurupee: 1948-1988* (1988) mentions Bhaduri’s statement, more recent scholarship like Anil Mukhopadhyay in his *Bangla Theater O Natyacharya Sisirkumar* (2016) has questioned its accuracy.

apart from being a playwright himself, refusing to produce Tagore apart from one or two exceptional instances like *Bisarjan* (1952) and *Achalayatan* (1957). This decision not to produce Tagore's plays coexisted with Dutt's apparent reverence for Tagore which he voices in several of his writings. Quite candid in reflecting on the difficulties of staging Tagore, he says in an interview titled "Theatre as a Weapon: An Interview with Utpal Dutt" (1971):

[H]is plays are so difficult.... We produced two Tagore plays and our experiences were bitter. When we did Tagore's plays they were unintelligible to the audience. We could have been playing in German... I think that only after the revolution will the people really claim Tagore. (Dutt and Gunawardana, 1971: 237)

Though renowned Tagore critic Shankha Ghosh would argue in his work *Arop Ebong Udbhaban* (2009) that Dutt's views on the matter went through a revision, as is evident in Dutt's essay "Rabindranather Murti" (1978),² the fact is that Dutt did not produce any of Tagore's plays even after his apparent change of position. What tops this list of reservations against staging Tagore's plays is perhaps Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) himself expressing his doubts on one occasion to celebrated artist Ramkinkar Baij regarding the stageability of one of his plays, *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander), "Would an enactment of that play be possible at all? I had meant it only to be read (and not performed)" (*Bohurupeer Raktakarabi* 2005: 174).

While the instances I have presented here cut across time and surely have their own contextual bearings, there is no denying that in the years following Tagore's demise and barring instances of exceptional efforts on behalf of Bohurupee or a few other groups, his plays have hardly found any takers outside Santiniketan and a few urban theatre groups in Calcutta. Indictments of being obscure and un-stageable continue to haunt the reception of Tagore's plays. It is only in the last decade and a half after the termination of the copyright to Tagore's works in 2001, and on the occasion of Tagore's hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary celebrations in 2011, that we have witnessed a considerable shift in this state of affairs. Therefore, I believe it is still relevant in the context of dramatic theatre traditions around the world to question whether Tagore's plays can be performed at all; and, if performed, then how? And, if not, then why not? Directing my point of enquiry towards these

² While in his earlier interview Dutt terms Tagore's theatre practice as "elitist" and his plays as mostly "unstageable", in "Rabindranather Murti" he clearly states the need to stage Tagore's plays like *Raktakarabi* and *Achalayatan* and also affirms that these plays have the potential to speak for the revolutionary cause.

questions, I would like to revisit the archive of the productions of Tagore's plays in search of conundrums or fallacies that have haunted their dramaturgy, in addition to identifying strategies that have possibly enabled directors to successfully circumvent the difficulties or shortcomings which they might have faced in staging Tagore's plays.

At the outset let me qualify that I do not use the term 'dramaturgy' as a derivative of 'dramaturg', a theatre professional whose task of selecting, adapting and analysing plays follows the tradition set by the first dramaturg Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) famous for his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-1769). By 'dramaturgy' I mean the entire structure of words, movements, images, music constituting the *mise-en-scene* of a production, and the context of performance determined by its social, political and economic circumstances. Such a distinction would be germane to the context of urban Indian or Bengali theatre, as, more often than not, there is no distinct figure of the dramaturg operating in these theatres, with the functions of dramaturgy generally performed by actor-managers/directors. What concerns me here are broader questions of dramaturgy relating to the intricate dynamics between the categories of text and performance, and the act of transfer from one to another with or without archival mediation, as played out in dramatic theatre traditions at specific historical moments.

A Critical Lacuna

In surveying the dominant critical perspectives on Tagore, it is surprising that in spite of Tagore being over-represented internationally as an Indian cultural icon in the last hundred years, one finds a striking lack of quality translations of his plays or any full-length historiography, critical account/analysis available in English of the numerous productions staged at Jorasanko, Santiniketan, the public theatre of Bengal, or the productions of Tagore's plays in post-Independence India. My dissertation, it should be acknowledged here, does not attempt to be an exhaustive historiography or analytical account of Tagore's plays or their productions but rather re-visits this history within the framework of a specific mode of critical inquiry. However, among the works which exist, under the larger rubric of cultural studies, a few books like E.J. Thompson's *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist* (1926), Andrew Robinson's *The Art of Rabindranath* (1989), Ashis Nandy's *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (1994), Rustom Bharucha's *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (2006), R. Siva Kumar's *Rabindra*

Chitravali: Paintings of Rabindranath (2011), Michael Collins' *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society* (2011), Kathleen M. O'Connell's edition of *Rabindranath Tagore: Facets of a Cultural Icon* (2012), Martin Kämpchen's edition of *Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception* (2014) and *Gitanjali Reborn: William Radice's Writings on Rabindranath Tagore* (2016) have enriched the field of Tagore studies.

Considering the translations of Tagore's plays in English, Tagore's own translation of his plays are now considered passé and, more critically, inaccurate, in so far as they curiously deviate from their Bengali originals, as we shall discuss later. Marjorie Sykes' translations of *Mukta-dhara*, *Natir Puja* and *Chandalika* titled *Three plays: Mukta-dhara, Natir Puja, Chandalika / Rabindranath Tagore* (1950) are among the earliest of translations of Tagore's plays not done by himself, and which are dated in their own right. Ananda Lal's *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays* (1987) includes translations of three plays of Tagore - *Raktakarabi*, *Tapati*, *Arupratan* and a short introduction to their production history at Jorasanko and Santiniketan. Lal's translations often strike a heavier academic note making the plays appear less as stage-able dramatic texts rather than as works of literature. However, it should be acknowledged that his introduction despite its brevity is the sole existing historical account in English of the performative experiments at Jorasanko and Santiniketan. William Radice's translations of two plays *Dakghar* and *Tasher Desh* titled *The Post Office and Card Country* (2008) are among the few sensitive and quality translations of Tagore's plays available. Radice also engages critically with the mentioned plays in an introduction to the above volume as well as in an introduction to an adaptation of *Dakghar* (1996), done on the occasion of a production by late British director Jill Parvin, in which Tagore's text is situated within references to an earlier production by Jewish children in a ghetto in Warsaw, shortly before being deported to a concentration camp. I will be dealing with this production history in some detail in Chapter 5. There are also instances of on-off translation of Tagore's plays being included in various anthologies of translations of his writings like Abhijit Sen's translation of *Tasher Desh* titled *Kingdom of Cards* in *The Essential Tagore* (2011) edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty.

In addition, there have been sporadic articles on various aspects of the Tagorean performance tradition. Martin Kämpchen in "Rabindranath Tagore on the European Stage: A Reflection on Theatre and Cross-Cultural Experiments" (1997) writes critically on the performances of Tagore's plays outside India. Sombhu Mitra and Samik Bandyopadhyay in

an essay “Building from Tagore” (1971) have also reflected intensively on Bohurupee’s Tagore productions while Mandakranta Bose in “Indian Modernity and Tagore’s Dance” (2008) has written on aspects of Rabindra-Nritya in the context of the modernization of dance in India. Urmimala Sarkar in her essay “Boundaries and Beyond: Problems of Nomenclature in Indian Dance History” (2008) has discussed Tagore’s experiments in dance *vis-à-vis* Uday Shankar’s contribution to Indian dance practice. Abhijit Sen has reflected on Tagore’s deliberate departure from the theatre practice at Jorasanko, in Sanitiniketan, in his essay “In Search of a New Language for Theatre” (2012), as well as commented on the proximity of Tagore’s performance idiom to indigenous forms of performance like Jatra in “Folk Theatre and Rabindranath: Setting the Scene” (2000). On the occasion of the hundred and fiftieth anniversary, Sen has also edited a volume of the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* with essays by Spandana Bhowmick and Rimli Bhattacharya among others on various aspects of Tagore’s engagements with performance, titled *Rabindranath's East-West Encounters: Performing and Visual Arts* (2012). On the occasion of the Anniversary, The Tagore Centre, London, in collaboration with ICCR has also brought out an anthology of essays titled *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, which has essays by Shlomi Doron, Bee Formentelli, Mair De-Garre Pitt related to the performance of Tagore’s plays. Swati Ganguly in an essay written in interdisciplinary mode, titled “The Illustration of *Red Oleanders*: Rabindranath, Modernism and Visual Culture”, published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* has juxtaposed the symbolic modernist aesthetics of Tagore’s play *Raktakarabi* or *Red Oleanders* to the modernist nature of his engagement with visual art. While I do not claim that the list above is exhaustive by any means, I have deliberately left out those works that focus primarily on a literary analysis of Tagore’s plays.

In Bengali, the oeuvre is exponentially more rich and diverse. It is impossible to speak here of the volumes of critical work which exist in the vernacular on various aspects of Tagore’s persona or work. Thus, I will limit myself to mentioning only those works which directly engage with performance. Pre-eminent Tagore critic Shankha Ghosh’s perceptive writings on myriad aspects of Tagore’s life, thought and work including theatre, I believe, remains an inevitable touchstone for any aspiring critical work on Tagore. Shankha Ghosh in his *Kaler Matra O Rabindra Natak* (1969) provides us with a perceptive analysis of the plays and invaluable insights into various facets of dramaturgy of Tagore’s plays as well as legendary productions of Tagore’s plays by the Bohurupee. Ghosh in his more recent works *Ishara Abiroto*, (2009) *Bhinno Ruchir Adhikar* (2010), *Arop Ebong Udbhaban* (2011),

Dekhar Drishti (2014) deals with instances of contemporary performances of Tagore's plays. Rudraprasad Chakraborty, in his works *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratikriya* (1995), *Sadharan Rangalaye Rabindranath* (1981) and *Rangamancher Kobikahini* (2014), accumulates almost all the materials available regarding the production of Tagore's plays during his life time at Santiniketan and also in commercial stages at Kolkata. This historiography is imperative for any research on Rabindra-Natya. Some other critics, practitioners and researchers like Dhurjati Prasad Mukhopadhyay, Kshiti Mohan Sen, Annadashankar Ray, Dhruva Gupta, Sombhu Mitra, Pabitra Sarkar, Sudhir Chakraborty, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Kumar Ray, Debojit Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar Samaddar, Darshan Choudhury, Malay Rakshit and few others also deal with aspects of the Tagore performance tradition, in addition to accounts by Santideb Ghosh who has significantly contributed to the formulation of Rabindra-Nritya, in his book *Gurudev Rabindranath O Adhunik Bharatiya Nritya* (1983). However, transgressing my self-imposed limitations, I cannot but end by mentioning Prasanata Kumar Pal's monumental work in the form of a nine-volume, incomplete biography (1982-2003) which stands out for its meticulous facticity and is bound to be indispensable to anyone working on Tagore.

Theoretical Formulations

Dramatic Theatre and the Anti-Textual Prejudice of Performance Studies

The discipline of performance studies from its very inception, especially in the USA and more specifically at New York University, has had a vexed relationship with the idea and practice of 'dramatic theatre'.³ When performance studies came into being in the 1970s at the Tisch School of Arts, NYU, and attempted to establish itself as the "new paradigm" with a "broad spectrum approach", it often posited its disciplinary potentialities against the older

³ There have been alternative approaches to performance as well which have been less insular in their critique of dramatic theatre. As Marvin Carlson points out in his introduction titled "Perspectives on performance: Germany and America" to Erica Fischer-Lichte's work *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), the "Midwestern" variety of performance studies which began at the Northwestern University reveal closer affinities to mainstream or dramatic theatre. Even the German tradition of Max Hermman and Fischer-Lichte herself, he notes, have maintained a close relation with mainstream theatre and routinely cite such performances in their work. Carlson also clarifies that while the Midwestern American variety is related to dramatic theatre in so far as it is still invested in textuality and oral culture, the German variety is more radical in the sense that it looks at dramatic theatre not as performance of a text but as an independent and embodied event.

discipline of “theatre studies” or the practice of dramatic theatre. One of the foremost proponents of this new paradigm, Richard Schechner, in an oft-quoted address delivered at the 1992 convention in Atlanta declared that:

[T]heater as we have known and practiced it- the staging of written drama- will be the string quartet of the twenty-first century: a beloved and extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance... [T]he new paradigm is ‘performance’ not theatre. Theatre departments should become ‘performance departments’ (Schechner, 1992: 8-9)

While Schechner was right to point out, and as many others have reiterated, “performance” as a theoretical paradigm has the scope of extending its field of analysis beyond the enactment of text-based drama to the study of dance, music, rituals, festivals, political events, everyday practices, virtual worlds and a gamut of other things, it can also be argued that in actuality this extension has in effect landed up in paying less attention to the practices of dramatic theatre. Schechner himself in an article published in the TDR eight years later titled “Mainstream Theatre and Performance Studies” (2000) says the following:

[M]ainstream theatre is an incredibly fertile area that PS [Performance Studies] ought to explore... if performance studies is to flourish, or even survive, in the 21st century, PS will have to build bridges to mainstream theatre. (Schechner, 2000: 5)

This indeed is a position radically different, if not in direct opposition to the one made in the 1992 convention, which clearly affirmed performance studies’ initial prejudice against dramatic or mainstream theatre.

But what is the key motivating factor underlying this rejection of dramatic theatre? If one studies the discourses arguing performance as the new paradigm, a key ground for such rejections appears to be what is perceived as the hegemony of text over performance in the dramatic theatre and a ministerial relationship of the later to the former. ‘Text’ here of course means a ‘material printed dramatic work’ and not a more provisional idea of the ‘script’, which is why the text/performance binary has often been substituted by other similar sets like the page/stage and literature/theatre. Consequently, based on such an understanding of the text/performance dynamics in dramatic theatre, with the post-dramatic turn in 20th Century theatre and the emergence of a new discipline in Performance Studies, as a counter move, both practitioners and theorists have often posited a romantic and sentimental distinction between the categories of ‘performance’ and the ‘text’. In such a discursive framework, the former is assumed to signify what is transgressive, multivalent and revisionary, as opposed to

the latter being dominant, repressive, coded, conventional and canonical. Based on such an understanding, there have been attempts to challenge and subvert dramatic theatre as a form of performance thought to be overdetermined by the set of codes built into the materiality of the dramatic text itself.

As Marvin Carlson expounds in his essay “Theatrical Performance: Illustration, translation, fulfillment or supplement” (1985), the text/performance dynamics in the practice of dramatic theatre has been understood in the history of Western theatre, conventionally, through two contrapuntal, yet equally deficient logics. One of these positions can be best represented by the concept of “illustration”. Such a position, Carlson clarifies, originates from a deep-rooted, antitheatrical prejudice and perceives performances as a secondary illustration of an original dramatic work, therefore by definition also secondary to or less than the original. The subscribers of this position often believe that the dramatic work is complete in itself— enjoyable to the fullest in solitary readings. They often view theatrical performances of these works as interpretations which are corrupt, partial, misleading, and, in effect, even unnecessary. Instances confirming a disparaging attitude towards performance can be traced right from Aristotle’s much celebrated treatise on theatre, *Poetics*, to the romantics and even modern theatrical greats like Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966)⁴ who:

[I]n *The Art of The Theatre* expressed a willingness to accept the proposition that Shakespeare's plays had no need of staging. Hamlet, he says, was complete when written, and "for us to add to it by gesture, scene, costume or dance, is to hint that it is incomplete and needs these additions". (Carlson, 2009: 81)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Carlson explains, is the argument that dramatic texts are meant to be performed and can only achieve true “fulfilment” through their staging. Proponents of such a view look at dramatic works as half-finished waiting to be realised in their fullness of form through stagings. In the European context, English theorist-directors like Ashley Dukes and Harley Granville-Barker, for instance, argued that what made Shakespeare’s plays great, was that:

They were incomplete in a particular imaginative way. He wrote “not to dictate, but to contribute, not to impose but to collaborate,” creating characters and situations which would stimulate creative completion by actors, directors and designers. (82)

⁴ A history of prejudice against performance or theatre in the European context is discussed in detail by Jonas A. Barish in his iconic work *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1985).

In the Indian context, Rabindranath Tagore himself in his only essay on theatre *Rangamancha* (1902) subscribes to such a view. Tagore, in the essay, compares a *drishya-kavya* (a dramatic work) with *shravya-kavya* (poetry), asserting that the fulfilment of a *drishya-kavya* is in its enactment.

The logic of “illustration” or “fulfilment” pose problems in their own right. Both try to privilege one over the other in the text/performance binary. Moreover, the crucial fact which eludes the grasp of both is what Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton points out and W.B. Worthen emphasizes in his essay “Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance” (2004):

[T]ext and production are distinct formations— different material modes of production, between which no homologous or ‘reproductive’ relationship can hold. They are not two aspects of the same discourse - the text, as it were, thought or silent speech and the production thought-in-action, articulate language; they constitute distinct kinds of discourse, between which no simple ‘translation’ is possible”. (Eagleton, 1978:66)

Notably, Carlson in his essay also identifies a third logic of “translation”, which intends to look at text and performance as two different mode of production seen through a semiotic lens, but falls short of the objective. The translation theory retains the logic of unilinearity in the sense that translation is always from the page to the stage, or script to the performance. Against these modes of understanding, Carlson posits Jacques Derrida’s concept of “supplement” as elaborated in his work *Of Grammatology* (1967), originally used in the context of theorizing the speech/writing relationship, to classify the relationship between text and performance. The “supplement”, according to Derrida, does two apparently contradictory things. First, it “adds itself, it is a surplus, a plentitude enriching another plentitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence.” Secondly, it “adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void” (Derrida, 1976: 144-145). Noticeably, to apply Derrida’s concept of the supplement to the understanding of the text/performance binary would imply acknowledging the two as distinctly separate modes of production, i.e. plentitudes in themselves.

To come to the point that I am trying to make here on the text/performance relationship, I would emphasize that the rejection of dramatic theatre by performance studies and post-dramatic theatre on grounds of being overdetermined by the dramatic text is based

on a flawed understanding of the text-performance dynamics in performance. What such an anti-textual prejudice has meant for performance studies, however, is the failure to take into account under its analytical lens entire traditions of dramatic theatre that continue to uphold literary texts as integral to the notion and event of performance. Specifically, in my case for instance, in Bengali, the term “Natak” is used to signify both the theatrical event and the play text, indicating perhaps how a text remains integral to any theatre practice in Bengal. Even Badal Sircar, the director who could be said to come closest to the idea of ‘post-dramatic’ theatre in the context of Bengal, was a playwright, and always had a written text even while staging fragmented and seemingly improvised performances. Under these conditions, it would be useful for researchers studying Bengali theatre not to undermine the performative potentialities of the text and instead to focus on the various kinds of relationships that the theatrical event and the literary text are engaged in within any performance tradition and historical location. As performance theorist Shannon Jackson makes it clear in her essay *Professing Performances: Disciplinary Genealogies*, “[R]ather than “defending or rejecting” terms like “text”, “theatre”, “literature” it is necessary to engage with these terms to find out how such concepts are played through individual contexts, situations, events and traditions” (Jackson, 2007: 33). In my dissertation, focusing on stagings of Tagore’s plays as a case study, I would like to enquire into various aspects of the intricate dynamics of the text-performance relationship within a dramatic theatre tradition, reaching outside the paradigm of the anti-textual prejudice of performance studies in its earlier articulations.

Textuality and Authorial Authority

If the performance studies critique of text/performance dynamics in dramatic theatre proves itself to be untenable, the question which faces us is whether the categories of text and performance are therefore completely unrelated in dramatic theatre or whether their relationship needs to be rethought in different terms. When texts are actually opposed to performance in the post-dramatic discourse on theatre, what is really at stake? As W.J. Worthen rightly diagnoses in his insightful essay “Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance”, what is at stake is not the text itself; but, rather, how the text is “construed as vessels of authority, of canonical values, of hegemonic consensus” (Worthen, 2007: 11). Worthen argues that once we realize that text and performance are two separate modes of production and that there is no ministerial relationship between the two, we also realize that the concept of authority manifests itself in the interactive dynamics of text and performance

in fundamentally different ways. Rather, both text and performance are read under fundamentally different set of coded conventions, or what Worthen will call “textualities” which control the production of meaning in each case. To put it more directly, just as the text as a coherent work is often understood under certain contexts of authorial signature, the performance too produces meaning through spatial, bodily, rhetorical, musical conventions innate to performance traditions. Therefore, when the performance cites the authorial signature of a text, it cannot possibly do so just by simply reiterating the text but rather re-signifying the textual authorial codes through its own conventions. Therefore, as Worthen explains in another essay titled “Drama, Performativity, and Performance” (1998), the problem of dramatic theatre's citationality is a complex one:

[M]any dramatic performances...are inscribed with authorizing gestures: they use acting, costume, direction, the entire *mise-en-scene* to claim an authority located in a certain understanding of a text, a genre, a performance tradition, a mystified author. Performances do not signify by citing texts. A performance creates a sense of “proximity” (to the text, to something else) as part of its rhetorical deployment of contemporary conventions of performance, as way of claiming “something we value”. (Worthen, 2009: 97)

Therefore, one of the key questions that can be posited about any dramatic theatre tradition, concerns the myriad ways by which the authorial signatures of the text get transferred to performative significations in stagings, through the act of dramaturgy.

Rabindranath Tagore, the cultural icon that he has been made out to be, ensures that productions of his plays are often haunted by the spectre of his authorial presence, despite more recent attempts to subvert it. I would like to argue that in the case of Tagore’s plays and their stagings, the issue of authorship gets more troubled because of the fact that Tagore was a director in his own right, and had assumed his own dramaturgies for the staging of his plays. Consequently, not only have his plays been staged with claims to reproduce the authorial signatures of the text in the most accurate manner, but these modes of staging draw their authority additionally from the authenticity of the dramaturgy represented by Tagore himself. Thus, the question of authorship extends here directly beyond the material text and gets imbricated with dramaturgy, as represented in the modes of transfer from the text to the performance. Thus, in my dissertation, I have deliberately chosen to focus on dramaturgy as the site of such transfers.

I would like to argue that it is the overwhelming presence of the spectre of authorial authority which has plagued the stagings of Tagore's plays, directly or indirectly. At a direct level, it has proved to be the basis of legitimizing direct forms of censorship on behalf of Visva-Bharati, which controlled the staging of Tagore's plays till 2001. Indirectly, however, the very existence of this spectre of authorial authority within the domain of discourse has proved to be inhibiting for directors intending to produce Tagore's plays. In my dissertation, I would like to engage with the archive of Tagore's own dramaturgy of his plays to revisit, deconstruct and critique such existing claims of authorial authority. I would like to investigate through specific productions, how directors after Tagore have felt challenged by the intricate dynamics of this authorial authority, and consequently, how they have negotiated it. I would also like to engage with the history of how such authorial authority was questioned or at least challenged by someone like Sisir Kumar Bhaduri in Tagore's own life time.

Authority, Archive, Archival Performance

Authority shares an intricate relationship with the archive. It is on the basis of the archive that authority exercises its powers of prohibition and exclusion. Jacques Derrida in his work *Archive Fever* (1996) presents an analysis of the patriarchal and authoritarian functions of the archive. The origin of the term "archive" can be traced back to Latin *archiva*, *archia*, from Greek *arkheia* meaning 'public records', from *arkhē* meaning 'government'. The Greek *arkhe*, Derrida argues, names "at once the commencement and the commandment" (Derrida, 1996:9). Through this note, he explores the authority of archives from the Greek superior magistrates, the *archons*, and the "domiciliation" of the archives as topological locations by which the archives appear to have authority. As Derrida plainly says, "There is no political power without control of the archive..." (15). It is the archival document which authenticates authority by legitimizing the source of power for enunciation and the basis for establishing truth claims and also that of effecting censorship.

Authorial forms of authority establish their claims and mark their territories through the archive. In the case of the dramaturgy of Tagore's plays, the archive is constituted by the fragmented traces of the Tagorean dramaturgy available in the form of Tagore's own reflections of theatre and his plays, oral history, memoirs, spectator's accounts, few photographs of productions, the texts of the plays and the tradition of performance practice that has survived Tagore at Santiniketan. It is important to note here performance theorist

Diana Taylor's juxtaposition of the "repertoire" (oral and bodily practices) vis-à-vis the "archive" (written documents), as an oft-ignored, alternative mode of history making, which she elaborates on in her much celebrated work *The Archive and The Repertoire* (2003). While acknowledging Taylor's claim of the performative modes of transmission of history being systematically precluded because of their alleged refusal to leave remains, Taylor's project ultimately proves to be limiting as Rebecca Schneider argues in her work *Performance Remains* (2011):

Taylor does not entirely succeed, in other words, in resisting the binary archive/performance. Simply by arguing that we "shift our focus *from* written *to* embodied culture, *from* the discursive *to* the performatic," Taylor realigns a distinction between the two and asserts a linear trajectory: as if writing were not an embodied act, nor an embodied encounter across time, and as if performance were not discursive. (Schneider, 2011: 106)

Taylor's failure to transcend the archive/repertoire binary makes her unable to identify the greater stakes involved which Schneider rightly identifies as the "archival culture". Much like the fallacious binary of text/performance, the archive/repertoire binary also falls short of addressing the archival culture which always understands and evaluates history relative to the remains accumulated as "indices of vanishment" (97). One realises that performances too can be subjected to such archival culture when they get museumized, as has happened to a large extent to the performance tradition at Santiniketan.

Echoing Schneider, I would like to argue that rather than positing archive against performance which has been the dominant theoretical paradigm in studying performance or theater's relationship to the archive, it would be more fruitful to think in terms of how the archive performs itself and in fact exists through performing. To able to do so, we, however, need to discard the conception that performance is that which disappears (a position which performance theorist Peggy Phelan subscribes to in her work *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (1993)). Rather, we need to think of performance as a perpetual series of re-appearance and re-participation. We need to understand performance as essentially existing at the threshold of appearance and disappearance. When looked through such a notion of performance the archive will also emerge as something integral to performance. The concept of archival performance will be particularly beneficial to the analysis of dramatic theatre because of its complex citational nature which we have already discussed.

Productions of Tagore's plays which have been produced in post-Independence India have often felt obliged to revisit the archive of dramaturgy in order to understand and replicate Tagorean dramaturgy. Claims of authenticity towards the archive have been central to the legitimising and validating process of productions of Tagore's plays. It would be my intention in this dissertation to investigate such claims of authenticity and validation as well as the modalities of archival replication through specific case studies. A related question would be to ask what happens when the archive of Tagore's original dramaturgy, however partial and fragmented, is not available for consultation by directors producing his plays outside Bengal. I would also look at more contemporary efforts at producing Tagore's plays which have asserted their intention of deliberately challenging the archive or even dismantling it altogether. In my dissertation I will look at such varied modes of archival performance related to the stagings of Tagore's plays.

Erratic Temporality

In this section, I would like to make three secondary arguments, auxiliary to what I have already said. The first concerns the erratic temporality of theatre. Within the discourse on theatre in the last century, an area of impassioned discussion has centered around the temporal nature of theatre. Theoreticians and practitioners alike have often been found to be obsessed with valorising theater's unique ability to accumulate and embody "presence". Prominent visionaries and practitioners of theatre like Artaud, Grotowski, Beckett, Schechner and others have relentlessly strived in different ways to make theatre unmitigatedly real and present. To do away with the text or "classics" as Artaud asserted was of course vital to this project. Their desire, as Elinor Fuchs correctly argues in her essay "Presence and the Revenge of Writing" (1985), was "to come closer and closer to a centre of human experience through a self-exploration of such intensity that it redefined the self" (Fuchs, 2009: 110). Consequently, performance theorist Peggy Phelan in her well-known study *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) has championed theatre's unique ephemeral quality. Assuming a contrary stance, Philip Auslander in his study *Liveness* (1999) has argued that liveness is not an ontological characteristic of performance but an invention of technological reproduction. Auslander clarifies that even the live performance is equally recorded and mediated just as the more apparently mediated ones. However, as Schneider rightly points out, even Auslander in his analysis fails to realise the complicated nature of the temporality of performance (Schneider, 2011: 92).

Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains*, however, proposes that theatrical performance's time is neither live, nor recorded, but something infinitely more complex. She uses the concept of "mean-time" to define theatre's temporal nature where something can take place simultaneously, with another thing at the same time, as well as happen in its place. She affirms:

[The time of theatre] is not straightforward...For theatre, while composed of and in time, is also a medium of masquerade, of clowning, of passing and not passing, of surrogating, the *faux*, the posed, the inauthentic, the copy, the double, the gaffe - all given to interruption and remix (89).

All of these elements have the potential to disrupt the time of theatre. My argument would entail that such a conception of theater's temporality would refute the misconception that in the case of dramatic theatre that the time of the performance corresponds to the time of the text, which is obviously not the case. Rather multiple times, both chronological and qualitative, get entangled in various kind of ways, as, for instance, in performances Jill Parvin's adaptation of the *Post Office*, to be discussed in Chapter Five. This is also to be seen in more recent adaptations of Tagore's plays which try to posit the play within the frames of contemporary socio-political discourses through various strategies. Moreover, the immediate and material performative contexts of a performance also shape the temporality of performance in multiple ways.

Textual Performance

While we have reflected on the textualities of performance, it is equally important to note the performative nature of texts within the practice of theater. In fact, the very idea of a singular, coherent, material, textual work appears to be a myth in a close study of the practice of dramatic theatre. First, a play text is usually available now in multiple editions with its distinctly different formats, annotations, introductions, or, for that matter, even in electronic formats, any of which can be used for the purpose of a production. Even if we overlook these mediated forms of textual performance, and even if we uphold that texts in performance traditions can be considered sacrosanct, the fact remains that in the making of any performance, the text is just one of the many components meant to be shaped and reshaped by performative contexts and circumstances of specific productions. In the rehearsal space and in actual performance, there no longer remains the coherent material textual 'work', but

only a provisional, workable idea of the ‘script’. It might be feasible to say that performance entails a Barthean “death of the author” of the dramatic work.

The Tagorean tradition too presents interesting instances of textual performance. First, there exists for almost each of Tagore’s plays multiple versions, each often edited for purposes of betterment or for being performed under different conditions. *Raktakarabi* for instance went through at least ten different versions, all of which exist in the archive. Tagore often added preludes suiting specific contexts of staging, shortened his plays or altered them radically, even assigning them new names - *Aruparatan* being the altered version of *Raja*, *Rinsodh* of *Sarodotsav*, *Tapati* of *Raja O Rani*, and so on. Even more radical, however, is the practice of the text getting altered during the rehearsals or performance. In one instance, we know that Tagore altered certain words in the text of his play *Raja* for a production at Alfred Theatre, Kolkata in 1935, keeping in mind the actors’ regional accents (Chakraborty, 1995: 81) which he only came to know about during the rehearsals. In another instance, in a performance of the play *Dakghar* in 1918 at Jorasanko Thakurbari, Tagore made an impromptu entrance on the stage as a *Baul*, wearing a saffron turban, singing a “*Gram Chara Oi Ranga Matir Poth*” (that red-soil path which leaves the village), passing by the window, while a scene was already in progress (141). Thus, Tagore the director often altered, interrupted, interpolated, re-wrote what Tagore the poet had originally scripted. In the purview of such instances, which would almost give the impression that Tagore’s texts are palimpsests with multiple layers, I would look critically at any attempt to claim fidelity to Tagore’s play text as a criterion of judgement for their productions. Such a claim would fall flat when placed against the multiple versions that exist for each of the plays, and the history of Tagore himself as a director imposing contingent changes on them. The idea of text as palimpsest would be central in examining more contemporary productions of Tagore’s plays where debates converge around the politics of adaptation. The question would be how much liberty can a performance take from the play text following which it must be downgraded to the status of adaptation or require a new authorial signature in the form of a new name other than the name of the play.

Notes on Method

As my research is primarily archival in focus, it is necessary not only to engage with the sheer scale and density of Tagore's archive but, more importantly, also to question how one reads it. There is a colossal amount of research that remains to be explored in Tagore's own writing of plays, essays, lectures, travelogues, letters and memoirs. In addition, one needs to develop appropriate reading strategies to draw on the memoirs of Jorasanko residents like Satyendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Swarnakumari Devi, Jyotirindranath Tagore; teachers and student-performers at Santiniketan like Kshitimohan Sen, Amita Sen, Promothonath Bishi, Santideb Ghosh or other acquaintances like Sita Debi and Ranu Adhikary. In addition to reading strategies, one needs to develop ways of 'seeing' Tagore's productions through the numerous still photographs of both older and contemporary performances as preserved at the Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan and Natya Sodh Sansthan, Kolkata; the Tagore Centre, UK; the Korczak Institute in Israel. Reports and reviews of the performances and interviews of directors published in various dailies and magazines in Bengal like *Nachghar*, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Amritabazar Patrika*, *Bengalee*, *Bijoli* and around the world like *The Globe*, *The Standard*, *The Westminster Gazette*, also need to be taken into account. Here again, one needs to develop ways of reading reviews against the grain of their platitudinous and pedestrian details and protocols.

In spite of the apparent proliferation, if not surfeit of materials available in the Tagore archive, the reality is that performances of his plays have been poorly documented. Not having witnessed most of the performances being addressed in this dissertation, and with no access to video documentation which became available only from the late 1980s onwards, I have had no other option but to rely on speculative methods to form an interpretation of a particular production or rehearsal process, drawn from a conglomeration of disjunctive moments and fragments. Only in dealing with the productions of contemporary directors like Heisnam Kanhailal or Suman Mukhopadhyay was I in a position to interview them extensively, in juxtaposition with the critical reportage on their productions and conversations with spectators.

A major lacuna in the archive is the dearth of Rabindranath Tagore's theoretical writings on performance, which consist of only two essays - *Abhinay* (1881) and *Rangamancha* (1902). It is indeed an enigma as to why such a prolific writer like Tagore should have minimized his critical reflection on theatre. One can, however, find valuable

hints regarding his thoughts on performance in the short introductions accompanying his plays, and in his insights on other performance traditions in his correspondence and travelogues like *Europe Prabasir Patra* (1879), *Paschim Jatrir Diary* (1891), *Japan Jatri* (1916) and *Java Jatrir Patra* (1927).

A method that I would like to adapt while approaching the archive is to remain reflexive to the ways in which the archive itself has been performed or produces meaning through performance. The archive, I would like to argue, even before it is interpreted, is not an impartial document of the past but an interpretation in its own right. Any archive is bound to have its own predispositions, and thus, also its silences, produced out of the very technology of its production, as Derrida asserts in his *Archive Fever*, “The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida, 1995: 17). The only way forward thus, is to be reflexive to these varied frames, contexts under which the archive has itself been performed. For example, wherever in the memoirs or reviews we find comments on Tagore the actor, we also find the critic, reviewer or the audience enamoured by Tagore the poet and the public figure. Thus, there is almost no critical evaluation on how well he played a particular character, or failed to convince in his performance. Instead of taking such limitations as impediments, we can try to read into such reviews the larger phenomenon of reception in Bengali theatre culture, along with its protocols and conditions. Therefore, in my research, there will be a two-way process of *reading into* and *reading beside* what is apparently visible.

Among the numerous performances that constitute my archive, I have singled out those productions, events, moments, narratives which I believe are pivotal in creating a paradigm shift from the more literary-bound interpretation of Tagore’s oeuvre towards a more dramaturgically interventionist production of specific plays. The idea is not to present an “empty mirage of continuous progress” (Agamben, 1993: 105) but to highlight the play of certain gestures and performatives which form, as Agamben terms it in his work *Infancy and History*, “a qualitative alteration of time”(ibid).

Regarding the use of words, I have retained the commonly used or, where applicable, official spellings for people, groups, historical events and places. I have avoided the use of diacritics. Since the dissertation cuts across time, I have retained in the main text the earlier spelling of “Calcutta”, which is how the city was identified in English. All translations from the original Bengali are mine, unless stated otherwise.

Chapters

In the first couple of chapters, I will reflect on the archive of Tagore's own engagements with theatre. My investigation into this history or archive will also entail looking at it *vis-a-vis* a particular kind of spectral presence. Directors producing Tagore's plays during Tagore's time or after him have been haunted by the fact that Tagore was a producer of his own plays and had created dramaturgies for them. Conversely, being a producer and an actor, it has also appeared that his plays might have been written with specific forms of dramaturgy in mind. Thus, faced with the spectre of this authorial authority, directors have often been found to wonder - 'How did Tagore think of staging his plays' or 'how were they in fact staged at Jorasanko or Santiniketan'? While acknowledging the impossibility of any single answer to such questions, in the two chapters I will attempt to work through the history of theatre practice at Jorasanko and Santiniketan in order to revisit and problematise the conceptions, the articulations, the myths and the fallacies that have been formulated in response to the above questions. It is not my intention to present here a systematic historiography. I would rather choose to focus on what I believe are key moments in the evolution of Tagore's thinking about theatre and dramaturgy.

In the first chapter titled "Theatre at Jorasanko Thakurbari: Inception and Formative Experiments", I will examine the idiom of theatre practice that emerged at Jorasanko Thakurbari in the latter half of the 19th century. In order to focus on the theatre practice at Jorasanko Thakurbari, I not only revisit the existing archive but also look at ways of extending or transgressing its usually marked frontiers. Often appraisals of Rabindranath Tagore's engagements with theatre begin with the first production *Balmiki Protibha* (1881). I, however, intend to go a little further down time to take a close look into the historical moment of the inception of theatre at the Jorasanko Thakurbari in the second half of the 19th Century and its evolution into a practice as I believe it was the ground from which Tagore's thinking on theatre as a form as well as art practice in general began and developed. To begin with, I identify and elaborate briefly on the concept of "sokh" as the overarching framework under which art practice and in general and theatre practice too was happening at Jorasanko. Then, I move on to discuss the inception of *sokher* theatre at Jorasanko. I deal at length on the first major production to have happened at the Thakurbari household - *Nabanatak* (1867). The point will be to revisit the contexts under which theatre as a form entered Jorasanko and began taking shape. An important element of analysis will be the manoeuvre away from

indigenous *jatra* to the quest for an Indianised theatre with its inevitable hybridity. Finally, I will deal with the production of Rabindranath Tagore's *giti natya* (a play in songs) *Balmiki Protibha* (1881) at Thakurbari which signalled Tagore's much celebrated entry into the Calcutta theatre scene.

In the second chapter titled "In Search of a New Language of Theatre at Santiniketan", I will move ahead in time to the beginning of the 20th century, when Tagore would establish a school at Santiniketan, which was to be the site of his future theatrical endeavours. The focus will be on discussing Tagore's engagement with theatre at Santiniketan. I will direct my analysis towards an articulation of the explorations of a new language of theatre at Santiniketan by identifying its underlying principles and affects in terms of its aesthetics and reception. In terms of the archival problems that it presents, the period from 1897 to 1908 seems unique in the history of Tagore's association with theatre. In spite of the compulsive playwright that Tagore was, he did not write a single new full-length play in this decade. It is only in 1908, that he wrote the play *Sarodotsav*, to be performed by the students and teachers at Santiniketan. It adds to the uniqueness of the period that he wrote his one sustained reflection on theatre – an essay titled *Rangamancha*. I analyse the essay *Ranganmancha*, the decade long hiatus from playwriting, and the text and performance of his play *Sarodotsav* which ended it, in order to point out and discuss the nature of the radical turn that Tagore's ideas regarding theatre, its aesthetics and politics go through during the period.

In the third chapter titled "Tagore in the Public Theatre of Bengal", I focus in particular on Rabindranath Tagore's relationship with the contemporary commercial theatre. Though established around the same time in the latter half of the 19th century, amateur theatre practice at Jorasanko, or later, at Santiniketan, was antithetical to the tradition of contemporary commercial-professional theatre practice in Calcutta. If the objective of the first was *sokh*, that of the second was to promote the profession of theatre through a predominantly populist form of entertainment as well as earning a livelihood through regular theatre practice. The relationship between these two theatre traditions serves as the backdrop for this chapter. My primary objective in this chapter lies in probing how Tagore's contemporary commercial theatre producers and directors approached the archive of his plays and dramaturgy. However, the association between the two antithetical modes theatre worked both ways. Not only were the producer-directors of the commercial theatre reacting towards Tagore's plays but Tagore too on his part found himself responding to the demands of the commercial stage. Not only Tagore himself but the other members of the Thakurbari

associated with theatre are also seen to respond to these collaborations in active ways. It would be interesting to study their approach as well.

In the fourth chapter titled “Bohurupee’s *Raktakarabi* (1954): Performing the Archive”, my intention is to problematize the concept of the archive and the relation between the archive, authorship and theatre history through a study of the ways in which the archive of Tagore’s plays and their dramaturgy as implied in the theatre practice at Santiniketan have served as a source of authentication and censorship. To sharpen the problematization of the archive, this chapter will primarily focus on the production history of Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander) directed by legendary Bengali theatre director Sombhu Mitra for Bohurupee in 1954. I believe that this production, still considered by many as creating a paradigm shift in the production of Tagore’s plays, can be a classic case study for studying the relationship between theatre, authorship and the archive. My intention will be to engage with Mitra’s directorial methodology to search for theatrical solutions through a prolonged and rigorous negotiation with the archive of Tagore’s dramaturgy as well as the play text. I would like to probe whether Mitra was merely following the archival clues to arrive at an interpretation of *Raktakarabi* which was ostensibly ‘true’ to Tagore’s own ideas about the play or whether in the process of negotiating the archive, he was ultimately led beyond the archive, and indeed, beyond the Tagorean author-function. Broadening the context of my discussion, as another instance of archival performance, I will end by reflecting briefly on Mitra’s larger, problematic claims of devising an “Indian” idiom of theatre and his possible misappropriation of the archive of Tagore’s plays and dramaturgy to validate such a programme.

In the fifth chapter titled “*Dakghar* outside Bengal: Dramaturgy as Contingent Encounter” I discuss multiple productions of Tagore’s *Dakghar* (1912) or *The Post Office* produced outside Bengal, in India and abroad. The principal intention of this chapter is to explore what happens when a play travels outside its spatial-linguistic context and staged in an alien cultural condition in a distinctly different performance tradition. Under these circumstances, not only does the archive representing the ‘original’ dramaturgy of the production and its traces, however fragmented, become only partially available to the director, such productions are also marked by the encounter of the play with a different theatre tradition with its own archive of distinct understandings of context, space, time, narrative, character, emotion, feeling. I believe an investigation of such productions can reveal fascinating insights into contingent encounters where there is as much chance of

success, as of failure, in the intercultural transaction. The first production I would consider is *Dakghar* directed by Heisnam Kanhailal in 2007. In the second set of productions of *Dakghar* that I deal with in this chapter, I move outside India by studying the *Post Office* production by Abbey Theatre, Dublin, at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and Court Theatre, London, enacted by professional players and produced by poet, dramatist and theatre director Lenox Robinson (1886-1958) between May-July 1913. The third production studied in this chapter would involve a dramaturgical citation of the legendary performance of *The Post Office* arranged by writer, educator, doctor and children's rights activist Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) with the children of an orphanage in Warsaw, Poland on 15 July 1942. This inscription of Korczak's production was recontextualized within a new adaptation of *The Post Office* directed by Jill Parvin and produced in London at the Tagore Centre in 1993.

Finally, in an extended conclusion titled "Tagore Our Contemporary", I try to answer briefly the all important question - Are the crises of our times resonant in Tagore's plays today? Pointing out to the existing misconception of Tagore and his plays being non-political, I discuss two productions: Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Falguni: Suchana* (2002) and Bhanu Bharti's *Tamasha Na Hua* (2012) as instances of differing modes in which the Tagore's plays can be staged relating them to contemporary times. I end by addressing the politics of adaptation which is generally found to haunt experimental stagings of Tagore's plays. The questions which are usually posed to any unconventional staging of Tagore's plays are: Did the director impose his interpretation too much over Tagore's own intentions in the production? Should his production no longer be considered as a theatrical interpretation of Tagore's play but rather as an "adaptation"? In many instances, a primary criterion based upon which such debates are clinched and judgements proclaimed is the printed text of the play. I argue that answers to the above question are not only likely to remain relative, but the choice of making the printed text the sole criterion in deciding them is ultimately informed by a hegemony of the text in theatre, as well as a fallacious understanding of the relation between archive and performance.

Chapter I

Theatre at Jorasanko Thakurbari: Inception and Formative Experiments

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the idiom of theatre practice that emerged at Jorasanko Thakurbari in the latter half of the 19th century. It has been common to perceive the theatre practice at Jorasanko unqualifiedly as a specimen of *babu theatre* that developed across elite households in late 19th century Calcutta - a sporadic, closeted affair of an elite group of *bhadralok* Bengalis, “not having any connection with the common mass” (Choudhury, 2010: 477). While acknowledging the spatial immediacy of any site, it must be acknowledged that theatre practice at Jorasanko Thakurbari was also notably distinct from the theatre happening at other contemporary elite households. In its sustained intensity, supplemented by political and aesthetic aspirations, Jorasanko theatre was unique. While in other contemporary elite households, the usual norm was to pay commercial troupes for staging performances, it was first at Jorasanko that the members of a household actively participated in organizing a theatrical production. In spite of being physically and ideologically detached from the Bengali public stage, no other amateur theatre practice generated such profound interest in the contemporary public stage, as well as influenced the future of theatre and cultural practice in Bengal, as the Thakurbari theatre. Arguably, it was the Tagores who were responsible in firmly establishing theatre and dance as respectable artistic engagements in Bengal at a time when they were often frowned upon as morally degrading.

While such qualifications will continue to haunt any retelling of the history of theatre practice at Thakurbari, my investigation into this history or archive will also entail looking at it, as I have already mentioned, *vis-a-vis* a particular kind of spectral presence. Directors producing Tagore’s plays during Tagore’s time or after him have been haunted by the fact that Tagore was a producer of his own plays and had created dramaturgies for them. Conversely, being a producer and an actor, it has also appeared that his plays might have been written with specific forms of dramaturgy in mind. Thus, faced with the spectre of this authorial authority, directors have often been found to wonder - ‘How did Tagore think of staging his plays’ or ‘how were they in fact staged at Jorasanko or Santiniketan’? While

acknowledging the impossibility of any single answer to such questions, in the following two chapters I will attempt to work through the history of theatre practice at Jorasanko and Santiniketan in order to revisit and problematise the conceptions, the articulations, the myths and the fallacies that have been formulated in response to the above questions. It is not my intention to present here a systematic historiography. I would rather choose to focus on what I believe are key moments in the evolution of Tagore's thinking about theatre and dramaturgy.

I will deal with Tagore's own engagement with theatre as actor, director, dramaturg and playwright with the intention to tease out certain key moments, ideas, images, matters of contention, which would constitute the repertoire of the archive of Tagore's own dramaturgy today. While not being exhaustive, the instances I choose will attempt to illustrate the sort of challenges the archive of Tagore's own dramaturgy might present to its modern interpreters. While the primary idea would be to bring forth a discussion on the practice of theatre as it developed at Thakurbari and Santiniketan *vis-a-vis* Tagore's thinking on theatre and dramaturgy, at a second level, as a self-reflexive and performative gesture, the chapters will also try to problematize the very archive from which one would attempt to build such a discussion. The intention would be to lay bare the silences, paradoxes, lacunas and aporias that inhabit the archive and at times also transcend them through creative or speculative readings.

In order to focus on the theatre practice at Jorasanko Thakurbari, I not only revisit the existing archive but also look at ways of extending or transgressing its usually marked frontiers. Often appraisals of Rabindranath Tagore's engagements with theatre begin with the first production *Balmiki Protibha* (1881) as being Tagore's first directorial venture or at best with his early engagements with theatre via productions of Jyotirindranath's plays. I, however, intend to go a little further down time to take a close look into the historical moment of the inception of theatre at the Jorasanko Thakurbari in the second half of the 19th Century and its evolution into a practice. This is because I believe it was the ground from which Tagore's thinking on theatre as a form as well as art practice in general began and developed. I identify and analyse *sokh* as a category to understand the mode of art practice at Jorasanko under the larger rubric of which theatre too was taking place. I briefly discuss how the idea of *sokh* retains its trace in Rabindranath's understanding of art or art-practice. Then, I move on to discuss the inception of *sokher* theatre at Jorasanko. I deal at length on the first major production to have happened at the Thakurbari household - *Nabanatak* (1867). The point will be to revisit the contexts under which theatre as a form entered Jorasanko and

began taking shape. An important element of analysis will be the manoeuvre away from indigenous *jatra* to the quest for an Indianised theatre with its inevitable hybridity

Finally, I will deal with the production of Rabindranath Tagore's *giti natya* (a play in songs) *Balmiki Protibha* (1881) at Thakurbari which signalled Tagore's much celebrated entry into the Calcutta theatre scene. In this section, I will focus on the production of *Balmiki Protibha* in order to trace the iconization of Tagore's performance as Balmiki in the production and its association with his public persona of the poet-prophet. *Balmiki Protibha* would mark the initiation of the practice of Tagore scripting roles for himself in his plays and enacting them as roles constructed as extensions of his off-stage persona. The very experimental form of *giti natya* also merits an analysis, especially in view of the comparisons it has attracted to western counterparts like opera. Finally, I will attempt to reflect briefly through whatever little archival traces are available as to whether and how Tagore in his directorial debut departed in his directorial choices from the earlier productions at the Thakurbari.

***Sokh*: A Mode of Art Practice**

“See, it's quite difficult to make someone understand what *silpa* (art) is. *Silpa* is *sokh*. Only he can create *silpa* to whom the *sokh* comes from within.”

—Abanindranath Tagore, *Gharoa*, 1941

Theatre was first introduced to the Thakurbari as *sokh*. *Sokh* loosely translatable as “hobby” (playful diversion) was a practice unique to the 19th century Calcutta elites, emerging out of a very specific socio-economic condition of the age. A new class of *bhadralok* elite was emerging in Calcutta by the early 19th century owing to the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Through the imposition of this Act, the local *zamindars* or feudal lords were stripped of their administrative powers and remained merely as tax collectors of the land. Freed of all responsibility, they became mere tax hoarders who could afford not to stay at their *zamindaris* and instead employ agents to collect taxes on their behalf. This arrangement created a number of ‘absentee landlord’ elite families in Calcutta like the Mullicks, the Rays, the Sinhas, the Ghoshals, the Tagores and others. This group of absentee landlords had ample wealth and endless leisure to indulge themselves, in a wide spectrum of ways. Thus, they became *soukhin*, or took recourse to entertaining themselves by the strangest of *sokhs*.

Contemporary writer Kaliprasanna Sinha's (1841-1870) satirical account of the time in *Hutom Pechar Noksha* (1863) presents a satirical yet detailed picture of the grand execution of the whims and fancies of the contemporary Calcutta babus. As we come to know from Sinha's account, the lives of the *soukhin zamindars* were synchronised with the celebration of different religious occasions like *durga puja*, *kali puja*, *gajan*, *ram lila* and others throughout the year, each of which would demand a grand spectacle being organised with a mindless expenditure of wealth.

Soukhinota, however, took a distinctly different course at the Thakurbari due to certain events which transpired in the middle of the 19th century. While the Jorasanko Thakurbari of the Tagores too had become an absentee landlord family with Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, buying lands in Bengal and Orissa, by the middle of the 19th century they could no longer afford to engage themselves in similar unabashed exhibitions of wealth or spectacular celebrations of religiosity due to certain new developments in the family. The Tagores, relocated from the eastern part of Bengal, now situated in Bangladesh, to what is known presently as Calcutta, and settled at Gobindapur acquiring considerable prominence in the region by working for European merchants, especially the British. Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), Rabindranath's grandfather, had amassed colossal wealth by working with the British. Dwarkanath came out of the Tagores' ancestral home at Pathuriaghata to construct the Jorasanko Thakurbari in the late 18th century and shifted there. Thus, began a new chapter of the Tagore family at Jorasanko which was to play a significant role in socio-cultural, political and economic life of Bengal in the next one and a half centuries to come.

Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), son of Dwarkanath, was educated at the newly established Hindu College (1817). He was associated with the religious reformist project of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and in 1843 he revived the *Brahmo Samaj*, established by Ram Mohan but which had gone defunct after his demise. Brahmo Sabha later converted into Brahmo Samaj formed by Ram Mohan in 1828 was an elite Hindu reformist sect, critical of idol worship, rituals, and sacrifices. These developments had already located Thakurbari in the cultural map of contemporary Calcutta, distinctly. The Tagores however still maintained quite a lavish life-style similar to other rich absentee landlord households.¹

¹See Binoy Ghosh's essay "*Thakurparibarar Adiparva O Sekaler Samaj*" for more details regarding the early history of the Tagores.

Following Dwarkanath Tagore's demise in 1846, the situation changed abruptly. Dwakarnath had left a huge burden of debt on Debendranath who took it upon himself to pay off the debts by curtailing the expenses at Thakurbari. This marked a huge change in the attitude and life-practices of the Jorasanko residents. The Thakurbari residents could no longer afford to engage themselves in unabashed exhibitions of wealth common to other absentee landlord families due to monetary constraints. It also came to be deemed unworthy of the Thakurbari residents to entertain themselves with lowly entertainments because of the regulations set down owing to their cultural status. With Debendranath becoming the patriarch of the family, Brahmo norms were implemented strictly at Thakurbari and religious festivals were kept out of bounds.

Therefore, *soukhinota* was obliged to take a different course at Thakurbari and got associated with *silpa* or art practice. Art would be introduced in the vacuum left by the absence of religious rituals and bizarre hobbies to preoccupy the leisure time at Thakurbari. Thus, at Thakurbari, as we hear from Abanindranath, *sokh* and *silpa* became synonymous. *Sokh* did not remain merely a hobby as it was at other elite households but became something more serious and complex in its purpose. As we understand from Abanindranath's statement above, if one aspect of *sokh* was a romantic notion of the dilettante artist - his inspiration coming from within and self-developing through an organic mode - the other was a diligent and habitual practice of a particular *sokh* - not meant to be a sporadic activity but an essential characteristic of one's personality and life. Though *sokh* in this peculiar ambivalence does seem similar to the concept of "play" as formulated in the writings of Romantics like Friedrich Schiller or 20th century philosophers like Johan Huizinga, there remain finer points of difference. Most significantly, unlike play, *sokh* seeks art practice to become an integral part of the artist's or the participant's personality.

It would perhaps be pertinent here to digress a little and reflect shortly on Tagore's own conception of art practice to find out whether he was influenced by this idea of the *sokh*. I believe that though Tagore in his more sustained pieces of philosophical reflections on art never used the term *sokh*, he would nevertheless draw from the concept to formulate his own theory of art. In his writings, Rabindranath, for instance, would stress repeatedly on the necessity for leisure to be available for the flourishing of art, and art for the welfare of the human spirit. In *Philosophy of Leisure* (1929), he says:

We grow to be fond of perpetual shabbiness produced by a miscellany of fragments only because the relegation of these to their proper places require time. And we say time is money, while we forget to say that leisure is wealth, the wealth which is the creation of human spirit. (*The English Writings of Tagore Vol 6, 2007: 187*)

Sokh too, we must remember, was meant to be practiced in leisure. As a self-identified inconsistent philosopher, Tagore would theorize art in his writings in variedly different ways and comment on its various qualities in his writings. However, a definition of art he would often subscribe to in his writings is art as something much like *sokh*, essentially ‘anti-utilitarian’ in an everyday sense of the term, something which would fulfil no immediate purpose. But, at the same time, art or any creative expression he would also stress is something of utmost importance to human life because it embodies the spirit of creation which forms the very essence of the human condition. The term he would use in English to illustrate such a conception of art is “surplus”. For Tagore, art as surplus is not functional yet essential to human beings.

Coming back to the inception of theatre at Jorasanko, it was introduced as a *sokh* with a specific purpose in mind. It was meant to be a secular, sophisticated, refined *bhadralok* alternative to the religious occasions and other performance events considered obscene like *jatra*, *kheur* and *panchali gan*, which were out of bounds for the Thakurbari residents. Such sentiments are captured aptly in a letter from Debendranath to his elder brother Ganendranath sent after the first major theatrical production, *Naba Natak* at Jorasanko, quoted by Satyendranath in his memoir:

My father hearing of this performance writes Ganendranath from Kaligram (16th January 1867) - ‘Your *Natyashala* (theatre) has been inaugurated. Its collective symphony has charmed many hearts. Many have been left satisfied with the enjoyment of poetry. The absence of any innocent pleasure in our *desh* (country) will be gradually obliterated by such endeavours. (1915: 27)

Cultural Hybridity at Thakurbari

Cultural critic Sumanta Banerjee demonstrates in his now iconic work *The Parlour and The Streets* (1989), how the field of culture in 19th century Calcutta can be read as an ongoing, unequal conflict between two distinctly different cultural modes - the existing native Bengali

culture and the new cultural forms rising out of a colonial education system and exposure to cultural specimens from the west, asserting their superiority over indigenous cultural production. This situation, however, appears even more complex when we take into account other forms of cultural discourse which were also asserting their influence in the scene - the re-interpretations of the Hindu past by the European anthropologists, as well as the cultural impact of the coming of Wajid Ali Shah (1822-1887) with his troupes and settling down in Metiaburuz, Calcutta, around the middle of the century (1856). The presence of such multiple contesting factors meant that the 19th century cultural scene abounded in instances of cultural hybridity, transition and erasure. Such cultural in-between-ness perhaps manifested itself most emphatically in the performance cultures of the period. Jorasanko Thakurbari being already identified as the cultural trendsetter in contemporary Calcutta, existed, as we shall see, at the centre of such exchanges.

Jatra

Even before theatre entered the Thakurbari, in the latter half of the 19th century as a cultural practice imported from the west, it had already gained much currency in Calcutta, especially among the English educated, *bhadralok babus* with their taste for all things British. Theatre was imported to Calcutta by the British in the 18th Century as “part of a larger endeavour by the British East India Company to build a life in Calcutta that, despite geographic impossibilities, would still reflect London” (Chatterjee, 2007:17). Theatre accounted for playing the most vital part of the cultural Europeanising of the *babus* in the late 18th and early 19th century because of the very apparent physical presence in the city in form of the newly constructed theatre houses modelled on European counterparts. While these theatre houses were mainly meant for the European audience, the *bhadralok* elite Bengalis of the city were also permitted to attend the theatre, though, as Chatterjee would argue in his work regarding colonial theatre *The Colonial Staged* (2007), these elites were never the actual intended audience. There were notable exceptions like Dwarkanath Tagore who held shares at one of the first premiere theatres in Calcutta, Chowringhee Theatre (established in 1813), and later when it was destroyed in a fire in 1839, Sans Souci Theatre (established in 1841). However, by the beginning of the 19th century, the Bengali elite were warming up to the possibility of having performances done in Bengali in their own households for themselves. The first half of the 19th century, saw a number of such sporadic attempts being made by the likes of Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Nabin Chandra Basu and others. The technicalities of

theatre being still new and alien to Bengalis, indigenous *jatra* or the *pala gan* substituted for theatre in most of these earlier theatrical ventures. Many of the *babu* families in Calcutta spent their money on maintaining a troupe of *jatra* players known as “*sokher dal*” in the vernacular.

At the Jorasanko Thakurbari too, it was *jatra* which was first introduced as a performance form in the first half of the century. *Jatra* performances by the contemporary popular exponent of the form Nemai Das, Netai Das and later the famous exponent Gopal Ure were organised from time to time at the Thakur Bari on the occasion of *durga puja* and other religious festivals. We find a description of one of these *jatra* performances held in the late 1850s, on the occasion of *durga puja* at Thakurbari from Jyotirindranath’s memoirs:

[On] the three days of the *puja* there would be *jatra* in the courtyard of our house. Preparations for the same have already begun. How exciting! Long wooden logs are being fixed in the courtyard and wooden boards placed upon them, thereby covering the area...Outside the said covered area, carpets have been spread across the courtyard on all sides where the audience would sit. A number of *jhar batis* (a huge hanging lantern) have been hung from the wooden covering above with the help of an iron rod. When the *dhol* would be struck for the first time at 11’o clock in the night, signalling the commencement of the *pala*, I [Jyotirindranath, then only a boy] would run from my bed to the courtyard. The courtyard would be packed with Jorasanko residents and other invitees and at the fringes of the courtyard would stand the lower-class uninvited outsiders. There was no restriction on anybody entering the premises for the three days of the *puja*. A number of *masalchis* stood holding *mashals* (burning torch made with cloth and oil) around the courtyard. A *darwan* (security guard) would be trying to make people sit saying “*baithiye*”, “*baithiye*” and even sometimes using his cane to the effect. The *jatra* entertainment was generally meant for the youths of the house and the lower-class people from outside.... *Majlish* would be arranged for the adults in the *Baithakkhana* inside the house where courtesans would dance. It was the responsibility of Jyotirindranath’s maternal grandfather to sit with the young Thakurbari residents on the Thakurdalan in the courtyard. From time to time they would throw into the performance space coins wrapped in handkerchiefs for the players to encourage and appreciate them (a practice which was called *Pela Deoa*) ... the costumes of the *Jatra* players were generally *zari chapkan*, *zari* belt and a head gear made of *zari* too with a feather attached to it. They generally dressed keeping the contemporary fashions and trends in mind...The Kelua, Bhulua *swangs* [*swang* was an Indian counterpart of the figure of the joker in these *jatras* generally with paint applied on his face, who wore absurd costumes and funny headgears] would appear particularly fascinating to the children. In the *Sumbha-Nishumbha* (mythological play) *pala* when Raktabij (a demon) would come shouting ‘*rerererere*’ from the

dressing room itself the children would be terrified. He would be looking like a dacoit with long hair, thick twirling moustache, wearing a red dhoti, a blood red *phonta* (a mark on the temple) on his temple, holding his sword and shield...again when Dhumrolochan wearing a *rakshas* mask would get down suddenly, jumping from the elevated platform on which the children would be sitting, some of them would even start crying out of fear. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 12-13)

What we find here is a vivid picture of a typical *jatra* performance happening at an elite household in mid-19th century Calcutta, far removed from its earlier religious character and rural context. The *jatra* performance at Jorasanko adapted its performative idiom to cater to the taste for sensations, appreciated by the *babus*. The sole objective of the newly formed “amateur *jatra*” or “*sokherjatra*” which departed from the traditional Krishna *jatra* (Das Gupta, 2009: 122) was to provide an entertainment of the senses - a decadent form suiting the tastes of a decadent class. The very apparent difference between the older form of Krishna *jatra* of which Govinda Adhikary of Krishna Nagar was one last great exponent (Das Gupta, 2009: 120), and the new amateur *jatra* which developed in the early 19th century, was to be found in the themes that they dealt with. While Krishna *jatra* dealt with religious themes, *Kaliya-daman* being its most popular *pala*, *sokher jatra* took up secular romantic themes with the sole purpose of exhibiting sexuality for the enjoyment of the *babus*. The religious and mythological genre shedding its more serious elements of debate and reflection on religious issues remained only as an elaborate costume play. The most popular *palas* of the *sokherjatra* throughout the century were *Bidya-Sundar* and *Nal-Damayanti*.

More important to us, however, are the performative differences between these two forms which come across wonderfully in Jyotirindranath’s descriptions. A major alteration was in the use of musical instruments which are hinted at in the mention of the *dhol*. While in Krishna *jatra*, musical instruments like *khol* and *kartal* were used, the *sokher jatra* involved the introduction of louder instruments like *dhol*. While in Krishna *jatra* songs and debates on religious issues would dominate, in *sokher jatra* new visual and performative gimmicks were introduced to cater to popular tastes. The *swangs*, for instance, brought in elements of slapstick. The costumes of the *jatra* players and their actions mentioned in the passage also reveal an attempt to dazzle the audience. Unlike in Krishna *jatra* where most exponents had inherited their art from previous generations, in *sokher jatra* most of the performers were first-generation performers lured by the availability of easy money in the profession. Gopal Ure, the most well-known among the *sokher jatra* performers and whose troupe enacted most

of the Jorasanko performances, was born in Cuttack; he hawked stationery articles early in his youth after migrating to Calcutta, and learnt his acting skills there (Das Gupta, 2009: 130). In *sokher jatra*, plagued by the sheer scarcity of educated, well-groomed actors, the troupes would hire non-trained, illiterate people from working class backgrounds. Another notable addition in *sokher jatra* not mentioned in Jyotirindranath's account was the popular element of the *khemta* dance introduced by a person called Kashi Dhopa, washerman by caste, following the initiative of Gopal Ude. The notable absence of *khemta* in Jyotirindranath's account, as well as the preoccupation with the demonic, might lead us to speculate that the particular *jatra* performance at Jorasanko was refraining from its usual efforts at sexual titillation, taking into consideration its young audience.

Sexual titillation formed a key element of *sokher jatra* performances and it is one of the reasons for a critical reaction to it. From the middle of the 19th century we can identify in the dailies and magazines brought out by the civil society in Calcutta, an attitude of growing disdain towards *sokher jatra*, which was often described as "obscene" and "degenerate". Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, for instance, wrote in an article published in the 19th century daily *Bangadarshan*:

In the *jatras* of modern time we notice a reigning influence of Vidya, Malini and Sundara. What kind of lessons can the young girls of the village receive when they hear such songs from the lips of Vidya?

Now, find out some means to get my man

Who has kindled the fire of lust in me

But he himself is indifferent.

When will that auspicious day arrive?

When will the moon rise

And pour forth nectar

To save the life of this *chataki* [a bird known for its thirst for water]?

Does not a father feel ashamed to hear such things with his son and daughter? What will they think of their parents when they grow old? (*Bangadarshan*, 5 March, 1876)

Even considering the snobbery towards indigeneity in general and puritan prudishness of the newly educated *bhadralok* elites, as evident in Bankim Chandra's words, it cannot be denied that *sokher jatra* strived to become an unpretentiously crass and popular entertainment. One can, however, read the expression of a deeper concern in Bankim's words regarding the fact that the Krishna *jatra* which used to be a form of entertainment for audiences across the ages and classes, could no longer be the case with *sokher jatra*. More importantly, it could no longer be contained within the sphere of domesticity. The Jorasanko experiment, however, would reveal that contrary to what Bankim would allege, *sokher jatra* at times, aware of its performative circumstances, tried to adapt itself to domesticated spaces, shedding its more sexual overtones.

Baiji Natch

At Jorasanko, however, *jatra* had already lost ground to *baiji natch* by the middle of the 19th century, as we learn from Jyotirindranath's account. A significant event in the cultural development of Calcutta was the coming of Wajid Ali Shah (1822-1887), the Nawab of Avadh, with his huge troupe, consisting of dancers, singers, and cooks, after being ousted by the British from Lucknow, and settling at Metiaburuj, Calcutta, in 1856. This event would leave a permanent influence on the cultural developments of the city.² One of the numerous mansions owned by the Tagore family across the city was given for hire to the courtesans by Dwakarnath Tagore, and which continued till the time of Debendranath. Thus *ghazals*, *thumris* and *kathaks* would henceforth become a regular presence at elite houses and would substitute *jatra* performances in many instances. Musical trainers would be employed to teach the young boys of the house, as, for instance Jyotirindranath, who himself was trained in Hindustani classical music as well as his sitar. Another major area of influence that the newly arrived Muslim population exercised on the performative culture of the city concerned the sartorial tastes of Bengali elite families as is evident from the *zari chapkan* (gold embroidered coats) of the *jatra* players mentioned in the aforementioned quote.

A more important change with the coming of the *baijis* at Thakurbari was the shifting of the site of performance from the open air courtyard to the *andar mahal* or inner quarters also called the *boithak khana* where the audience was segregated on the basis of age,

² See Sripantha's *Metiaburuzer Nawab* (1978) for more details regarding the cultural impact of the coming of Wajid Ali Shah.

class and gender. The children, women and people from outside who were allowed to see the *jatra* were prohibited from seeing these *baiji* performances. The *baiji* performances too, one suspects, were stopped in the 1860s only on moral grounds, with the increasing Brahmo atmosphere in the household, paving the way for more legitimate forms of theatre. However, the point is that the new spatial and spectatorial protocols which began with *baiji natch* continued to be practised when theatre would be introduced at Thakurbari. We learn, for instance, how the child Rabindranath or Abanindranath would hear the rehearsals and peek through the windows but would not be allowed to see the rehearsals or the performance in person. Even the women of the house were initially not allowed to be present.

Jorasanko Theatre's shared origins

Apart from considerations of spatial and spectatorial dimensions, the Jorasanko theatre did not forsake *jatra* altogether. Rather, the first Jorasanko theatre enthusiasts, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Gunendranath Tagore and Saradaprasad Gangopadhyay, would confess of being inspired by both *jatra* and European theatre practice. Jyotirindranath would write to Gunendranath in a letter, reflecting on the beginning of Jorasanko theatre, “The origin of the Jorasanko Theatre, now almost lost in antiquity... was in Gopal Ooriah’s *jatra*...” (Bandyopadhyay, 2013: 59). While this would bear testimony to *jatra* being an inspiration and role model behind the establishment of the Jorasanko theatre in his memoirs *Jibansmriti*, Jyotirindranath would reflect on the other half of the inspiration:

One day we [Jyotirindranath, Gaganendrnath, Samarendranath and Abanindranath] had a discussion regarding the fact that there does not exist, any “Extravaganza-Natya” (The European form of Extravaganza play) among us. I immediately took the responsibility of putting together an extravaganza. I composed an *Adbhut-Natya* (absurd-play) by collecting and putting together randomly a few funny poems from old issues of *Sangbad Prabhakar*, setting them to tune and then started rehearsing enthusiastically in the *baithak khana*. (Jyotirindranath, 1931:24)

Thus, *jatra* and the European mode of proscenium became the dual models of inspiration for the Thakurbari theatre. Both however had their differing functions to perform: If European theatre was the ideal that needed to be emulated to produce an Indian counterpart, *jatra* was the only workable model available for the Thakurbari theatre enthusiasts in a number of aspects of the theatrical production.

It is important to note here that the terms *jatra*, *pala*, theatre, play, *majlish*, *baithak* might denote distinct connotations or performance forms to us, but in the early and mid-19th century discourse around performance in Calcutta, these terms were often interchangeable categories. The term *natak* too was often used as an umbrella term to denote any of these genres. For instance, in order to present an account of the earliest attempt to write and produce a performance at Thakurbari by Debendranath's brother Girindranath, Satyendranath, the elder brother of Rabindranath, wrote:

Mejokaka (Girindranath) wrote a *natak* once which was also enacted...I cannot say how successful the enactment was. We were not allowed a seat at the *majlish* [as Satyendranath was still only a boy], we could only peep through and catch a glimpse or two of the enactment. (Satyendranath, 1915: 134)

One can easily note how Satyendranath's use of the term *natak* and *majlish* is interchangeable. Such fluidity between terms would be further revealed by the added information that Girindranath actually wrote a *jatra*, as we learn from Jyotirindranath's memoirs. Thus, we understand that these forms, terms and concepts were still in a state of flux in terms of their usage in these times.

The term *natak* is presumably adapted from the Sanskrit term *nataka* which denotes a specific kind of a play or *rupaka* among the ten different *rupakas* delineated in the *Natyasastra*.³ It became the Bengali counterpart for the both the terms "play" and "theatre". Both the dramatic text and the theatrical production addressed by the same term also meant that these terms were inseparably connected. The dramatic text was the pre-requisite for any production and the production could only be that of a dramatic text. An alternative term to denote a theatrical production or performance was *abhinay* derived from the Sanskrit term *abhinaya* used also in the *Natyasastra*; it literally meaning "acting". At Jorasanko, as is evident from Jyotirndranath's words, theatre entered the Bengali vocabulary first as a dramatic text or play. The fact was quite obvious considering that it was not theatrical production but the dramatic text which was the primary aspect of the European theatre most

³ *Nataka* is one of the ten kinds of plays listed in the *Natyasastra*. The *Natyasastra* edition translated into English and annotated by Adya Rangacharya (1984) defines *nataka* as "That which has its theme a well-known story, a well-known hero of exalted nature, which concerns the story of a royal sage and his family, in which there are superhuman (*divya*) elements, which speaks of the various aspects of glory, grandeur and success of love-affairs and which has acts and prologues is a *Nataka*" (148).

readily available for emulation by the Bengali *bhadralok* elites. Those taught at the Hindu College got acquainted closely with the classics of English literature and Shakespeare was a vital component of the syllabus. With the establishment of the printing press in the late 18th century and a subsequent proliferation of magazines of all sorts, literature flourished in 19th century Calcutta. A majority of the new writers tried to recreate British literary genres and conventions in Bengali. Novels and plays became two of the most favoured European genres. The writers familiarised themselves with the latest trends in the European cultural scene which is seen happening in Jyotirindranath's fascination with the extravaganza, one of the most popular 19th century British dramatic genres.

The use of the term "extravaganza" by Jyotirindranath signals the Thakurbari's intent of devising a grand spectacle under the alibi of theatre. We shall see that the principal objective of early Thakurbari theatre enthusiasts led by Jyotirindranath was to construct a visual spectacle which mirrors reality in its closest detail. A second point is that extravaganza being a musical genre attracted Jyotirindranath's attention because of his own keen interest in music. *Jatra* was a musical form and in the early performances at Jorashnako music played an important role.

Theatre and Jatiya Sanskriti

Jyotirindranath's fascination for the extravaganza might appear a bit odd as well if seen in an entirely different context. A prime ideological objective behind Jyotirindranath's or the Thakurbari's interest in devising a theatre was in contributing to the larger cultural project of forging a "*jatiya sanskriti*" or national culture which emerged in late 19th century Bengal. To understand the very paradox of how Jyotirindranath's desire to emulate the British extravaganza fits within the schema of the contemporary educated intelligentsia's desire to give expression to a *jatiya sanskriti*, for which one would necessarily have to engage with the political contexts of 19th century cultural developments in Calcutta.

Reflecting on the cultural politics of the first half of the 19th century, historian Amiya P. Sen makes the important point that,

In the first half of the century, particularly in Bengal, patriotism was not grossly inconsistent with an undisguised support for the continuation of British rule. Bengali writers of the period made repeated references to how the British had 'rescued' India from many centuries of 'tyrannical' and 'un-progressive' Muslim rule. (Sen, 2000: 2)

However, by the middle of the 19th century, the tables had turned dramatically. The Bengali *bhadralok* elite had begun changing its tune from an unabashed adulation of the British to a circumspect hailing of the *deshomata* (motherland). Interestingly, the seeds of this precipitous turn-around were latent in the very Orientalist project propagated by the British and other European educators. It was the research of the European scholars associated with the newly found institutions like Fort William College and The Asiatic Society which helped considerably to unearth several obscure ancient Indian texts and traditions thereby creating a new sense of awareness and pride amongst the educated class regarding the cultural heritage of the country. However, as Partha Chatterjee explains in his work *Nation and its Fragments* (1993), it was impossible for the elites to assert such a nationalist identity for the fear of being censored by the Empire. Therefore, they channelized their nationalist sentiments into the field of cultural practice and the domain of domesticity both of which were yet relatively free from British influence. A quest for a *Jatiya Sanskriti* (an Indian or national culture) became the focus of 19th century cultural practice of the Calcutta intelligentsia.

A key obstacle in the way of envisioning a national culture had to do with the English elites born and brought up in Calcutta and educated in English culture and customs who had little acquaintance with regional cultures. Also, as popular culture critic Sumanta Banerjee in *The Parlour and the Streets* rightly points out, the indigenous cultural practices like *jatra*, *swang*, *kobi gan*, *akhrari*, *kirtan*, *panchali* and others, which had been imported to the city in the beginning of 19th century, underwent a drastic change, by shedding their overtly religious character to incorporate sexual elements in abundance. They embraced an earthy Bengali language rich in colloquial slang to suit the mind-set of the general populace and the uneducated rich. The growing sexualisation of the forms and their inability to adapt to more serious and responsible modes of secular culture meant that they began to be chastised regularly by the educated elites on both of these fronts. They lost the respectability required to be considered within the purview of artistic discourse. Therefore, the only models which became available to the nationalists for emulation were also models alien to them, though in different degrees: the British cultural practices of the proscenium theatre and the Oriental legacy of the retrieved ancient Indian texts. Thus the cultural practice of the late 19th century began and developed through an attempt to emulate and re-create these two utopias resulting in a gradual erasure of the indigenous forms of cultural practices. However, in theatre practice, it can be argued that the erasure was definitely delayed and *jatra* still managed to exert considerable influence on theatre till late into the 19th century. The practice of theatre

that developed at Jorasanko too was quite consciously a part of the project of *jatiya sanskriti* and shared its goals.

Naba Natak: First Major Production at the Jorasanko Theatre

Commissioning the play

We learn from Jyotirindranath's memoirs that that the first couple of theatre productions to happen at the Thakurbari were organised by the enthusiastic youths of the family and were promptly dismissed by the elders of the household as amateurish and fashionable experiments. Both the productions staged in 1865 were based on Michael Madhusudan Dutt's plays, *Krishna Kumari* and *Ekei ki Bole Sabhyata*. However, such a dismissive attitude towards theatre was to change fast at the Thakurbari, as the Bengali *bhadralok* elites of Calcutta had already discovered by then a serious social purpose for theatre - *lok sikha* or the education and reform of the masses. Led by the example of Ram Mohan Roy, most of the newly educated elites of the early 19th century Calcutta had joined the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reformist sect established by Ram Mohun in 1828 and later revived by Debendranath Tagore in 1848. The apparent disjunction with the beliefs of conservative Hindu society, resulting from being trained in the English Orientalist education system, enabled Brahmos to reflect and criticise certain prevalent tyrannical socio-religious practices, especially those involving women. Notorious practices like *satidaha pratha*, *bahubibaha pratha*, *kulin pratha*, *balya bibaha pratha* were singled out. Such criticism, however, found favour with the Empire too, as they began to outlaw such practices, thereby demonstrating the need to assert their hegemony by justifying their civilizational mission. *The Bengal Sati Resolution* was passed in 1829 and *Widow Remarriage Act* in 1856. Under such circumstances, the reformists discovered in theatre, a new tool for facilitating their mission. Theatre seemed to them a medium through which public consciousness and opinion could be generated in support of such reform. Throughout the 19th century, one would witness theatre being subjected to the cause of social reform in Calcutta.⁴

⁴ See Ghulam Murshid's *Hindu Samaj Sanskar Andolon O Bangla Natak- 1854-1874* (1983) for a detailed account of theatre and social reform in 19th century Bengal.

Owing to this development, at Jorasanko too, theatre began to be taken seriously. As a first step forward the need was felt to enrich the canon of dramatic literature, which in turn could be performed. Thus, an advertisement was printed in the *Indian Daily News* on 22 June 1965, announcing prize money to be earned for a play written on the subject of *bohu bibaha* or polygamy. Responding to this call, the Thakurbari enthusiasts were able to rope in playwright Ramanarayan Tarkaratna (1822-1886) who was commissioned for the task of writing the play. Ramanarayan, an expert in Sanskrit and teacher at the Sanskrit college, Calcutta, was already well known as a playwright for his play *Kulinkul Sarbasya* (1854) which incidentally was a play on the same theme. The Jorasanko residents obviously wanted to entrust the task of playwriting to experts in the field and thus re-advertised in *Indian Mirror* on 15^h July 1965 withholding the invitation:

ADVERTISEMENTS

The following Prizes are offered by the committee of the Jorashnko Theatre for the best dramatic productions on the following subject:-

No. 1.-Rs.200.

The Hindoo Females.- Their Condition and Helplessness.

To be handed over the Committee of before the 1st of June (sic) 1866.

Adjudicators,-(sic) Babu Peary Chand Mitra.

Professor Krishna Comul Bhattacharya, B.A.

Pandit Dwarka Nauth Bidyabhoosun.

No. 2-Rs.100

The Village Zamindars.

Period-Before the 1st of February, 1866.

Adjudicators,-Pundit Eshwar Chunder Bidyasagar,

Pundit Dwarka Nath Bidyabhoosun.

Babu Raj Krishna Bannerjee.

The dramas are to be written in Bengali, and must be dedicated to the Jorasanko Theatre.

The subject on polygamy which was advertised in the Indian Daily News of the 22nd instant is, after due consideration, withheld from public competition, as the committee has been able to secure the services of Pundit Ram Narayan Tarkaratna for the task. The following gentleman have kindly taken upon themselves the task of examining the same:-

Pundit Eshwar Chandra Bidyasagar.

Baboo Raj Krishna Banerjee. (*Indian Mirror*, 15 July, 1965)

Ramnarayan finished writing the play *Naba Natak* (spelled *Nobo Natock* during its time of publication) within a year and on 6 May 1966 a public felicitation ceremony was organised at the Jorasanko Thakurbari to commemorate the occasion and officially honour him. At the ceremony presided over by writer Peary Chand Mitra (1814-1883), also known as Tekchand Thakur, Ramnarayan read out the whole play in front of the gathering. This can be regarded as the first instance in the history of Jorasanko theatre of a public reading of a play. This, however, was not the last such event. Later, Rabindranath would make it customary to read his new plays to a gathering of family, friends and acquaintances at Jorasanko. These readings, as we shall examine later, reveal themselves as not merely readings, but rather, as the testimonies of those who listened to these readings prove, they need to be regarded as solo performances in their own right.

The subject of *Naba Natak* was a critique of the contemporary despicable social practice of polygamy where old men took young girls as wives. In the play, one finds that the issue is argued in a rather oblique and inadequate manner where the pregnant first wife of an old *zamindar* Gabesh babu is tortured and killed by his young second wife. The point allegedly being made is that a sexually dissatisfied young woman can pose a menace to the family. Gabesh Babu himself is portrayed as a benign gentleman suffering because of the single mistake he committed of marrying a young girl. The girl, on the other hand, is portrayed as innately evil; her own agony or the perils of being married as a young girl to an old man are hardly addressed in the play, making it rather patriarchal in its treatment of polygamy.

Keeping in accordance with the cultural hybridity characteristic of the period, Ramnarayan too, in *Naba Natak* drew on both Sanskrit and European traditions for the play's

dramatic structure. Commenting on the play, Jyotirindranath aptly points out its shared lineage:

Pandit Ramnarayan did not know English, wrote plays abiding by *desi* principles. He can be claimed as being the first *jatiya natyakar* [national playwright] from Bengal ... It was not that Ramnarayan's *Naba Natak* was completely independent of foreign influences. We do not have the instance of any tragic play in our Sanskrit dramatic literature. Keeping in mind the preference of the English educated audience, he scripted the first tragic play ever written in Bengali. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 34)

Ramnarayan was not charting new territory in writing *Naba Natak*. He already had in front of him the exemplars of Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), who provided models for dramaturgy dealing with social and political themes. While Mitra had already scripted the legendary *Nil Darpan* (1858-59) by then, Dutt had in fact finished writing all his plays. Ram Narayan mostly followed their lead in his play, while also at times creating new conventions. Much like Dutt's and Mitra's plays, *Naba Natak* also had a tragic format, as indicated by Jyotirindranath. However, on the other hand, *Naba Natak* was the first Bengali play to have an act divided into multiple scenes following European conventions. Unlike Mitra and more in tandem with Dutt, Ram Narayan's play was primarily written in prose interspersed with songs. Ram Narayan's earlier play *Kulin Kul Sarbashya* incidentally included major portions in verse. Such an early shift from verse to prose on behalf of Ramnarayan can be taken as a pointer of how Bengali theatre would evolve in the future. It is important to note that in spite of following the European models of playwriting Ramnarayan included as a sort of an acknowledgement to the tradition of Sanskrit playwriting, a *Nandi*⁵ and a *Prastavana*⁶ at the start of the play. When one keeps the contemporary project of "*jatiya sanskriti*" in mind and also the investment in the Hindu past following the European anthropologists, one can speculate that Ramnarayan perhaps felt

⁵ *Nandi* is listed in the *Natyasastra* under the *Purvaranga* which are a set of actions to be performed at the beginning of a performance. Adya Rangacharya's explains that *Nandi* is called so "because by invoking the blessings of gods, Brahmins and kings, these later three are propitiated" (44).

⁶ *Prastavana*, also known as *Amukha* is listed in the *Natyasastra* under the *vritti*-s. Adya Rangacharya's edition defines *Prastavana* as "that part in the beginning where the *nati* (female associate of *sutradhara*) and *vidusaka* (jester) or *pariparsvaka* (actor-friend) carry on a dialogue with the *sutradhara* regarding some relevant topic, using interesting words or any type of *Vithi* style or in some other manner" (170).

obliged to include such traditional trappings or thought it fashionable to do so. Interestingly, it would become a tradition to include prologues to plays at Jorasanko and Tagore himself will often be found to add prologues to his plays.

Spatial dynamics

The first production of *Naba Natak* at the Jorasanko Thakurbari was on 5 January 1867. By this time, theatre was already being taken seriously at Jorasanko. Therefore, the responsibility of organising the production could no longer be entrusted to the young enthusiasts. Significantly, the elder members of the family took charge. Indeed, a lot of what can be said about the materiality of the *Naba Natak* production hovers around the transition happening from the *jatra* to the theatre and the resulting overlaps between these two modes of performance. Perhaps the most significant alterations to happen in the transition from *jatra* to theatre were spatial and spectatorial in nature. The open space and the motley crowd of the *jatra* audience gave way to an indoor affair inside the *baithak khana* (parlour), in front of a select audience. It is important to reiterate here that *baiji natch* and not theatre was the first performance in Jorasanko to happen in the *baithak khana*. *Baiji natch* was organised indoors presumably because there was a class prerogative attached to it, due to certain formal requirements as well considerations relating to the sexually charged nature of the performance. In theatre too, all of these concerns remained intact though possibly in differing degrees; like *baiji natch*, theatre too had a class prerogative and contained sexual elements considered only fit for viewing by male adults. However, with the passage of time, the more intimate relationship between the audience and performers ingrained in the spatial and performative dynamics of *jatra* gave way to a more formal distance between the stage and the audience in theatre. It is in this new spatial-spectatorial configuration, that the influence of European proscenium theatre is also most evident in the staging. A wooden stage was set up in the large hall on the first floor of the Thakurbari. The audience would be limited and invited, educated elites with more refined tastes. The invited would consist of the *crème-de-la-creme* of Calcutta civil society including British officials. We learn from Indiradevi's memoir *Smritisamput* (2001) that children and even women of the house would not be allowed for such performances but only had the option to peep from behind the ventilators of the hall.

Regarding the production of *Naba Natak*, we hear from Jyotirindranath about the extravaganza that was constructed on the stage for the occasion of the performance:

The scenes hanging in the backdrop of the stage were drawn by the most skilled *patuas* in Calcutta. The stage was decorated as exquisitely as possible. We tried our best to make the stage appear as *bastab* (realistic) as possible. The forest-scene was bedecked with herbs and creepers of varied kind, glow-worms still alive and contained in a jar were released every time the scene was in play to provide a real-like feeling (it was Debendranath who having a passion for gardening would do it himself). It looked exactly like a real forest. Quite a number of people were engaged that day by the Thakurbari to collect glow-worms and were paid two annas for each of the worms. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 37-38)

One of the things that strike us in the above description is of course an attempt to create a distinctly different visual aesthetics than what was customary at the colonial theatres or in *jatra*. The use of creepers and real glow-worms reveal the intention of the Thakurbari residents to create an indigenous aesthetic signature of its own - a trait which would remain throughout the theatre practice at Thakurbari and Santiniketan. The creation of such an indigenous aesthetics of course fed into the project of *jatiya sanskriti*. However, if one chooses to look critically at this aesthetic transformation, the central dramaturgical principle of the Thakurbari theatre enthusiasts led by Jyotirindranath for the *Naba Natak* production still appears to play into the appeal of visual spectacle much like *jatra*, or theatre produced at other elite houses or colonial theatres. Though we find Jyotirindranath emphasizing the meticulous attempt to mirror the real in its minutest detail, paradoxically the very exaggeration of it would mean playing into the audiences' expectations as a grand contrivance. However, the overt aim of this visual experimentation an Indian, and more refined alternative to the various existing models of theatrical spectacle.

Inquiring more into the spectacle devised for *Naba Natak* production at Jorasanko, the drop scene appears to be of its key attractions. The painted drop scene was a direct import from the European proscenium theatre where drop scenes were the norm, unlike in *jatra* where the open-air staging does not permit props. We learn from Jyotirindranath's account that the drop-scenes for *Naba Natak* were painted by the best of the local *patuas*. Interestingly, drop-scenes at the contemporary colonial theatre houses were generally imported or in some exceptional cases painted by British artists visiting India. Thakurbari's induction of the *patuas* to draw drop scenes means first a practical inability to import screens as well as a confirmation of the ideological project of indigenisation.

But what did the drop-scenes for the production depict? Jyotirindranath would describe with pride, how one of the drop-scenes depicted Bhim Singh's "Jagmandir" lake palace of Rajasthan which was in complete spatio-temporal disjunction with the play being performed. The fact that the drop scenes had an aesthetic value and presence of their own and did not require to be related to the play being performed also adds to the logic of the spectacle. What is more important to notice here, however, is the topology of Oriental fantasy represented by the drop-scene. The British fetishization of the ancient Hindu India had reached the Tagores via Orientalist scholarship. The Tagores, however, were drawing on



Figure 1 Swarna Kumari Devi from an early performance at Jorasanko

these Orientalist tropes to formulate a glorious Indian, Hindu past to serve their own ideological goals. The *nat* and *nati* bedecked in jewellery, chosen especially for the occasion from the Thakurbari collections, would also bear testimony to such appropriations. While we do not have any photograph from the production apart from a standing group photograph of the orchestra, a profile photograph of Swarnakumari Devi in costume for a later play would present us with a fair idea as to the embellishments of the costumes. It is curious to note that the English guests present at the performance would probably

still read this spectacle as simply one of Oriental fantasy and not as one of furthering the Hindu nationalist cause. However, such spatial and aesthetic prerogatives would continue to be projected at Jorasanko theatre only to be challenged much later by Rabindranath at Santiniketan.

Acting

What was the style or method of acting which the *Naba Natak* actors followed? It can be safely said that no method of theatre acting was available to the Jorasanko theatre enthusiasts and neither were there any models they could emulate. While it was easier for the Thakurbari

theatre enthusiasts to create an indigenous alternative to the visual splendour of the European model of proscenium theatre, acting proved much trickier to replicate. From the existing archival fragments, the underlying intent appears to be to create an apparent departure from the *jatra* style of acting. The project seems to be to salvage acting from the mindless shouting and extravagant gesticulating of the *jatra* in order to create a more subdued, refined and, more importantly, a “realistic” mode of acting. However, practically, it was easier said than done. The actors were themselves mostly amateurs and more used to *jatra* than theatre; inevitably, they often fell back on the excesses of acting, especially at moments which presented the slightest of opportunities for introducing sensation and melodrama. The phenomenon of cross-dressing as well in *Naba Natak*, as we shall see, at times would be thought to have jeopardized the ideal of the ‘real’ as far as acting was concerned.

Regarding the actors and the rehearsal process, we find some basic information in Jyotirindranath’s memoirs. The group of actors who came together at Jorasanko Thakurbari for the production of *Naba Natak* consisted primarily of members of the Thakurbari family, their in-laws, relatives and acquaintances. However, from his account we also learn that the large number of characters in the play demanded additional actors. Thus, some people from outside the Thakurbari - educated and mostly working as clerks in government and private offices around Calcutta, came to see the rehearsal initially and later joined the production as actors. We also learn that they had to pass a test of skills conducted by the senior members of the Tagore household, which, one would presume consisted mostly in terms of their appearance and delivery of lines, as there were still no benchmarks as to assess “good acting”. The actors, we come to know, began to rehearse only with play reading-sessions, and gradually moved on to practising gestures and actions. They rehearsed for as long as six months before the first performance was announced. Among the actors, it was only Krishnabihari Sen, well known Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen’s brother and Akshaykumar Majumdar who had prior experience of acting in a performance of *Bidhaba Bibaha* written by Umesh Chandra Mitter and performed at the Metropolitan Theatre of the Mullicks at Chitpur in 1859. Krishnabihari was thus entrusted with the responsibility of directing and training the actors for the production.

Krishnabihari had earlier acted in the role of a scholar in a performance of *Bidhaba Bibaha*. Thus, acknowledging the little experience he had in these matters, we looked up to him as an expert. He became our actor-trainer. (Jyotirindranath, 1931:99)

Incidentally, Krishnabihari's elder brother Keshab was the actor-trainer in the *Bidhaba Bibaha* production. We do not find any details, however, regarding how Krishnabihari or even Keshab in the earlier production for that matter, trained the actors.

Though it was at Jorasanko theatre where women from respectable families would act on the stage regularly for the first time in the history of Bengali theatre, this paradigm had not yet been set in the late 19th century. Thus, *Naba Natak* predictably had an all-male cast with the roles of women performed by men, which again was a common practice at the time for *jatra* performances. Despite the prevalent practice of cross-dressing, one comes to know from Jyotirindranath's memoirs that on the day of the performance itself, the actors who were playing female characters began fainting at the fear of facing the audience. Initially hesitant, they gradually grew in confidence once they were on the stage. It was only Akshay Chandra Choudhury, who would later become famous as a comic actor, who failed to make himself appear on the stage dressed in female attire. There might have been an apparently noticeable stiffness in some of the actors who were impersonating women for the first time on stage. *Someprakash* magazine published the following report on 28 January 1857:

...[I]f the techniques of acting that we witnessed at Jorasanko are practiced everywhere then we will surely find a pure and innocent form of entertainment. ... Costumes and make-up were generally good and it was only Sabitri (Sarda Prasad Gangopadhyay) who did not look feminine enough- more like a *hijra*. Even his way of speaking left much to be desired. The last portion with Subodh was dissatisfying. Who can tolerate weeping at a stretch for thirty minutes? A youth who can leave his home because of a petty family dispute must not cry like a woman... (*Someprakash*, 28 January 1867)

While the report praises the performers in general, it also points out that in certain cases the cross-dressing was not plausible enough because of the appearance of the actor as well as his vocal acting. More interestingly, if the reviewer thought some of the woman characters were un-woman-like, he also found the male character of Subodh pointlessly feminine because of his over-melodramatic acting. Thus, the *Naba Natak* performance can be said to have inadvertently explored degrees of gender in-betweenness. The very element of cross-dressing made gender appear in contemporary *jatra* and consequently in early Bengali theatre including Jorasanko, in its visual and performative manifestations, less stable and more fluid. At Jorasanko, however, such fluidity was enhanced by the amateurishness of the actors on the one hand and a melodramatic style of acting on the other. What we also notice in the above review is how acting is being judged on the basis of the verisimilitude it creates and how both

cross-dressing and melodrama are seen to jeopardise it. This appears to be one of the reasons why Thakurbari theatre enthusiasts would think of introducing the women of the household into theatre thereby making cross-dressing unnecessary.

In fact, the question of cross-dressing and the introduction of women actors in theatre became one of the major issues of debate in late 19th century Bengali theatre and society was closely related to the contemporary ideal of realism in theatre. The first instance of women acting for the public in a performance in Bengal, dates back to the 1835 performance of *Bidyasundar* at Nabinchandra Basu's place in Shyambazar. A contemporary detailed report of the performance published in an English fortnightly *Hindu Pioneer* praised the initiative of including women actors and urged all theatrical endeavours to follow its lead in this matter. The report also flayed the contemporary conservative Hindu society in no uncertain terms for not allowing its women access to education and freedom to express themselves publicly or participate in theatre (Bandyopadhyay, 2013: 24-26). Neither the performance, nor the review, however, could possibly inflict a change of heart in the contemporary Bengali Hindu society which preferred its women domesticated, staying inside the *andarmahal* (inner quarters of the house). Even Jorasanko with its progressive views in social matters did not allow women to participate in their early theatrical ventures. However, by the second half of the century, the practice of cross-dressing in theatre was placed yet again under scrutiny. A group of public theatre practitioners led by Girish Chandra and on the advice of Michael Madhusudan Dutt in 1873 employed prostitute women as actors at the Bengal Theatre, to do away with the practice of cross-dressing which they thought was a mismatch with the realistic aesthetics of theatre they espoused. An essay titled "Madhyasthe" written by Manomohan Basu, published in the same year, criticising the introduction of prostitutes upon the Bengali theatre stage bears testimony to such views of contemporary theatre practitioners:

In theatres abroad women characters are played by women themselves. In Bengal, bearded, hefty men disguised as women try to speak in thin, feminine notes through their coarse voices. Can this appear bearable to this community of great social reformers? It seemed urgent for them to immediately reform such practices. What form of reform other than bringing in real women to play the women characters? They claimed that 'acting (*abhinay*) must reflect the natural/real (*swabhaber pratirup*), and it is unnatural to make men represent women on the stage. Therefore 'bring forth women'... (Basu, Quoted in Bandyopadhyay, 2013: 150)

Such views might have been shared by the Jorasanko theatre enthusiasts too when they introduced the women of the household into theatre in the early 1880s. Interestingly, Tagore himself, in the post-Jorasanko phase, had no reservations about cross-dressing, as we shall later find out. He would clearly state in his only essay on theatre “Rangamancha” (1902):

It is time to discard the imported and unsophisticated fallacy that one needs to be able to show a whole painted garden in order to mean one, or, for that matter, woman characters would have to be obligatorily played by real women (Tagore, ed. Ray, 1996: 443)

Obviously, Tagore did not subscribe to the ideal of realism, neither in acting, nor in terms of theatre in general. We will deliberate at a later point on the ideal of realism being promoted regarding acting in the contemporary discourse around theatre.

Coming back to cross-dressing, not all the actors in *Naba Natak* failed in their cross-dressing efforts. In fact, Amritalal Basu, who would later become identified by the sobriquet *rasaraj* (the master of mirth) for his fine comic acting skills, seems to have played his role better than the other actors. Inspired by his acting in the role of the first wife Chandra Lekha, Jyotirindranath wrote a parodic verse in appreciation-

Mone pore sei din, natak 'heroine'

Sammukhe ayna dhori

Gabesh korite bondi patichen nana phondi

Pan khey thont lal kori

Mori, mori, mori”. (Bandyopadhyay, 1999: 131)

(I remember the day when the heroine of the play sat in front of her mirror, her lips red with chewing *pan*, scheming to win Gabesh’s heart)

We come to know from Abanindranath’s memoirs that Jyotirindranath had also taken part in cross-dressing by playing the role of *nati*. The figures of the *nat and nati* were imports from the Sanskrit drama tradition where they would jointly present a prologue at the beginning of the performance. Ramnarayan, however, was not the first to include these figures in his plays. Attempts at playwriting preceding *Naba Natak*, including Ramnarayan’s earlier play and Michel Madhusudan Dutt’s first play *Sharmistha* (1858) had featured the *nat*

and *nati*. However, we hear about Jyotirindranath's costume and his perfect impersonation of a woman as *nati* from Krishna Das Pal's comment in the editorial column of *Hindu Patriot*:

The play opened with the usual appearance of *nat* and *nati* with a customary prologue. Both were clad beautifully and the *nati* in particular presented a very graceful figure. Her attitude, gestures and notions were as delicate as they were becoming, though her singing, we must confess, was not up to the mark. (*Hindu Patriot*, 28 January 1867)

Though Jyotirindranath's appearance and bearing are praised in the review, he receives criticism for his singing. We will discuss the element of singing a little later in the section when we address the musical arrangements for the production.

Regarding the general style or method of acting, as I have already mentioned, realism appears to be the central principle regarding acting. upheld and promoted during the time. Rendering the action as realistically as possible or creating an illusion of reality was considered the ultimate objective of the actors. To take an instance from the context of the *Naba Natak* production, Abanindranath's humorous anecdote proves to be revealing:

The role of the central male protagonist was done by Akshay Chandra Mazumdar who played Gabeshbabu as a Kulin Brahmin who marries multiple women in the play. I had heard interesting stories regarding the production from him. One time, he said, *Naba Natak* is being performed; so, there is quite a buzz in the city. One day as I was taking a stroll, an old man got hold of me and kept urging me for a pass. He said that he had heard a lot about theatre but never had the opportunity to see one. With much difficulty, I managed to arrange a ticket for the old man. He came to watch the show but I did not hear from him after that. Then, another day as I was walking while smoking my *hookah*, I met him coming back from his daily dip in the river. I asked him if he had enjoyed the theatre performance. He started yelling at me saying, 'Go away, I don't want to see your face again. Get lost, you sinner, it is my evil fortune that I had to see your face, this early in the morning.' He went on abusing me, and finally, when I, overcoming my sense of shock at such sudden and severe allegations, managed to calm him a little, he blurted, 'Sinner! You murdered your wife, you shall not even be granted a place in hell.' He was speaking of the performance... he was still so engrossed in the illusion of theatre that he could not distinguish it from reality. (Abanindranath, 1941: 138)

While the quote itself bears witness to the magical quality that theatre as a new form elicited for its first-time viewers, the more important fact to note here is that Akshay Chandra Choudhury fondly remembered the incident above probably as an appreciation he received for his acting. The sole purpose of acting in that case appears to be creating an illusion of

reality. The added stress on realism must also be understood as a conscious shift away from the exaggerated acting and heightened melodrama of the *jatra*. There was obviously a deliberate attempt to tone down the loud registers and the flamboyant gesticulation in search of a more subdued aesthetics as Thakurbari evidently wanted to distinguish its theatre from the lowly entertainment of *jatra*.

At this point it is interesting to note as Sudipto Chatterjee points out in his work *The Colonial Staged*, that when one of the founding fathers of Bengali commercial theatre, Girish Chandra Ghosh, was planning to move into professional theatre, it is dramatic illusion that he identified as the central philosophy of theatre. In an essay written in 1875, written under the pseudonym “Shree Pu” in a contemporary Bengali periodical *Aryadarshan*, Ghosh wrote-

Making unnatural things natural and visible is the function of acting. A sort of illusion needs to be created, as if all that is being witnessed is really happening. The quality of the best kind of artificiality is that it cannot be told from the real. The illusion is broken if its artificiality becomes discernible. Take the illusion away and the magical spell is broken. Casting a spell on the audience with this magic is what we call dramatic illusion. (Quoted in Chatterjee, 2007: 126)

In another notable instance, actor and producer of the late 19th century Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi who was also very close to the Tagore family says this very early in his career:

Actors ought to behave in the way in which we converse easily with our friends and relatives, the way, according to our needs, we move our appendages, faces and heads, the way we roll our eyes. The audience will never be moved if they merely recite [their lines]. Abstractions always need to be made concrete. Raving and ranting deceitfully, and reciting in a drone to create feelings among the audience is quite ineffective in acting. True acting is about speaking and acting in a refined and naturalistic manner. (ibid: 135)

It is indeed intriguing to observe that not only at the Jorasanko theatre but consequently at the commercial theatre too which would take off around a decade later, realism would remain the key category in the understanding and practice of theatre, especially acting. One suspects that such concurrence is not merely coincidental but causative in nature too, when one gets to hear from Ardhendu Sekhar who had the chance to attend one of the performances of *Naba Natak* at Thakurbari that, “I had nothing left to hear or learn about acting after watching the performance (*Naba Natak*)” (Bandyopadhyay, 1999:131). Such a reading would also challenge the commonplace view that the Jorasanko theatre being a closeted affair did not

have any significant effect or influence on the contemporary public theatre. Even in the late 19th century Jorasanko theatre in many aspects remained the model which shaped the theatrical imagination of the stalwarts of Bengali public theatre like Girish Chandra or Ardhendu Sekhar.

However, such idolisation of realism did not necessarily get translated into practice and a major culprit, as we have already discussed, was melodrama. While the actors could not altogether forgo the love for creating sensation, it is equally true that the audience on its own part also cherished and demanded it. Melodrama or any genre for that matter, we must realise, needs to be located not within the performance but in a specific kind of pact forged between the performers and the audience. Such a pact at Jorasanko seeped at unseen levels from the *jatra* into the theatre. Both the performers and the audience alike would eagerly wait for strategically placed, emotionally charge moments for the dramatic illusion to implode and be substituted by melodrama.

Jyotirindranath, for instance, would bear testimony to the fact that Akshay Chandra Choudhury in the comic scenes, would often move into the realm of unsolicited slapstick to gratify the audience. He would improvise and invent dialogues spontaneously which were not in the script and not even in tandem with the logic or aesthetics of the script; indulging in exaggerated, absurd and even obscene gestures to generate laughter in the audience. It would not be any different with the tragic scenes as we learn from Jyotirindranath:

When Gabesh babu [the central protagonist of the play] dies in the end, Amala, Kamala, Chandrakala and many of his other wives present on the stage would begin wailing so loudly that even the people from the neighbouring houses would be horrified to listen to their howling. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 58)

Akshay Chandra Choudhury's candid response when asked by Jyotirindranath as to how he could manage to be so unabashed by this performance on stage would be enlightening for us here. Choudhury would respond saying, "I have a secret mantra, while acting on stage I consider all those in the audience as monkeys" (ibid). However, to shift the course of the discussion a little, it would be important also to note that both the tragic and the comic characters of the plays were performed by relatively more experienced actors who would be either be acquaintances or in-laws of the Tagore family. The Tagores themselves would feel more comfortable playing graceful and sombre characters demanding a less pronounced style of acting. Obviously, their class status resulted in certain on-stage inhibitions. The next

generation of Thakurbari actors, Rabindranath, Abanindranath, and Dinendranath, however, would not succumb to such inhibitions.

Songs and Musical Arrangements

Theatre historian and musicologist Debojit Bandyopadhyay in his work *Banglar Manchagiti (1795-1872)* (1999) presents a detailed historiography of the application of music and use of songs in 19th century Bengali theatre. Bandyopadhyay in the introduction to his work quotes Bertolt Brecht's reflections on the use of music or songs in theatre, made in the context of the performance of his play *Three Penny Opera*, to point out how music or songs in theatre need to be integrated within the action through various performative strategies:

[I]f we are to give successful musical interpretations of the songs, we must approach them from the dramatist's own point of view... the composer must visualize the action, circumstances and intentions of the singer... (Brecht, quoted in Bandyopadhyay, 1999: 27)

However, what we find Bandyopadhyay doing is presenting a collection of songs along with their dramatic context, as used in each of the plays performed during the period. In his work, we hardly find any attempt to provide us with indications of how these songs were actually being performed on stage. It has to be acknowledged that from the archival traces that remain, we cannot directly ascertain how exactly music was played or songs were performed in contemporary performances, or in the performance of *Naba Natak* in particular. However, keeping in mind the fact that music and songs would play a key role at both Jorasanko and Santiniketan, it would be crucial for us to try and form an idea as to how exactly the application of music or songs was being conceived in early Jorasanko theatre. How similar or different was it from the use of music and songs in *krishnajatra* or *sokher jatra* or the way Rabindranath would later conceive the use of music and songs in dramaturgy of his plays? Though there are no direct answers to these questions, I believe an analysis of the strategic positioning of songs in the contemporary dramatic texts can offer us with valuable clues.

If we observe carefully the positioning of the songs in *Naba Natak*, for instance, we find a conspicuous effort on behalf of the playwright to contextualise the act of singing a song within the action of the play in order to create an alibi for its presence and, in the process, also present the audience with a prior indication of the forthcoming song. To give an example, this is how the very first song of the play is introduced through the conversation of *nati* and *sutradhar* in the *prastavana*:

Sutradhar: ...Sing us a song love.

Nati: Why? If you want to perform a play, then do it as well. Why must I sing a song now?

Sutradhar: For the audience to be able to concentrate, it is necessary to sing a song first. See love, before dyeing a cloth, it is necessary to squeeze it.

Nati: All right then! Let me sing a song. (Sings a song in Sanskrit)

Sutradhar: A nice song indeed! Comprising of delightful *rag-raginis*, it also suits the play which is going to be performed. But-

Nati: But, what?

Sutradhar: Why did I say but? The song is in Sanskrit, so in case everybody present in the audience is not able to understand...

Nati: Hey! Don't say that. It means disrespect to the audience to assume that all of them do not know Sanskrit.... (Quoted in Debojit Bandyopadhyay, 1998: 157)

Thus we see how within the play itself, a discourse takes place around the event of singing a song. Not only is the song properly introduced but the formal requirement of singing a song at that particular moment in the performance is also explained and justified. It is pointed out that the song is present not merely because it is pleasurable to listen to, but more importantly, to provide a very specific performative function of preparing the audience's faculties for the utmost enjoyment of the action to happen, a function also characteristic of the larger concept of *prastavana*. Ramnarayan also anticipates the possibility of the song, which is in Sanskrit following conventions of Sanskrit drama, not being understood by some in the audience and thus includes an apologia of sorts.

In the case of the second song sung in the fourth act, which is sung within the action of the play unlike the earlier song which had a more formal air to it, we find *zamindar* Gabesh Babu's young wife Chandralekha requesting her neighbour Chapala to sing a song. Here too, we find the playwright trying to situate the act of singing within the action of the play itself:

Chandralekha: ...Then, let's hear a song. Sister, would you please sing one of Nidhu Babu's *tappas*.

Chapala: I prefer to sing my own songs rather than ones written by others. Let me sing one of them to you. (Sings)

Chandrakalah: Ah! A voice as melodious as flute, you must sing one more for me!

Chapala: Only if you have liked it.

Chandrakaha: I have indeed liked it, sister! (laughs). (ibid)

Thus we find a deliberate effort on behalf of Ramnarayan to situate the songs within the action in the play, in order to create a sort of elaborate context for it so that it does not seem out of place. But why does Ramnarayan take the trouble to devise such an elaborate framework to situate the songs? What are the underlying reasons for this phenomenon? The answer as we shall see, once again lies in the transition from *jatra* to theatre.

Songs were central to the form of *Krishna Jatra*, a trait which continued in *sokher jatra* too. In fact, one of the major criticisms that *jatra* was being subjected to in the middle of the 18th century concerned its over-dependence on songs. The tradition of *juri* which was introduced into *jatra* in the mid-19th century meant that four singers should be placed at four corners of the performance space to sing the songs which were incorporated into the lines spoken by the main actors. After every few lines spoken by the actors, the *juri* would burst into songs which continued for a considerable amount of time. A tradition developed in order to facilitate the performance of the actors who could not sing. However, as Sudipto Chatterjee argues in his work, though earlier songs sung by the *juri* had their own appeal and were generally appreciated, by the 1850s the tastes of the Calcutta elites newly introduced to theatre began changing. Introduced to the prosaic and dialogue-heavy mode of European theatre, the *juri* tradition began seeming excessively taxing and distracting. Thus the role that music and songs were to play in the new theatre was to be much reduced and considerably distinct in nature. Music and singing would no longer constitute the central aspects of the performance as in *jatra*. Though songs would retain their own appeal, they would also remain as a support to acting which would be at the centre of attention on the stage. As Amritalal Basu writes,

In our native *jatra*, songs are the main thing, which is why you ‘listen’ to a *jatra* play; but in theatre it is physical action, that is ‘acting’, which is why theatre is to be seen...[I]t is through its songs that Jatra expresses itself; cut the songs and everything remains untold. But theatre has cut songs to size, (because) acting is a natural characteristic of drama. (Quoted in Sudipto Chatterjee, 2007: 197)

At Jorasanko, music and songs were already a regular presence, even before the introduction of theatre. Jyotirindranath was trained in Hindustani classical, harmonium, sitar, piano and a number of other instruments. Jadu Bhatta, a legendary singer from the Bishnupur *gharana* of Hindustani classical music used to stay in the Tagore household around the time and teach music to the boys including Rabindranath. Jyotirindranath learnt sitar when he was in Mumbai at Satyendranath's place. Moreover, the coming of Wajid Ali Shah with his troupe, as I have already mentioned, imparted a major influence on the musical culture of Calcutta and at Jorasanko. New musical instruments like the harmonium and *tabla* were being introduced apart from new modes of singing like *thumri* and *ghazal*. Jorasanko, therefore, already had a vibrant musical culture even before theatre was introduced. Music and songs, therefore, though not always coming to the foreground to the extent that they would later develop in the production of *Balmiki Protibha*, still had to have considerable presence at the Jorasanko theatre.

But it is here once again that the crisis was felt. While it was easier to reduce the number of songs in plays (*Naba Natak* had only four of them) or do away with the *juri* and let the characters on stage sing the songs, the more difficult problem was to arrive at a new performative modality for the singing of the songs in theatre, or even how to write new kind of songs which would fit the theatrical mode. In *jatra* even when the actors sang songs, they would stop moving, stand or sit at one place, until the singing ended. In a performance heavily dominated by songs, this would be the norm and it was not considered unnatural. But surely, songs in theatre could not be performed the same way as in *jatra*. The natural dynamics of *jatra* with more songs and a few intermittent dialogues were radically altered to a dialogue-and-action-based theatre interspersed with a few songs, where following European models of tragedy, the unity of time and space was more rigidly marked. With these changed dynamics, singing not only did not remain the dominant performative mode but was required to be logically situated within the time and space of the action. Moreover, the criticism of *jatra* on grounds of being over-burdened by songs also meant that the playwright tried to justify the presence of each song in the play.

But, most importantly, an apologia was also necessary for the presence of the songs because in spite of the need to do so, new kinds of songs or new mode of performing them were yet to be invented. Dance was still out of bounds on moral grounds. Though now placed within the real time and space of the action, the act of singing still practically meant a disjunctive break in the action - a separate performance within the performance. The songs

could not suddenly shed their technical complexity and rigour of *raag, taal, loy* and get assimilated within a conversational mode. They still remained pieces meant to be primarily sung and to be listened to. Rabindranath later on would accept the challenge of adapting songs to theatre and throughout his career, starting with *Balmiki Protibha*, would be involved in relentless experimentation with the application of songs in his plays and in performances.

How was the quality of singing in the performance? The reviews are found to generally praise the singing. It was only some of the newspapers, which brought out negative reviews of Jyotirindranath's singing as *nati*, as we have already seen. Manmathanath Ghosh in his biography of Jyotirindranath, however, dismisses any such criticism alleging that they resulted from the audience's or the reviewer's own limitations:

We can say this much regarding the critic's [Krishna das Pal's] comment that at the time Jyotindranath acquired considerable fame as a singer in the Brahmo Samaj. Perhaps, because the song was in Sanskrit, common people failed to understand it. (Quoted in Debojit Bandyopadhyay, 1998: 159)

The reviewer Krishna Das Pal on his part, however, does not elaborate on his criticism of Jyotirindranath's singing, and thus it is not possible to ascertain on exactly what grounds he was making his criticism. We might wonder whether Jyotirndranath's attempt to impersonate a female voice while singing in the character of *nati* had something to do with it.

Regarding the musical arrangement of the play, we witness Jyotirindranath's intention to emulate the European theatrical idiom. He felt that an Indian counterpart to the European orchestra must be formed specially for the production of *Naba Natak*: "At that time there was hardly a quality concert in Calcutta...On the occasion of *Nobo Natock* a group was formed at our house" (Jyotirindranath, 1931:39). Jyotirindranath noticeably addresses "orchestra" as "concert" in his accounts, which once again highlights the fluidity of terminological categories in the contemporary discourse of performance. Though the idea of the orchestra was borrowed from the European theatrical convention, the list of instruments reveals a predictably hybrid collection from multiple sources. It consisted of a motley of instruments from the Bengali, North Indian and Western musical traditions:

The rehearsal continued relentlessly for six months- rehearsals for the actors during the day and for the concert consisting of varied musical instruments at night. I used to play harmonium. At that time there was hardly any concert worth mentioning in Calcutta. Perhaps the only one worth recalling was at Maharaja Jyotindromohon Thakur's place. On the occasion of *Naba*

Natak a new group was formed at Jorasanko (The instruments which consisted the orchestra were- Harmonium, two-three Violins, clarinet, piccolo, chello, *kartal*, *dhol*, *banya-tabla* and *mandira*). The conception of the concert had not yet been popularised. Adi Brahma Samaj's well-known member Bishnu Chandra Chakraborty used to set the *gath* (arrangement) for the concert. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 41)

Abanindranath in his memoirs proudly claims this as the very first time that the harmonium was used in a theatre production in India, a claim which cannot be verified on the basis of the existing documents. Dwijendranath Tagore was the first to use the imported instrument, but it was probably a pedal-pumped instrument that was cumbersome or possibly some variation of the reed organ. It was not until 1875 that Dwarkanath Ghose of the Dwarkin Company modified the imported harmony flute and developed the hand-held harmonium, which subsequently became an integral part of the Indian music scenario.⁷ However, we learn that in the first *Naba Natak* performance Jyotirindranath himself was in charge of playing the harmonium, though he could not have possibly done it alone as he was performing on the stage as well.

We learn from Jyotirindranath's accounts that the music of the concert consisted of a background score to the play. We do not get any hint as to how exactly the background score was composed to fit the play. What was the dramaturgical principle followed? Presumably, its function was much as in *jatra* to create a general mood for each scene depending on whether it was romantic, tragic, comic, heroic, or otherwise. However, one also suspects that the general tenor of the music would be toned down in relation to the loud music normally presented in a *jatra* performance. As a significant alteration from *jatra* where the musical troupe used to sit on one side of the performance space or in European opera where the orchestra is placed in the orchestra pit, we learn from Jyotirindranath's memoirs that the orchestra group sat in a separate room adjacent to the hall in which the performance was being staged. Though Jyotirindranath does not mention anything particular about the coordination between acting and music, it appears that the coordination took place through the only open door linking the two rooms.

Reception

⁷ See the essay "How Harmonium Accompaniment in Hindustani Music Is Changing the Scale System" (2015) by Kaushik Banerjee, Ranjan Sengupta, Anirban Patranabis, Dipak Ghosh for more information in this regard.

How was *Naba Natak* received by its audience? We have already come across some of the reviews but let me discuss here a few more here to shed light on what the production was seen to achieve in its day by its contemporaries. The following review of the performance was published in *The National Paper*:

JORASANKO THEATRE: On Saturday night last we had the pleasure of witnessing the Jorasanko Theatre, established at the family house of Baboo Ganendra Nauth Tagore, grandson of late Baboo Dwarakanath Tagore. The subject of the performance was the celebrated ‘nobo natak’ ...the acting on the stage, which was pronounced by all present on the occasion to be of the most superior order. To choose out one or two or more amateurs for especial commendation, would we fear, be doing gross injustice to the rest, each acquitted himself so creditably. Beginning with the graceful bow of the natee, the representation of every succeeding character, elicited loud shouts of applause from all sides and rendered the whole scene an object of peculiar amusement to the audience. The concert was excellent. It had no borrowed airs and was quite in keeping with national taste. (*The National Paper*, 9 January 1867)

What would strike one in this review which is generally appreciative though not detailed is the phrase “peculiar amusement”, which indeed evinces a degree of abruptness seen in context of the full content of the review. We do not get to know exactly why the performance seemed “peculiar”. The reviewer might possibly be indicating the distinct difference of the particular production from theatre happenings at other households. Secondly, we also note how the concert seemed to be “[in] keeping with the national taste”, feeding into the cultural ideological project of “*jatiyo sanskriti*”.

We come to know from the playwright Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s memoirs that the performance was in fact so successful that it had to be repeated on nine occasions at the Thakubari. We come to know from reports published in the contemporary daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* that the production was nothing like what was seen before in Calcutta and thus became quite a sensation.

Naba Natak, both the play and its performance, as the name would suggest, aspired to cause a radical departure and to pioneer trends in the contemporary field of theatre practice. It was befitting of the Jorasanko residents who enjoyed the status of being part of the contemporary cultural vanguard. Ostensibly, they wanted to create an Indianised version of the European form of theatre, but at the same time, they were also keen to distinguish themselves from what they believed to be the lowly form of *jatra*. On certain fronts,

especially in the aesthetic refinement of staging and the quality of acting, *Naba Natak* would indeed create new benchmarks. However, as we have seen, in yet many of its other aspects, its efforts would amount to anything but an odd mishmash of *jatra*, proscenium theatre and conventions borrowed from Sanskrit drama.

Naba Natak would officially introduce Thakurbari to one of its most favoured *sakhs*. Jyotirindranath would almost single-handedly ensure the consistent presence of theatre at the Jorasanko in the years to come, translating, adapting or even writing plays and producing them regularly. While the underlying dramaturgical and aesthetic principle of theatre practice would remain mostly unaltered till the Santiniketan phase, there would be ample experimentation at Jorasanko in terms of the genre of plays and their forms of staging. Swarnakumari Devi, younger sister of Jyotirindranath, would for instance write and produce plays like *Vasantotsav* (1879) or *Bibaha Utsav* (1884) which would anticipate the festive character and the celebration of seasons in plays written and performed at Santiniketan. Rabindranath himself in *Balmiki Protibha* would give birth to a new form which he termed *giti natya*. Rabindranath's career in theatre, however, would begin at the age of sixteen not as a playwright or a director but as an actor in the title role of Jyotirindranath's play *Alik Babu* (an adaptation of Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentleman*) performed under the title *Emon Kormo Ar Koribo Na* (1877). He would go on to play roles in a few more productions before starting to write plays himself, finally turning director for one of them- *Balmiki Protibha*.

Balmiki Protibha: A Career in Theatre Unfolds

The icon and the performer

As I have already mentioned, appraisals of Rabindranath's engagements with theatre often begin in earnest with *Balmiki Protibha* and perhaps not unjustifiably so. In the oeuvre of Tagore's theatre activity *Balmiki Protibha* indeed is a first in many senses of the term. *Balmiki Protibha*, a *giti natya* or a musical drama, penned in 1881 can be regarded as the first full-length play that Tagore scripted. It would be the first production at Jorasanko of a play written wholly by Rabindranath and also the first of his own in which he would act. It would also be the first play written completely in verse to be sung, a form henceforth called *giti natya* (musical drama) which Tagore would embrace in his Thakurbari days. It marks as well a beginning to his own experiments with music and songs in theatre. Last but not the least,

Balmiki Protibha was the first production where Rabindranath Tagore was entrusted with the task of directing a play at the Thakurbari. *Balmiki Protibha* was a play commissioned to be performed at the Biddajan Samagam, a collective of contemporary Calcutta intellectuals formed in 1875 through the initiative of the Tagores.



**Figure 2 Tagore as Balmiki standing (I)
in *Balmiki Protibha* performance at
Jorasanko, 1891**



**Figure 3 Tagore as Balmiki
sitting/reclining in *Balmiki Protibha*
performance at Jorasanko, 1891**

The play deals with the mythical story from the *Ramayana* of dacoit Ratnakar turning into the poet Balmiki. Tagore adapts the story and changes the details, adding a subplot, while retaining the central focus of the story through the transformation of the dacoit into a poet. It can be argued that the *Balmiki Protibha* performance at Jorasanko is remembered above all for Tagore's acting in the character of the central protagonist of the play, Balmiki. The moment when the quintessential Bengali poet, Rabindranath, appeared as the quintessential Indian poet Balmiki on stage, remains deeply etched in the Bengali cultural psyche. It emblemizes a grand inauguration of the 'poet-prophet' persona which Tagore will identify with and keep performing throughout his life, both on and outside the stage. Most of his plays post *Balmiki Protibha* will include characters fashioned after the persona of the poet-prophet, which Tagore would often perform himself.

Two of Rabindranath Tagore's photographs as Balmiki taken on the occasion of the performance of *Balmiki Protibha* at Jorasanko in 1891, would go on to become two of the most popular and iconic images of him, which circulated widely in the public domain. The photographs taken by Bourne and Shepherd, one of the oldest and most well-known photography companies in Calcutta, who were also the official photographers for the Thakurbari family, reveal a young Tagore bedecked in a long *kurta*, *dhoti*, a *kamarbandh* and a loose robe like a *jobba* with an ornate *nagra* on his feet. In the background we see the *Balmiki Protibha* set. The costume is experimental, as it often was with the Thakurbari household both in its everyday attire as well as in its performance culture. Rabindranath's costume in the photograph reveals elements borrowed from various cultural sources. More than all the details in the costume, however, what strikes the modern viewer of the two photographs are the very apparent ways in which they have worked in tandem to immortalize the icon of the poet-prophet. Tagore is captured in two distinctly different dispositions in them. In one them (Figure 2) we find Tagore standing with a haughty demeanour, the index finger of his right hand pointing downwards in the form of a command or directive, evoking the figure of a prophet caught amidst his clairvoyant augury. What perhaps would be crucial to the construction of the prophetic image is also Tagore's flowing hair and beard which instantly evokes a visual association with Christ. In the other version (Figure 3), we find him sitting and reclining, in a pensive and reflective mood, his eyes fixed in a daze, akin to the figure of the romantic poet. We see why both the images have worked together to entrench in the Bengali cultural psyche the icon of Tagore as the poet-prophet.

But can these photographs be counted as visual records of Tagore's acting in the *Balmiki Protibha* performance and analysed for the same purpose? Christopher Balme, in an essay on theatre iconography titled "Interpreting the Pictorial Record: Theatre iconography and the Referential" (1997) points out the problems that pictorial evidence presents to theatre historians. Often used simply as descriptive illustration, pictorial evidence is limited in its usefulness merely as a record of performance. Photographic evidence especially from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot always be trusted, since scenes from plays, for example, were often re-constructed in photographers' studios rather than being captured in the theatres where they were enacted. Tagore's photographic portraits as Balmiki therefore must not be seen as only representative of, or bearing witness to the theatrical performance of *Balmiki Protibha*. This is simply because at the time when these photographs were taken there were no technological provisions available for taking photographs during the

performance. Thus obviously these photographs were captured in a separate private sitting where the subject was performing exclusively for the camera or at best for the few other people present in the studio. Thus they must also be seen to represent a form of “photographic performance”, which as we know is shaped by its own technical requirements. Seen in the light of such photographic performance, it becomes important also to note that among the few moments selected and re-enacted from the theatrical performance, these moments too were not accidentally but knowingly chosen. Thus the poet-prophet icon was indeed being put forth quite consciously.

It requires to be noted here that though there exist a few photographs from performances at Jorasanko before *Balimiki Protibha*, *Balmiki Protibha* was the first which can claim a whole series of them. In fact it can be safely said that *Balmiki Protibha* bears the most extensive pictorial documentation among the Jorasanko or Santiniketan performances. What however surprises us is the complete absence of any discourse around the pictorial documentation of performance at Jorasanko or Santiniketan. Photography in those days was a time-consuming, expensive and elaborate process. Thus it is indeed surprising that there is no mention of the process of pictorial documentation in any of the biographies or memoirs.

Tagore’s act remains commemorated not only through the photographs but also in the words of those who were witness to the performance. The performance being organized by the Biddajan Samagam, many elite members of the Calcutta intelligentsia were present, who were left mesmerized by the performance. Gurudas Bandyopadhyay, Judge of the Calcutta High Court and Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, for instance, penned a song quoted below after witnessing the *Balmiki Protibha* performance at Jorasanko Thakurbari in 1891:

Awaken my Bengali mother land, sleep no more
And witness a new dawn shining on your ignorant abyss.
A new Rabi (sun) has awakened, revealing a new world
To show us again a new ‘Balimiki-Protibha’.

See it with your heart’s content and let your thirst for happiness be quenched,
The mind will be purged of its confusions, eternal peace shall be yours.

Thus enriched in your mind, you will forsake

The debris of wealth you seek day and night.

(Quoted in Chakraborty, 1995: 23)

The panegyric above bears testimony to the overwhelming impact of Tagore's play and its performance. We also notice the messianic quality which Bandyopadhyay ascribes to the event. Though written immediately after watching the performance, the panegyric would also happen to have its own history of performance. It would be sung in public for the first time, thirty years later, on 28 January 1912 at the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad on the occasion of Tagore's 50th birthday being celebrated. Significantly, the 1912 function at the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad was the first instance where Tagore was publicly felicitated in Calcutta. It could be identified as the event which marked conclusively the recognition of Tagore as the premier poet of Bengal by contemporary Bengali civil society luminaries. The fact that the song was the first thing in the itinerary for the evening is revealing. It affirms the significance of *Balmiki Protibha* in Tagore's theatrical oeuvre and more importantly in the construction of his public persona.

But what constituted Tagore's much eulogized performance as Balmiki? While Tagore as Balmiki would be entrenched in the cultural memory of his contemporaries and generations to come, we will get to know very little in spite of the existence of a good number of reviews and accounts, as to how exactly Tagore had approached his role for the performance. It would be pertinent to discuss here, briefly, in the course of discussing Tagore the actor, his early interest in acting - a passion and an innate quality he seems to have possessed and cherished all his life. Tagore in his *Jibansmriti* confesses his desire for acting even as a child:

From my childhood itself I had *sokh* for acting. I was confident that I had an innate ability in this craft. It has been proved that my hunch was not wrong after all. (Tagore, 2004: 53)

We also learn from his reminiscences that long before he debuted on the Jorasanko stage as a child in the character of Alik Babu in *Emon Kormo ar Korbo Na*, he along with some of his friends from the *Kustir Akhda* (wrestling group) tried to organize a production of a play titled *Mukta Kuntala* (one with free flowing hair) by Harish Chandra Haldar. Tagore was left particularly fascinated by a dramatic moment in the play where the protagonist Ranadurdharsh Singh, King Puru's brother, takes leave from his lover Mukta Kuntala to proceed for a war against King Alexander; Mukta Kuntala asks him to either die a heroic

death or come back victorious with the crown of Alexander in his hands and marry her. He accepted to act the role of Mukta Kuntala. The play, however, could not be staged, Tagore recalls, due to the intervention of the elders in the household. He mentions elsewhere how he himself was responsible to a great extent for the production not happening. In a dress rehearsal of the play, he collected some vermilion from Kadambari Debi, Jyotirindranath's young wife, to apply to his own forehead in order to give his character more authenticity. But there were unpleasant consequences:

When I applied the vermilion on the parting of my hair nothing had occurred to me. When I went to school I forgot to wash it away. The boys at school mocked me. For the coming few days I could not afford to show my face at school. (Chakraborty, 1995: 14)

However, moving beyond these early encounters, Tagore had already acted in a couple of plays before *Balmiki Protibha*. Though it appears from Jyotirindranath's portrait of Tagore as Alik Babu in *Emon Kormo Ar Koribo Na*, that his performance in the production left a lasting impression, it did not receive much attention because it was restricted entirely to the family. Archival resources also do not give us much information regarding the productions. *Balmiki Protibha*, however, was the first performance where Tagore's acting skills were placed on display in front of a larger public. The first performance of the play was arranged on the roof top of the outhouse at Jorasanko on 26 February 1881. The Who's Who of contemporary Calcutta was present for the occasion, notably, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Peary Mohan Mitra, T.N. Palit and other luminaries. The second performance of the play in 1886 at Thakurbari was a ticketed show and therefore might be accurately attributed as the first public appearance of Tagore, considering the fact that 1881 performance was only open to invitees. The performance was organized to generate funds for the Adi Brahma Samaj. The third production of *Balmiki Protibha* at Jorasanko in 1891 was perhaps the grandest of all events, performed in honour of the then Viceroy Lansdowne and his wife, who were special guests at Thakurbari for the evening. Other Calcutta elites were also present for the occasion. Owing to these three productions, we get a number of accounts bearing witness to Tagore's acting in *Balmiki Protibha*.

But as I have already mentioned, the fact that we get a number of accounts bearing witness to Tagore's acting in the play does not fully illuminate our understanding of his acting. Rather, in the accounts, we encounter a marked absence of any real engagement with the corporeal dimensions of his acting. In fact, throughout Tagore's theatrical archive,

whenever we will critics bearing witness to Tagore's acting on stage, we will inevitably find them so enamored by Tagore's personality and presence that any evaluation of Tagore interpretation of the character under consideration will remain inconsequential and systematically unaddressed. In the case of *Balmiki Protibha*, for instance, Haricharan Bandyopadhyay who would go on to write the first detailed Bengali Thesaurus was present at the performance. This is what he has to say:

I found a huge courtyard inside brimming with people sitting in rows with not an inch of space left to be occupied... the performance began. First, the dance of the *Bonodebis* (forest nymphs)



Figure 4 Tagore as Andha Baul in the *Phalguni* performance at Santiniketan, 1916

and then the entry of the dacoit troop. I was witnessing all this, but all the while thinking about the poet - when will I get to see him in the attire of Balmiki, when will I get to hear songs in his melodious voice. I was eagerly awaiting his presence - then I saw the poet enter dressed as Balmiki, the leader of the dacoit troop-wearing a long *jobba*, with a conch shell around his neck - for the purpose of calling his troops. The poet attractive as he was, in the glowing prime of his youth, wearing a dignified attire which enhanced his presence- basking in the stage lights- his beauty was exponentially magnified. The audience was left awestruck and speechless to witness the poet dressed as Balmiki looking picture-perfect. Then we got to hear a song in the poet's melodious voice. The song ended but as Balmiki was turning back to go offstage, the audience began shouting, 'encore', 'encore'. It was not satisfying for anyone to have heard the songs once, they wanted a repeat. The poet, helpless, turned back and only after re-enacting the whole section again, was allowed to leave the stage. (Chakraborty, 1995: 59)

The quote clearly gives us a vivid picture of how the performance itself would often take the backseat with Tagore's appearance on stage. Playing any character whatsoever on stage would not be able to disguise Tagore's personality of the poet-prophet off-stage; this is

what the audience wanted to see and was duly gratified. Sita Devi, for instance, who was witness to many of the performances at Santiniketan has said, “Whatever character he might play I could never forget that he was Rabindranath. It was impossible for him to disguise himself, though he was a first rate actor” (quoted in Ghosh, 1969: 134). Pramathanath Bishi, student at Santiniketan and later well-known writer would say, “All characters would reveal themselves impressed by his own personality” (ibid). Rabindranath was indeed a star and people just could not get enough of him as we clearly see in the instance above where Tagore is asked to repeat a scene. Even the flow of the performance could easily be interrupted to accommodate the audience’s demand to see and hear him over and over again. But can this reaction of the audience be attributed to audience psychology alone or was Tagore complicit also in the creation of this phenomenon?

It can be argued that Tagore beginning with *Balmiki Protibha* designed his onstage characters as extensions of his off-stage persona of the poet-prophet. The poet-prophet-singer character which debuted in *Balmiki Protibha* would go on to become a major trope in his plays through the characters of Sannyasi in *Sarodotsav*, Thakurda in *Raja*, Andha Baul in *Phalguni*, Dhanajay Boiragi in *Prayeschitto* and *Muktadhara*, and others. In *Balmiki Protibha*, the character of Balmiki is integral to the play and situated within the action of the play. However, in the later plays, we will find the said characters being designed in such a way as to be able to comment on the action of the play embodying the ethical values of the play. When Tagore would play these characters on stage, he would dress almost as he would otherwise in a *jobba*, with only an additional piece of cloth tied around his waist or on the head. Tagore would even draw from the repertoire of visual signifiers associated with the prophet or seer in the public subconscious. If the *Balmiki Protibha* photograph reminds us of Christ, the Andha Baul of *Phalguni* is a more direct adaptation of the figure of the *baul*, a sect of itinerant singers in Bengal, whose songs are thought to have a prophetic quality about life and the cosmos. The photograph shows him holding on to an *ektara* (a one-stringed instrument), the signature instrument of the *bauls* and singing a song. He would adapt the figure of the *sannyasi* in *Sarodotsav*, playing with it but retaining the prophetic quality attached to the figure.

A peculiar mode of performing emerges when we realize how Tagore's everyday persona and his on-stage characters drew from each other, lending both credibility and legitimization to their symbiotic relationship. The borderline between the everyday and the staged, the real and the performed, the person and the persona, social behavior and acting, get blurred in a synergetic signification. The everyday performance of the poet-prophet persona is justified through theatre while acting on stage becomes real and seen as an extension of the everyday. But surely the poet-prophet persona drew from a repertoire of bodily performatives, which go beyond sartorial resemblances. From the reviews and witness accounts, we encounter a recurring element in the poet's attractive voice and ability to recite and sing. Very few modern poets could become first-rate reciters of their poems or singers of their songs, but Tagore was definitely one such reciter. Not only during performances but



Figure 5 Tagore as Balmiki, Standing 2 in *Balmiki Protibha* performance at Jorasanko, 1891

even in his innumerable lectures presented on various occasions in and outside Bengal, he invariably performed to packed houses owing to his beautiful voice and excellent recitative skills. On stage too, Tagore's recitation and singing hold special attraction for the audience as we have already seen. The voice thus would play a crucial role in the transformation from the poet-prophet offstage to the poet-prophet on stage.

Regarding the corporeal dimensions of Tagore's performance, we can only speculate in the absence of more specific archival markers as to how or whether Tagore approached his role physically. How did he succeed in embodying the transformation from the dacoit Ratnakar to the poet Balmiki in the performance? We do

not find any direct clues. The existing photographs, however, though not directly relating to the performances, can still be regarded as representing the larger repertoire of postures which constituted the poet-prophet's persona and thus could have been part of the performances as well. Interestingly, when analyzed under such a lens, we will find how the pictorial archive of

Tagore as actor has been performed rather selectively. Only those photographs have been chosen and circulated extensively, which have conformed to certain fixed societal modes of seeing or have furthered the poet-prophet icon in a specific manner. There are also photographs which have been put under systematic erasure. To take the instance of *Balmiki Protibha*, there exists at least one more version of the photograph of Tagore as Balmiki which has not received much attention compared to its other two counterparts. In this photograph we find Tagore standing with his hands clasped together. But what is striking in the photograph, is that instead of an assertive prophet or a lost romantic, we find here a Tagore in a more modest, reserved or even what one could describe as a taciturn disposition. We might wonder whether the photograph's reduced popularity is due to its non-conformity to standard modes of masculinity or the icon of the poet-prophet. Correspondingly, we might also wonder whether certain gestures or actions which constituted the young Tagore's everyday bearing or performance on stage as Balmiki would appear awkwardly feminine to contemporary, standardized social modes of viewing. Such suspicions will be reinforced by certain contemporary appraisals of Tagore's acting. For instance, actor Amritlal Basu says:

There is, in the masculine frame of Rabindranath, such a judicious mixture of the feminine, that the product almost approaches the Divine. He sighs, murmurs, wails, kneels, claps his hands, draws out without making effeminate the poetry of his presentation. (Basu, quoted in *Natya Akademi Patrika* 4, 1994: 93)

However, in the case of the *Balmiki Protibha* photographs, they could perhaps also be read to suggest that Tagore did try to act out the transformation from Ratnakar to Balmiki physically - the earlier standing photograph representing Ratnakar ordering his troops, the second one representing a transformed Balmiki.

The Form of Giti Natya and Directorial Interventions

The *giti natya* form of *Balmiki Protibha* has been the subject of much speculation and analysis. *Balmiki Protibha* was the first in a series of *giti natyas* like *Kal Mrigaya* (1882), *Mayar Khela* (1887) and *Chitrangada* (1892) that Tagore would write in his Jorasanko years. Written and performed entirely in the form of songs, the *giti natya* form has often been compared and contrasted with the European form of 'opera' or 'music drama'. Rabindrasangeet and Rabindranritya specialist, Santideb Ghosh, for instance, comments in one his treatises, "Wagner's Music Drama is quite similar to what Gurudev has called

“Sure Natika” (Ghosh, 2006: 27). Tagore himself, in his memoirs *Jibansmriti* discusses the form at considerable length and argues for its unique and distinctive identity from opera. Here we will perform a short investigation of the circumstances of the evolution of the *giti natya* form and its key characteristics in the context of *Balmiki Protibha*. We will at the same time also question the validity of the above claims.

Rabindranath began his writing career primarily as a poet and shifted to prose for his fictional writings only later in his career. While Tagore wrote poems since he was in school, his first novel *Bou Thakuranir Hat* was published in 1883 at the age of twenty-two, his first play in prose, *Nalini* was written and published in 1884. It appears that he felt more comfortable with the verse form since his early years. Seen in the light of this fact, it seems obvious for him to write his first play in a verse form. However, seen in the light of contemporary trends in theatre, his choice appears to be aberrant. As I have already indicated earlier, the playwrights of the period began favoring prose over verse. Even Jyotirindranath, who was Rabindranath’s inspiration and mentor in theatre, wrote plays in prose. Rabindranath’s first dramatic expressions in writing, however, took shape in verse, though a choice that was perhaps more impulsive than deliberate. What also must have influenced his decision was an early fascination for Shakespeare’s plays.

Tagore, to begin with wrote *natya kabyas* (dramatic poems) like *Bhagna Hriday* (1881) written in a fashion quite similar to Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues. In *Prokitir Protishod* (1881) we encounter the first impressions of the dramatic form in the introduction of multiple characters but still poetry dominates in the form of long poetic reflective monologues - a problem we encounter, though in lesser degree, in his later plays like *Raja O Rani* and *Bisarjan* as well. What prompted Tagore to write a play like *Balmiki Pratibha* not in verse but songs? The popular story of the writing of *Balmiki Protibha* is as remarkable as the production itself and it has been recorded in Tagore’s own words in his *Jibansmriti*. Rabindranath, we learn, had just returned from a trip to England in 1878, before writing *Balmiki Protibha* in 1881. Tagore as a youth used to have a collection of Irish melodies written by Thomas Moore. Young Rabindranath yearned to know the tunes to the lyrics by Moore but in vain. Finally, he got the chance to learn them when he visited London in 1878. Once he came back, Tagore was often requested to sing these songs and some other pieces that he had learnt at London to the members of the Thakurbari family. We also learn from Tagore’s *Jibansmriti* that his voice following his London visit had also adapted a strange foreign accent, perhaps from singing the melodies repeatedly, which

appeared funny to the Thakubari residents. *Balmiki Protibha* was written and composed under such an atmosphere charged with western music. We hear from Rabindranath that *Balmiki Protibha* tried to bring together indigenous and western forms of music:

Several of the *gan* of *Balmiki Protibha* were *baithak-gan-bhanga* [modifications of *baithaki* songs]; some of them were composed by my brother Jyotirindranath and a few were adapted from European sources... Two English *sur* served for the drinking songs of the band of robbers and an Irish melody was used for the lament of the wood nymphs. (Tagore, 2002: 116)

But the question remains: Was the intention in *Balmiki Protibha* simply to merge these two traditions of music? Tagore's own reflections on the way in which indigenous music was appropriated for *Balmiki Protibha*, I believe, would contradict such a reading and reveal a deeper underlying objective. We learn from Tagore that while the Irish and English tunes were used unchanged, the Indian tunes were modified in *Balmiki Protibha*:

From this mixed cultivation of foreign and native melodies was born *Balmiki Protibha*. The tunes in this musical drama are mostly Indian but they have been forced out of their classical conventions: that which soared in the sky has been made to run on Earth. Those who have seen and heard it performed will, I trust, bear witness that the harnessing of Indian melodic modes in the service of the drama has proved neither demeaning nor futile. This conjunction is the only special feature of *Balmiki Protibha*. The pleasing task of loosening the chains on melodic forms and making them adaptable to a variety of treatment completely engrossed me. (ibid)

We find how the indigenous tunes were forced out of their classical conventions to put them to the service of drama. This statement, I believe, leads us to a better understanding of the project that was *Balmiki Protibha*. I have discussed earlier in the context of *Naba Natak* how the indigenous songs with their technical rigidity could not be inserted into the dialogue-based, conversational structure of theatre, without disrupting its flow. *Balmiki Protibha* was an experimental attempt to free indigenous music from its technical conventions so that it can be appropriated to theatrical performance. Not only were indigenous tunes modified but indigenous tunes suitable for appropriation to theatre was also identified for the purpose, as we learn from Tagore:

The *sur* belonging to the *telena* segment of Indian music particularly lend themselves to dramatic purposes and has been frequently utilized in this work. (ibid)

Tagore in his reminiscences also presents a vivid description of the performative mode of experimentation through which the indigenous tunes were modified. The indigenous

tunes we learn were brought out of their strict classical conditioning by playing them on the piano:

At that time I used to compose various kinds of *sur* (tune) on the piano. Both Rabindranath and Akshay Chandra [a poet close to the Tagore family] used to sit beside me with their writing arrangements ready. As soon as a *sur* was composed, they would begin putting words to the *sur* intending to craft a full-fledged song out of it. Whenever I composed a new *sur*, I used to play it a few times for them. Akshay Chandra would smoke a cigar for a while listening intently to the *sur* being played. Then he would suddenly begin writing exclaiming “*hoyeche hoyeche*” (it’s done), placing his still-lit cigar upon any object in front of him. Rabi however would always be writing peacefully, seldom getting excited. Usually the norm is to write a *git* (song) first and then put it to *sur* but our process was the exact opposite. (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 38)

It is indeed fascinating to hear how the instrument of the piano became the mode through which the indigenous tunes were modified. More importantly, however, the relation between the western tunes and the indigenous ones in *Balmiki Protibha* is revealed to be not one of mutual co-existence but of the later striving to become like the former. The European tunes provided the model based on which the modification of the indigenous tunes were to be performed. Another insight that we receive from the above quote is that in *Balmiki Protibha* the tunes were created first and then words were put to them. This would vindicate the argument that *Balmiki Protibha*’s principal project related to the appropriation and merging of music into theatre. It is also why perhaps Rabindranath would term it alternately as a *sure natika* (a play in tune). He says in *Jibansmriti*:

Balmiki Protibha is not a *kavya grantha* (poetic text) which will lend itself to just being read, it is an experiment in *sangeet* (music). It cannot be enjoyed unless listened to in the state of being performed. It is not what Europeans call an opera but a *sure natika* (play in tune). That is to say *sangeet* has not been ascribed predominance in it... Much later I had composed another *giti natya* called *Mayar Khela* (the play of Maya) - its character being markedly different. In *Mayar Khela*, *git* was of primary importance and not *natya* (drama). While in *Balmiki Protibha* and *Kalmrigaya*, a series of dramatic situations were threaded with *gan*; in *Mayar Khela* a garland of *gan* was threaded by the thinnest of dramatic plots. The play of *bhab* (feeling/emotion) and not *ghatanasrot* (series of actions) was *Mayar Khela*’s central feature. (117)

Tagore makes it clear that in *Balmiki Protibha* it is the dramatic situations which are central and music has been adapted to suit their meaning and tone. Tagore also makes an important categorical distinction by distinguishing *Balmiki Protibha* from his play *Mayar*

Khela where he believes songs are the primary element and not tunes like the former. Furthermore, Tagore differentiates between songs *git/gan* and tunes or *sur* - songs being entities conventionally well structured and complete in themselves while tunes are more free-flowing and thus can be played with. More importantly, tunes when freed from their structured usage in songs become more easily appropriated by speech. The whole point of *Balmiki Protibha* thus was to free contemporary indigenous music from its conventional song-based structure to generate tunes which could be better appropriated to the dialogue-based conversational mode of theatre. The objective was to open up a passage linking music and the dialogic mode of theatre which could then result in a synthesis between the two. Interestingly, Tagore also mentions in *Jibansmriti* that around the time he was influenced by Herbert Spencer's essay on music which argued that music is nothing but everyday speech, albeit in an emotionally heightened mode. It appears that this formed the principle on which Tagore had based his experiments in *Balmiki Pratibha* to forge together theatre and music. We will discuss Tagore's ideas on theatrical music in greater detail in the next chapter.

Coming back to Tagore's distinction between *gan* and *sur*, it seems a misnomer therefore to call *Balmiki Protibha* a *giti natya*, clubbing it together with *Kal Mrigaya*, *Chitrangada*, *Chandalika* or *Mayar Khela*. However, Tagore himself, in his writings, has used the term *giti natya* to *Balmiki Protibha* as well. This once again indicates the terminological fluidity in contemporary discourses and arguably a trait in Tagore's writings too. *Sure natika* does seem a more appropriate category to denote *Balmiki Protibha*. Tagore's objection to calling *Balmiki Protibha* an opera also hinges on this fact. Opera as a form, consisting of a series of musical compositions, complete in themselves and woven together by a plot, appears to Tagore more similar to *Mayar Khela* than *Balmiki Protibha*. One would have to acknowledge that there are similarities between the form of *Balmiki Protibha* and that of opera or Wagnerian music drama or even *Mayar Khela*, all being composed of similar elements- theatre and music. However, speaking in terms of the specificities of the form and the conventions and equations between theatre and music that are manifested in them, the forms still retain their unique characteristics. The differences between the forms are subtle and often not fundamental but rather a matter of degree.

We however are still left with an important question to answer: Did the experimental musical play *Balmiki Protibha* demand an equally experimental dramaturgy? Did the mishmash of realism and melodrama continue or was there an attempt to devise a new form of dramaturgy to do justice to a new kind of play which tried to merge theatre and

music? The reviews and accounts do not present any direct answer to these questions but there are interesting clues underlying what has been said. It can be argued that *Balmiki Protibha* was a radical experiment not only in playwriting and the application of music in theatre; it was in the context of Tagore's time marked as a radical performative departure. *Balmiki Protibha* is the first recorded instance of dance making an appearance in the history of Jorasanko theatre. Dance in 19th century Calcutta was seen as morally degrading entertainment and something which the *bhadralok* could not possibly take part in. We learn from the reviews and witness accounts that *Balmiki Protibha* consisted of at least one dance of the forest nymphs in the introductory scene and a few instances of dance by the dacoit group. While we do not get to know how exactly these dances were choreographed or what kind of movements they consisted of, we learn from the memoirs of those participated that the movements were simple and quite basic rhythmic ones. From Indira Devi's account of a *Kalmrigaya* performance in 1882 at Jorasanko by the women of the house, we learn:

How I have made girls laugh by telling the story that of how in *Kalmrigaya*, I and Ushadidi, dressed as the forest nymphs, while the song "*Somukhete bohiche totini*" (the river is flowing in front) was being sung, sat at one place and through the flowing movements of our right hand showed how the river flows and marked "*duti tara akashe futiya*" (two stars appear in the sky) by pointing our two fingers towards the sky (Choudhurani, 2001: 57).

In another instance of a *Mayar Khela* performance at Jorasanko, we learn from Indira Devi's account that Tagore taught her how to play her character by "dancing beautifully" himself (ibid). Was dance being seen as a theatrical solution to the performance of songs? Was *Balmiki Protibha* an experiment then in creating a new mode of performative expression which merges acting and dance or something in-between? The answers can only remain speculative. However, Tagore would continue to experiment with music and dance in his theatrical engagements. We will discuss them in more detail in the next chapter as we encounter his experiments in Santiniketan.

Chapter II

In Search of a New Language of Theatre at Santiniketan

Introduction

In the previous chapter I have discussed the introduction of theatre at Jorasanko Thakurbari, its evolution into a practice, as well as Tagore's celebrated entry into the Calcutta theatre scene with *Blamiki Protibha*. A young Rabindranath was incorporated into the Jorasanko theatre quite early in his teens and two decades later he was at its forefront. In this chapter, we will move ahead in time to the beginning of the 20th century, when Tagore would establish a school at Santiniketan, which was to be the site of his future theatrical endeavours. The focus will be on discussing Tagore's engagement with theatre at Santiniketan. As in the previous chapter, I will not try to present here a detailed historiography. Rather, I will direct my analysis towards an articulation of the explorations of a new language of theatre at Santiniketan by identifying its underlying principles and affects in terms of its aesthetics and reception.

In terms of the archival problems that it presents, the period from 1897 to 1908 seems unique in the history of Tagore's association with theatre. In spite of the compulsive playwright that Tagore was, he did not write a single new play in this decade; he did write a short comic skit called *Bashikaran* in 1901, but no full length play. It is only in 1908, that he wrote the play *Sarodotsav*, to be performed by the students and teachers at Santiniketan. It adds to the uniqueness of the period that he wrote his one sustained reflection on theatre – an essay titled *Rangamancha*. Interestingly, it is not only in regard to theatre but in relation to other aspects of Tagore's life and work as well that this period is considered significant. Arguably, this was the decade when he associated himself, most unreservedly with the institutional mode of politics. He emerged as a leading voice for the *Banga Bhangra Andolon* (Bengal Partition Movement, 1905), spiritedly organized *sobhajatras* (processions) and lectured compulsively on matters relating to *Swadeshi*.¹ However, while Tagore wrote numerous songs, essays and novels in this period both furthering the cause of and analysing

¹ See Sumit Sarkar's *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal- 1903-1908* (1973) for more details on the Swadeshi movement and Tagore's association with it.

Swadeshikota, he did not write any plays. By the end of this period he had been left disillusioned by the communal and elitist nature of contemporary Hindu nationalist politics and shifted his base from Calcutta to Santiniketan. I believe it is crucial to read the essay *Ranganmancha*, the decade long hiatus from playwriting, and the text and performance of his play *Sarodotsav* which ended it, as symptomatic of a radical turn in Tagore's ideas regarding theatre, its aesthetics and politics.

What prompted this radical turn in Tagore's ideas regarding theatre? What were his reservations against the form of theatre that was being practiced at Jorasanko? Why did Tagore, a prolific writer, a practising playwright, actor and director throughout his life, write so little, critically, on theatre? Why did he write his only sustained critical reflection on theatre at a time when he was unable to write or produce plays? Was he able to conceive a new language of theatre with *Sarodotsav*, the play which broke the hiatus? If yes, then what characterised this new language of theatre and how was it different from the theatre practice at Jorasanko? It is with the intention to find answers to these questions that, in this chapter, I would direct my analysis first on the period of a decade long hiatus (1897–1908) and the essay *Ranganmancha*, and secondly, on the play *Sarodotsav* and its production at Santiniketan. While my analysis will begin by focusing on the play *Sarodotsav* and its performance which will also be its primary subject, it will, however, spill over temporally to refer to the larger repertoire of Tagore's later plays and their productions at Santiniketan in order to lay bare the continuity and development of their ideas.

While existing reflections, on Tagore's engagements with theatre have rightly identified Tagore's search for a new language or model, the intentionality behind this search has been often ascribed simply to the desire for conceiving an "Indian" theatre as opposed to the western proscenium form. Abhijit Sen, for instance, argues in his essay "Rabindranath Tagore: In Search of 'New' Model for the Bengali Theatre":

Through these events (activities related to Swadeshi), as well as writings, Rabindranath was 'imagining' a new India. Alongside, he was also 'imagining' a new kind of theatre, which would be significantly different from the colonial mimicry then practiced on the public stage. (Sen, 2012: 100)

While acknowledging Tagore's reservations about western realistic models and his advocacy of indigenous forms, I would argue that Tagore did not desire in his textual and dramaturgical experiments at Santiniketan beginning with *Sarodotsav* to give shape to any form of "Indian

theatre”. Not only would Tagore never mention the phrase “Indian theatre” in his writings but in fact what would constitute his experiments at Santiniketan would challenge contemporary understanding of “Indian-ness”. Rather, as we shall see, Tagore would be challenged by political and aesthetic concerns much more complex in nature.

Rangamancha: The Lacuna of a Treatise and the Enigma of the Hiatus

Rangamancha was by no means the first piece of critical reflection on theatre in the Bengali or the Indian context. From the middle of the 19th century we find critical pieces on *jatra* and theatre being published sporadically in various existing Bengali magazines and dailies. In Bengal, not only critics, but a theatre practitioner like Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) was found to write critically on theatre often by the late 1860s, both anonymously and in his own name. Jyotirindranath had already published his first couple of essays on and *jatra* in 1882 in the journal *Bharati*. In the pan-Indian context, we find Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-1885) for instance writing on theatre since the early 1870s. Thus Tagore’s essay seen in the context of his times was not groundbreaking. But, seen in the context of his oeuvre, it indeed appears striking. Throughout his life, we find Tagore having written generously on almost every other field of art he associated with, including literature, music and even painting, which he only began exploring as a sextagenarian. Most of these writings, although not always theoretically consistent, are critical in nature deliberating on the aesthetics, ethics, and politics of diverse forms. About theatre, however, which he associated with all his life, Tagore is found to have written almost nothing critically except this one essay in the midst of his career at the only phase in his life when he was practically not doing any theatre. In fact, in 1881, Tagore had written a one-page tract titled *Abhinay* which is technically speaking, his first essay on theatre. But, for practical purposes, the tract is just a very short poetic reflection on Shakespeare’s well known words from the play *As You Like It*- “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players”. It does not reveal any critical insight on acting or theatre in general; thus, effectively making *Rangamancha* his only existing critical reflection on theatre.

One can only speculate today as to the reasons behind Tagore’s strange silence on theatre. However, at a practical level, it poses the archival challenge to anyone trying to understand the evolution of Tagore’s ideas on theatre and performance from the clues embedded in the play texts and the archive of their productions. Only through this process

then does it become possible to grasp how Tagore conceptualised the philosophy and practice of theatre. This appears to be the only option although the fact remains that *Rangamancha* has been somewhat overused as the master key to decoding Tagore's ideas regarding the theatrical form.

The title of the essay *Rangamancha* which is not a long critical reflection but only a short three-page tract displaying the characteristics of a pamphlet, translates literally as the 'The Theatre Stage'. Indeed in the essay Tagore's central concern seems related to the aesthetics of the theatre stage. He argues strongly against the use of backdrops or sets in theatre which he thinks are an import from the European traditions and an unnecessary luxury, detrimental to the real purpose of theatre:

If the audience is not spellbound by childishness of an imported variety, and if the actor sincerely believes in himself and in *kavya*, then it will be the task becoming of a *sahridaya* (honourable) Hindustan to free and honour *abhinaya* by purging it of its expensive excesses. (Tagore, Ed. Ray, 1996: 278)

What strikes us here, among other things is the phrase "*sahridaya* Hindustan". We will discuss it shortly but for the moment let us focus on the essay's primary objective. Tagore, in the essay, criticises European theatre of being obsessed with the idea of the "real" unlike an Indian form like *jatra* which he believes thrives on the "*parasporik biswas*" (mutual belief) and imagination of the actors and the audience. Tagore believes that the realistic backdrops or set, create an unnecessary obstruction to the audience's imagination and interrupt their appreciation of the "*drishyakavya*" or dramatic work being performed. It also hinders the communication between the actor and the audience by creating distraction. He believes that the audience can easily imagine the background in relation to the action and does not need it to be physically present. He calls attention to a form like *jatra* where no backdrops or sets are used and the audience has no problem in relating to the action which is enacted. Thus realistic sets or backdrops appear to him as childish devices of make-believe. What troubles Tagore is also the fact that the elaborate realistic sets or backdrop are expensive, therefore ill-suited to a country like India with limited resources.

It is perhaps evident that when Tagore is critical of backdrops or sets, what he really has in mind are the grand realistic arrangements at Jorasanko and perhaps also at the public and the colonial theatres in Calcutta. As I have already discussed, the central dramaturgical principle which was followed at the Jorasanko was of creating a spectacle matching the

colonial theatres. The backdrops or the sets constructed were often showpieces in themselves and constructed with a complete disregard for the plays being performed. Under the logic of the spectacle, the actors, who are supposed to be the most fundamental element of any form of performance, were expendable, susceptible to being overshadowed by the background. Thus, Tagore is right to point out in the context of his times that the actor is the primary subject of any theatre and the over-doing of the spectacle distracts attention away from his performance.

From a larger perspective, bearing a poetic imagination and an aesthetic sensibility uncharacteristically modern for his times, realism of the European Victorian variety or a colonial mimicry of it never appealed to Tagore as an aesthetic principle. He saw it as a limitation imposed on the creative and imaginative faculties of the artist as well as his audience. Thus, it is necessary to read his rejection of stage décor in the essay as a reaction to contemporary spectacular realistic aesthetics. Consequently, we will find later in Santiniketan, new forms of minimalistic stage décor introduced by the likes of Nandalal, Suren Kar and Ramkinkar getting Tagore's approval. Also revealing in the essay is Tagore's counter posing of the *jatra* to theatre. Though introduced to European culture early, unlike many of his contemporaries, he does not exhibit an unqualified fetish for them and was also surprisingly free from the prejudice towards indigenous culture or performance forms like *jatra*, common to his generation and class of theatre enthusiasts. Throughout his career in theatre, Tagore would be seen to draw freely from various indigenous musical and performance forms.

Now, coming back to the mentioning of '*sahriday Hindustan*', in the light of such terminological usage, a pertinent question which might be posed is whether Tagore was trying to formulate or promote any notion of "Indian theatre" through it. At the very outset it should be stated that the contemporary Hindu nationalist drive formed the background of Tagore's essay. Not only in the essay itself, but the Hindu nationalist context is found to be inscribed in the history of the essay's publication as well. The essay was published in *Bangadarshan*, a Bengali literary magazine, founded initially by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1872, and resuscitated in 1901 under the editorship of Rabindranath. The magazine had a defining influence on the emergence of a Hindu, *bhadralok*, Bengali identity and the genesis of Hindu nationalism in Bengal.

In the essay too, Tagore is often found to draw from Bharata's *Natyasastra*. He begins his essay by citing from the *Natyasastra* in support of his argument that, "There is description of a theatre stage in Bharata's *Natyasastra*. I do not find any mention of a backdrop there. I do not believe it was a shortcoming to not have one" (277). Tagore also borrows term like *drishya-kavya* from the *Natyasastra* which he uses to denote a dramatic text. Tagore, in the essay, compares a *drishya-kavya* with *shrabya-kavya*, asserting that the fulfilment of a *drishya-kavya* is in its enactment. We find that, though a litterateur, Tagore was not looking at his plays as dramatic works to be just read but rather texts to be enacted. Therefore, Tagore was notably also subscribing to the popular understanding in dramatic theatre discourses of performance as a fulfilment of the text. However, coming back to the question of nationalism, Tagore's criticism of European theatre in the essay as well as his promoting of indigenous forms like *jatra* over it, might also be read as expressions of nationalistic sentiment.

However, while in the essay we find Tagore drawing from the repertoire of contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse on theatre and also feeding into it, his engagement with it also needs to be seen as markedly distinct from other contemporary expressions of nationalist sentiment in theatre. The case of Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-1885) would be an apt instance to provide here. Vasudha Dalmia in her essay on Bharatendu Harishchandra's theatrical endeavours titled "The National drama of the Hindus" in her work *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006), discusses an essay by Harishchandra himself titled "*Natak*" written in 1883 to illustrate how Harishchandra intended to legitimise contemporary Hindu drama by forging links with the existing canon of ancient Sanskrit literature on drama. The modalities of such a forging would entail translating from and adopting Sanskrit terms relating to theatre aesthetics. In Bharatendu's essay "*Natak*", one of his primary intentions remains to draw a genealogy of national/Indian drama from Sanskrit plays to the present day. Additionally, "*Hindi Natak*", on the basis of that genealogy, also delegitimizes certain contemporary indigenous modes of theatre practice like the *bhand*, *tamasha* or *yatra*, which are categorized and demeaned as "*bhrasta*" or corrupt. In Bengal, too, there was precedence of such terminological appropriation and canonisation even before Tagore. Sudipto Chatterjee for instance, in *The Colonial Staged* discusses a work titled *Bharatiya Natya Rahasya* or *A Treatise on Hindu Theatre* by Sourindramohan Thakur, a *babu*-musicologist with various Indian and international affiliations, published in 1878. Chatterjee emphasizes that, "The express intention of Thakur in the treatise is to reclaim the mythic origins of

Sanskrit theatre as legitimate history, thereby creating an absurd manifesto for a Sanskritic-Bengali theatre” (Chatterjee, 2007: 126).

Unlike Harischandra or Thakur, Tagore’s citing of the past in his essay, however, seems less programmatic. We find Tagore being aware of *Natyashastra* and drawing from it in support of his argument. However, unlike Harischandra, Tagore does not make any claims about the *Natyashastra* as being the only manual to epitomize how an Indian theatre should be. His reference to the *Natyashastra* ultimately remains a matter of fact, not a prescriptive reference. Ranajit Guha would rightly diagnose in his study of Tagore’s ideas on history in *History at the Limit of World-History* (2002) that Tagore’s approach to history or more specifically historical or religious treatises is not of an unqualified acceptance or idolisation but more in the nature of a creative appropriation. We will discuss this point in more detail later in this essay. However, in *Rangamancha*, too, if the choice of his language and modalities of his argument reveal themselves to be informed by contemporary Hindu nationalist ideology they also appear to present themselves ultimately subjected to Tagore’s own ideas.

Interestingly, though Tagore’s rejection of European realism might seem nationalist on the face of it, but in reality it performed the opposite function during this time. Contemporary theatre practice in Bengal found in European realism the perfect foil to further its nationalist goals. On the other hand, Tagore’s aggrandizement of the *jatra* in *Rangmangancha* too does not fit into the contemporary Hindu nationalist discursive frame. We have already witnessed Harishchandra’s high-brow rejection of indigenous performance forms. Argued from a larger perspective, what would also problematise any attempt to read *Rangamancha* as simply furthering the cause of Hindu nationalism or proposing an idea of an Indian theatre is if we consider the essay as voicing certain aesthetic concerns in regard to theatre. *Rangamancha*’s prime objective appears to be an opposition to naturalism, which was not limited to the essay but was generic to the theatrical discourse of the time, even outside India. For instance, if we consider the views of W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), Irish poet, playwright and a key member of the Irish Literary Theatre (which undertook the project of a revival of theatre in Ireland at the turn of the century), we note that his essays written in *Samhain*, an Irish theatrical periodical, voices almost similar concerns as Tagore. He says in an essay titled *The play, The player, and the Scene* (1904):

I am the advocate of the actor as against the scenery. Ever since the last remnant of the old platform disappeared, and the proscenium grew into the frame of a picture, the actors have been turned into a picturesque group in the foreground of a meretricious landscape-painting. The background should be of as little importance as the background of a portrait-group, and it should, when possible, be of one colour or of one tint, that the persons on the stage, wherever they stand, may harmonise with it or contrast with it and preoccupy our attention... Having chosen the distance from naturalism, which will keep one's composition from competing with the illusion created by the actor... treatment will always be more or less decorative. This decoration will not only give us a scenic art that will be a true art because peculiar to the stage, but it will give the imagination liberty, and without returning to the bareness of the Elizabethan stage. The poet cannot evoke a picture to the mind's eye if a second-rate painter has set his imagination of it before the bodily eye; but decoration and suggestion will accompany our moods, and turn our minds to meditation, and yet never become obtrusive or wearisome. The actor and the words put into his mouth are always the one thing that matters, and the scene should never be complete of itself, should never mean anything to the imagination until the actor is in front of it (Yeats, 2014: 185).

We find Yeats too being critical of a naturalistic mode of staging where the attempt is to create a perfect illusion of reality, where actors are used as embellishments to backdrops which dominate the stage. Much like Tagore, Yeats considers scenery as a hindrance to the actor and the audience's imagination. Similar to what we will find being practiced later at Santiniketan, Yeats too here is proposing a suggestive approach to scene design. He too claims the supremacy of the literary play text over everything else and the actor over the scene.

As it is well known, Tagore and Yeats would be close friends later on. However, they did not meet until 1912 and one can presume that each was writing unaware of the other person's views. Two people writing around the same time about similar things in the theatre, although positioned in completely different geographical and cultural realities, perhaps points to certain generic concerns regarding theatre emerging around the time, across the globe. It indicates the growing dissatisfaction with the existing realistic-naturalistic modes of staging and a shift of focus in theatre from the *mis-en-scene* to the literary text and the actor. Interestingly, these very concerns would lead to the emergence of a literature-heavy symbolic theatre in Europe, which, as we shall discuss later, will share many characteristics with the idiom of Tagore's symbolic plays and their enactment at Santiniketan. Thus it is perhaps

possible to read Tagore's essay less as a claim for an Indian mode of theatre, and more as a modern rejection of European realistic-naturalistic aesthetics in theatre.

The enigma of Tagore's decade long hiatus from playwriting therefore in the light of the treatise becomes more fathomable. It becomes clear from the reading of the essay that Tagore was definitely dissatisfied with the contemporary realistic and spectacle-oriented mode of theatre practice at Jorasanko and was in search of a new language for theatre which can transcend its limitations. The text and the performance of *Sarodotsav*, would mark the first expressions of this new language of theatre.

Sarodotsav: A New Historicity

While Tagore's search for a new language of theatre would begin with an aesthetic rejection of the naturalistic mode, what would characterize the new language of theater that Tagore would arrive at in *Sarodotsav* is also a new approach to history, breaking away from the dominant modes of historical representation in contemporary Bengali theatre. The Hindu past, both in its historical and mythological dimensions had become an obligatory presence in the Bengali theatre of the late 19th and early 20th century. Both, the commercial theatre of Girish Ghosh, Amritalal Basu, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi and others, as well as the parallel theatre that existed at elite houses like the Jorasanko Thakurbari were drawing from the Hindu past, via its historical and mythological figures and narratives. This was of course feeding into the conservative Hindu nationalist cultural project of the period as elaborated by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1993, 8). As Sudipto Chatterjee discusses in his essay "Performing (Domi-) Nation: Aspects of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Theatre", the passing of the Dramatic Performances Control Act (1876) effectively marked the end of direct political activism against the British Empire in Bengali theater. Thereafter, most plays produced by the commercial companies prioritized mainly the box office. However, even after the Act was passed, invoking nationalist sentiments remained a major trope in the plays, with no direct political motives, but with the sole aim of gaining popularity by instigating the audience emotionally.

Hindu nationalist sentiments were stirred up in contemporary plays and their performances through the invocation and glorification of historical and mythological figures as well as narratives. Hugely popular performances in the commercial theatre like

Jyotirindranath's plays *Purubikram* (1874) and *Sarojini* (1875) are paradigmatic examples of such manoeuvres. A realistic and spectacle-oriented aesthetics was also crucial to this project. It facilitated in creating an illusion of a utopian Hindu past for the consumption of the populace. Though such performances claimed to make history 'real' for the audience present, the reality was far from being historically accurate. What was presented on stage was a formula of populist aesthetics. If at Jorasanko such populist stunts could not be as unabashed owing to the cultural aspirations and aesthetic preoccupations of the Tagore household, at the commercial stage, this populism would dominate. Girish Chandra Ghosh in one of his essays paints a sorry picture of the contemporary commercial stage plagued with such antics:

Those who would have no understanding of the characters are supposed to play them; the king of kings arrives on the stage dressed as a groom. Neither can he walk, nor does he talk like a king. To exhibit their heroic dispositions, the actors simply shout at their loudest. Accustomed to such yelling and mistaking it as an apt expression of heroism, the audience also shouts out "excellent" in appreciation. An old backdrop with a king's chamber drawn on it can always be seen hanging on stage. All sorts of kings from all around the world would walk in to that same chamber. The *patuas* do not know how the palace should be designed, the tailors have no idea about the king's sartorial code; the wig-maker has never seen a king in his life and has only learnt from some theatre manager that kings always have *babri* (shoulder length, voluminous, flowing and curly) hair...(Ghosh, 1977: 386)

We find that nationalism was represented in contemporary theatre through a systemic erasure of history and an augmentation of myth. We notice too how in a commercial theatre burdened by economic crisis such spectacular attempts at staging history would often fail farcically. But we also see how such failures will be rendered invisible to the audiences who would be equally eager to be swept of their feet by the rhetoric of sensations.

Rabindranath, in his earlier plays written and performed at Jorasanko, would also be found to draw unproblematically for his resources, both verbal and visual, from the reservoir of the cultural icons of Hindu past. However, a distinct change in his treatment of the past can be perceived in Tagore's second set of plays written after he arrived at Santiniketan; the first play of this set being *Sarodotsav*. As Guha in his work *History at the Limit of World History* will rightly identify that rather than subscribing to a "historiography" in its meticulous statist narrative, Tagore in the latter half of his career would promote an increasingly subjective interpretation of history, which Guha terms "historicality". It is such a sense of historicality which is found to permeate *Sarodotsav*. The play reveals an intimate relation with history but

is not subjugated to the logic of historiography as is the case with some of Tagore's earlier plays. Not only in the play but in the performance of *Sarodotsav* too, Tagore undertakes a series of innovative, dramaturgical and aesthetic choices to manifest this new approach to history and, in the process, challenges the dominance of realism on the contemporary stage. I will discuss some these choices in detail below.

Textual Departures

Khela: an overarching framework

In *Sarodotsav*, a significant departure from Tagore's earlier play texts can be noticed in the form of its loose plot structure. *Sarodotsav* is written in prose interspersed with songs. Unlike his earlier plays, it is not divided into acts; instead, it is presented in one act (three scenes), to be performed without any breaks in between. The function of the loose plot is that it works against the causal logic of conflict and resolution as well as a linear narrative based on European models of tragedy, which formed the core of the nationalist plays written in Bengal at that time. Instead of a well knitted plot, the text of *Sarodotsav* consists of a *bricolage* of images, moments and songs embodying a mood of playful festivity.

It is perhaps also important to point out here that *Sardotostav*'s structure does not owe much to the tradition of Sanskrit plays; nor does it closely follow the *Natyashastra*. As renowned Sanskrit scholar Sukumari Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 2014: 378) rightly points out in her essay "*Rabindra Sahitye Sanskrita Natok*" (Influence of Sanskrit Plays in Tagore's Writings), the only set of conventions from Sanskrit drama that Tagore is seen to retain in *Sarodotsav* and also in some of his later plays is that of providing a *prastavana* at the beginning of the plays. However, he modifies these conventions too according to his own needs. Consequently, in a later altered version of *Sarodotsav* titled *Rinsodh* (1921), we find the play beginning and ending with songs which introduce the general mood of the play to the audience. We learn in detail from the publisher of the play Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay's accounts about the inclusion of a prologue in *Sarodotsav*. It appears that Tagore had initially requested Bidhusekhar Shastri, Sanskrit teacher at Santiniketan, to write a *nandi* for *Sarodotsav*. Bidhusekhar refused saying that the *nandi* to the play written by Tagore should not be written by someone else. He urged Tagore to write it himself. Tagore wrote a poem and a song and even composed the tunes within half an hour. Neither the song nor the poem,

however, was included in the play's first published version (Pal, Vol. 5, 2010: 26). This small piece of history indicates perhaps Tagore's casual approach to such conventions unlike in Jorasanko where they were followed more diligently.

Though not in terms of theatrical conventions, but textually, in *Sarodotsav* Tagore is found to use certain concepts like *chuti* (time off) and *rinsodh* (paying off debt) from the *Upanishad*. We learn from Kshitimohan Sen, teaching in Santiniketan at the time, that Tagore, prior to writing the play, had asked him and also other teachers to find him passages containing description of *sorot* or autumn from the Vedas (24). Evidently, Tagore had consulted the resources presented to him but had appropriated them in his own characteristic manner as we shall see.

The plot or the structure and theme in *Sarodotsav* manifest themselves through the concept of "*khela*" (play). *Khela* in the play is a structural device which also becomes a leitmotif and substitutes the nationalist ideological framework with an ethical core. *Khela* is central to Tagore's intentions in *Sarodotsav*. It facilitates a form of nonchalance that can afford to be transgressive. There is always a nonchalance associated with the idea of play as play-theorist Huizinga informs us in his treatise on play *Homo Ludens* (1938):

Be that as it may, for the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time". (Huizinga, 1949: 8)

It is this lack of moral seriousness that, gives the act of playing its ability to break societal *dispositifs* easily, to create new orders for itself. Tagore uses such a potentiality ingeniously in *Sarodotsav*.

There recurs throughout *Sarodotsav* elements which contribute to the formation of the mood of a festive play. For instance, terms like *khela*, *chhuti*, *mukti* (freedom) are used repeatedly in the songs as well the dialogues. The characters in the play are often found to speak in a playful language full of puns and wordplay. Such a form of speech is better identified in Bengali by the term *hneyali*. The figure of the *sannyasi*, who is a king in disguise, literally plays with a group of children in the play. Interestingly, disguise too can be regarded as a characteristic element of any play. As Huizinga explains,

The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises. (13)

Thus we see at the centre of Tagore's play, the Sannyasi, who is a king in disguise, and who is able to capture the imagination of the children and adults alike by creating a veil of mystery around him. What also conforms to the mood of play in *Sarodotsav* is the fact that strict moral or ethical binaries of good and evil are played with and often rendered unstable. All of these contribute to the formation of a state of play where established structures can be turned topsy-turvy. We will discuss the political ramifications of such a manoeuvre in greater detail below.

The play motif in *Sarodotsav* must also be understood in relation to the performative context where it is seen to fulfill certain other objectives. In contemporary Santiniketan one of the key functions of the play motif was to catalyze community formation. Theater at Santiniketan had a completely different function to fulfill than the plays performed at Jorasanko. As I have discussed earlier, in Jorasanko, theatre was meant to be a spectacle to its audience and regardless of its pretensions of *loksikha*, its primary objective was to entertain. At Santiniketan, however, one of the key objectives of theatre as a space and an event was to bring together the residents, mostly teachers and students, through a collective creative endeavor, to form a closely knit community. The "play" motif, thus was also meant to bring the community of teachers and students to play together. Such a spirit of play could also only be realized by breaking the rigidity of the performer/ audience separation, evident in the proscenium stage. This too might be one of the reasons why Tagore was exploring a more intimate connection between the audience and the performers by advocating an open-air spatial arrangement at Santiniketan. He was drawing his inspiration from *jatra* where such proximity is built into the spatial dynamics of the performance. At Santiniketan, the performer-audience intimacy in theater was also complemented by the fact that both the performers and the audience in their everyday lives belonged to the same community. Again, community formation was also not limited to performance itself; the rehearsals too provided time and space for community formation.

The play motif would also involve an interaction with the more immediate performative context of pedagogy at Santiniketan. While it has been often pointed out how Tagore's engagements with theatre at Santiniketan have been shaped by the fact that they

happened under the aegis of an educational institution, the way Tagore's plays or his theatre practice in turn engaged with or even looked to influence the pedagogical context has mostly escaped analysis. While in plays like *Dakghar* or *Achalayatan*, the issue of pedagogy would come to the fore as the central theme, theatre practice at Santiniketan since its very inception would engage with the pedagogical context at a more fundamental level. The teachers and students performing together in the rehearsals and the performances would obviously affect the dynamics of their relationship off-stage. In a play like *Sarodotsav*, when we find a teacher acting in the role of the *sannyasi* playing with the young boys, who would be played by pupils from the school, it would seem that Tagore was deliberately challenging through his play and its performance, the normative societal codes informing a teacher-student relationship. The play motif was thus also meant to transform the teachers and students into real playmates. Thus we see how *khela* or play in *Sarodotsav* provides an overarching framework which shapes both its text and performance structurally, forming at the same a bridge between the everyday and the performative at Santiniketan.

In-between time

A very interesting concept related to *khela* or play, which Tagore introduces in *Sarodotsav* and explores in his later plays too, is the cyclical nature of seasonal time breaking through the linear monolithic time of the past. Seasonal festivals are common in all communities, their sole purpose being to mark the passage of time. However, it is not simply marking the passage of time which seems to be Tagore's intention in *Sarodotsav* and later in plays like *Phalguni*. Rather, it is realizing the present as a moment connecting the past and the future which reveals itself to be the key objective. For Tagore the present moment bears the legacy of the past but it is as well the moment of action which determines the course of the future. Thus, for Tagore, there is always an ongoing intercourse between ritual and play in the present, encompassing the tradition of the past and the potentiality of the future.

Sarodotsav marks a break in continuous time by bringing into play the present and the future into the same continuum. It is however a characteristic feature of play, always to create such a pause, a distance. As Huizinga says:

Such at least is the way in which play presents itself to us in the first instance : as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives. (9)

Play, and thus theatre by extension, is a framing of life itself. It is a moment where life is perceived anew through the creation of a distance. Accordingly, Tagore names his play after a season: *sorot* (autumn). *Sarodotsav* literally means a spring time festival and the play was usually performed in the spring vacation. *Sorot* in India and especially in the Rahr region of Bengal where Santiniketan is located is not only the season for festivals but the time for respite after the scorching summer and flooding monsoon, just before winter sets in. It is also a time for *chuti* as arguably the most important religious festival of Hindu Bengalis, *Durga Puja*, is held during this time. It is in this threshold of time, a time in-between acts, that *Sarodotsav* is situated.

Spatially, all the action in *Sarodotsav* and many of Tagore's other plays at Santiniketan, take place on an open road. Tagore even thought of naming one of his later plays, *Mukta-Dhara*, 'the road'. The road symbolizes for Tagore not only a topology where human beings can freely interact with each other; it is also a temporal segment of the present which is an in-between time open to the past as well as to the future. The temporal metaphor of the road takes a new significance when we consider how in the performance of the play at Santiniketan, the time for the performance could also be marked as situated in between everyday-time and theatrical-time. This can also be read to illustrate how the time for theater syncopates multiple times within itself.

However, Tagore reminds us in *Sarodotsav* that this in-between time is also one of paying debts: *rinsodh* (clearing debts), as Tagore terms it in the play. *Rinsodh* proves to be a central concept in the play (which actually also becomes the title for a later adaptation of the play) signifying debts which bind one to the past and which must be paid off in order to move into the future. Therefore, *Sorot* is a time not only of play but of work too, as brought out in a nuanced manner, through the character of a boy Upananda in the play. As Upananda chooses to work even while the other boys play to repay this Guru's debts to Lokheshwar, Tagore points out that leisure and happiness can be found in work too. Work can be a form of pleasure, and work too is part of the cycle of time which coexists along with play.

Miniaturising the Past

It is in this framework of festive-play and in-between times that Tagore elaborates on the *pouranik* or the Hindu mythological subject with an intention to play with it. He does this through 'miniaturising', as philosopher Giorgio Agamben would call it in his treatise *Infancy*

and History (1993), the grand narrative of history. The very first treatment of miniaturization the characters of the play receive is when Tagore denies them a proper name unlike the elaborate ones they used to have in earlier mythological narratives. The characters are often described by their generic names like *sannyasi* or *thakurda*. The central character of the play is the *sannyasi* (an ascetic), or rather a king disguised as *sannyasi*, a trope which opens the possibility of describing him as the imposter *sannyasi*, the un-kingly king, or, it could refer back to an Aristotelian utopian coinage of the philosopher-king. The *sannyasi*, however, is not the usual ascetic with a stern and intense bearing but one who prefers to play with children. It needs to be remembered here that the term ‘sannyasi’ post Bankimchandra’s novel *Anandamath* (1882) is a loaded category, associated with the emerging iconic figure of Vivekananda and the nationalist revival in Bengal. As Indira Choudhury explains in her work *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*:

...Vivekananda died in 1902, but the dynamism of the sannyasi icon survived throughout the freedom movement. This icon held a special appeal for the participants in the Swadeshi movement in 1905. In this trial by fire, armed with the strength of the celibate ascetic, the frail Bengali could resolve at last to slough off his effeminate self-image as one he had spiritually outgrown. (Choudhury, 1998: 141)

The figure of the Sannyasi thus, within the purview of the Hindu nationalist iconography, has a usual reference to a socially stereotyped mode of masculinity. Tagore, however, on his part breaks down such an icon not only through the *sannyasi*’s speech, which is full of humour and wordplay, but also when he makes the *sannyasi* break into dance in the *baul* spirit with a group of village children. Tagore in a letter to young Ranu Adhikary written before one of the two performances of *Sarodotsav* at Madan Theatre in 1922, organized to raise funds for the university, alludes humorously to his intention of playing with the figure of the ‘*sannyasi*’ in *Sarodotsav*:

Today, I will have to dress up as the *sannyasi*. There is no other implication for me to dress up as a sannyasi but to collect funds. Do not be astonished, as at your Varanasi there are many who dress up like a sannyasi in the hopes of earning fortunes and their hopes are not in vain. (Chakraborti 1995: 88)

Another character in the play is *thakurda* (grand-father) - the grand patriarch of the family. Tagore’s *thakurda* is, however, anything but a patriarch. A friend to the children of the locality, he is also their chief conspirer in all sorts of mischievous activities. The

characters of the *sannyasi* or the *thakurda* are further ‘miniaturized’ in Aagambenian sense, by placing them within an easy everyday life situation instead of in a major ethical or political crisis that was often characteristic of Tagore’s earlier plays or nationalist plays at Jorasanko or at the commercial theatre. The only character in *Sarodotsav* with an elaborate name is Lakheshwar (Lakhi+Ishwar), the comic caricature of a crooked and miserly businessman, whose name incorporates a pun (Lakhi or Laxmi being the goddess of wealth in Hindu mythology).

Notably, in *Sarodotsav*, Tagore also chooses to secularize the Hindu religious ritual by segregating the material elements of the ritual from its sacred framing. Whereas in the play the group of village children are asked by the *sannyasi* to collect *kash* flowers to play “*sarodotsav*” with him, one instantly notices how Tagore imparts to the sacred object of the ritual-flowers, a more secular identity. Stripped of sacredness, the ritual in *Sarodotsav* becomes play.

Thus, in Tagore’s *Sarodotsav*, we encounter for the first time a remarkably different treatment of the past. Renowned poet and Tagore-critic Sankho Ghosh argues in his essay, “*Natyomukti O Rabindranath*” (Ghosh, 1969: 13), that the *pouranik* ambience in Tagore’s plays can be interpreted as an allegorical device, a technique almost similar to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. This is a technique by which Tagore could situate his plays in Bengali culture thereby forging close associations with his audience, while formulating a distance with the contemporary at the same time, thereby enabling him to critically comment on his own time. In the dramatic text of *Sarodotsav*, Tagore indeed uses the device of *pouranikota* to be able to comment critically on his own times - to subvert the very manner in which Hindu mythology was being appropriated in contemporary theatre.

Performative Departures

Undoing the Spectacle: The New Aesthetics of theatre

Sarodotsav was staged at Santiniketan for the first time in 1908 jointly by the teachers and students of the school that Tagore had founded there in 1905. Tagore perhaps could finally think of realizing for the first time what he had voiced in his essay “*Rangamancha*”. We, however, have access to very little information regarding the 1908 performance and there are

no photographs available. We only come to know that Tagore did not play any of the characters in the performance. Perhaps, he anticipated that *Sarodotsav* being the first performance at Santiniketan, his constant presence as an organizer and director behind the stage would be indispensable. We indeed find him preoccupied with organizational matters in a letter to Santosh Chandra Majumdar written two days before the performance. In this letter Tagore mentions a dress rehearsal and also the details regarding producing the makeup for the character of *thakurda* from Calcutta - an artificial white moustache and a bald wig (Chakraborty, 1995: 86). Though he mentions a dress rehearsal, Tagore does not elaborate on any stage devices or costumes which indicate perhaps the possible absence of any such accessories.

From Sita Devi's account of another performance at Santiniketan in 1911, we come to know that the costumes were simple and there was nothing grand about them. Even the king disguised as a *sannyasi*, this time played by Tagore himself, wore the white *jobba* which was the poet's everyday attire with a saffron turban tied on his head (87). The students who played the children might also have worn the *kurta* and *pajama* which comprised their everyday attire at Santiniketan. It appears that the costumes in the performance of *Sarodotsav* or at Santiniketan in general were minimal. This was a departure from the tradition practiced at Jorasanko. Though we do not find any details in the few existing accounts from both of these performances about the stage design, the very absence of any mention makes us suspect that nothing spectacular was done on that front as well. Descriptions of stage décor from later performances of other plays corroborate such a view and also indicate, notably, that the performances were organized mostly in open-air spaces.

Any doubts about Tagore's choices in relation to the stage design, however, will be comprehensively put to rest by a wonderful anecdote shared by Abanindranath Tagore in his reminiscences. Reminiscing about a 1922 *Sarodotsav* performance organized at the Madan theatre, Calcutta, he says:

In the backdrop was fixed a blue velvetish cloth...we used to have a huge *shola* umbrella with glittering mica spread on it...I fixed that to one side of the stage...it looked beautiful, a white umbrella against the blue sky. Rabikaka surprisingly didn't like it at all and asked why should there be a King's umbrella. The stage must be kept unpretentious and spare. Saying this he removed it himself... (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1995: 93)

It obviously appeared to Rabindranath that the umbrella as a mere embellishment did not contribute to the content of the play. What is also significant to note here is Tagore's clear directions to the effect that the stage must be kept simple. Abanindranath's characteristic humorous anecdote however does not end here. He goes on to recollect the story of how he managed to redeem himself post this ignominious rejection of his designer's penchant for spectacle:

One day there would be a dress rehearsal- Rathi and Kanak noted down which scene will have what sort of lighting- at what point in the scenes the light would gradually fade out or fade in. In that performance there was a special emphasis on lighting... I, however, was left completely disheartened by the fact that nobody liked the *shola* umbrella I had so lovingly placed on the stage. Sitting and reflecting, I told Nandalal, "Nandalal, we should try to make a moon upon the blue sky in the background." Nandalal asked, "Should I paint one on the cloth?" I said, "No, a painted one won't do, we need a real moon, a real autumn moon." Nandalal could not think of anything at that point. I told him to go and buy silver paper from the shop. Nandalal went straightaway and brought two silver papers. I said, "Cut out a considerably big moon from the paper and also a few stars." Nandalal brought the cut outs and I told him, "Go stick them on the cloth with gum". I also told him, "Don't tell anyone anything now, they will find it out in the night during dress rehearsals." In the night when the light fell upon the stage, on the blue cloth, it looked like a real night sky. Everyone was left impressed. (ibid)

However, the instance mentioned above clearly reveals the difference in opinion about stage design between Rabindranath and Abanindranath. While Tagore was in search of a new aesthetics reaching beyond the realist and spectacular conventions of the contemporary urban stage, Abanindranath despite being innovative was still bound to them. One, however, also notices how Tagore while remaining true to his aesthetic principles was flexible as a director and did not hesitate to use the lights available in the theater to full effect, which obviously would not have been available in performances at Santiniketan.

In another instance of a 1916 performance of *Phalguni* at Jorasanko Thakurbari, Tagore is found to request Gaganenedranath in a letter:

What if the stage can be constructed not in the cemented courtyard but in the space in front of the south side of the house? You can begin decorating it immediately- it will be easier to plant trees- it might accommodate more people as well. (123)

We find that even at Jorasanko, Rabindranath was keen to bring theatre out of the *baitthakkhana* into the open air. Ultimately, one realizes how Tagore was consciously trying to break away from the manner in which historical or mythological plays were usually



Figure 6 Stage for *Natir Puja* performance at Calcutta, 1927

performed on the Calcutta stage. He also did away with the custom of drawing curtains at the end of each scene. It is a significant fact that all the action in *Sarodotsav* and most of Tagore's later plays take place outside on the village street. It also needs to be stated that at Santiniketan, while making such choices Tagore also had in mind the financial limitations. But in the final analysis such choices do need to be regarded as a conscious step towards realizing a distinctly new language of theatre.

If it was Tagore who required the stage to be decorated in a simple, aesthetically appropriate, yet cost-effective manner, the onus was upon artists of the caliber of Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, Ramkinkar Baij and Surendranath Kar, to be creative enough to think 'out of the box' to make such subtle visual effects possible. The visual aesthetics which is found to have developed later at Santiniketan is minimalist, initially just decorative and later, symbolically suggestive. The few photographs and the accounts that exist reveal a conscious attempt at not using any stage devices which relate directly to the action on stage. Rather, in early productions of plays like *Phalguni*, the stage is found to be decorated with leaves, flowers, garlands, *alpna*² and handmade textiles. In a performance of the play *Phalguni* at

² Alpana refers to colourful motifs, or painting done with hands and paint which is mainly a paste of rice and flour on auspicious occasions in Bengal. The word Alpana is derived from the Sanskrit *alimpana*, which means 'to plaster' or 'to coat with'. Traditionally, it was drawn by the women of the house. It is considered as a folk art in Bengal.

Santiniketan on 25 April, 1915, we learn about the stage from artist and Abanindranath's disciple Asit Kumar Halder who was in charge of the stage décor:

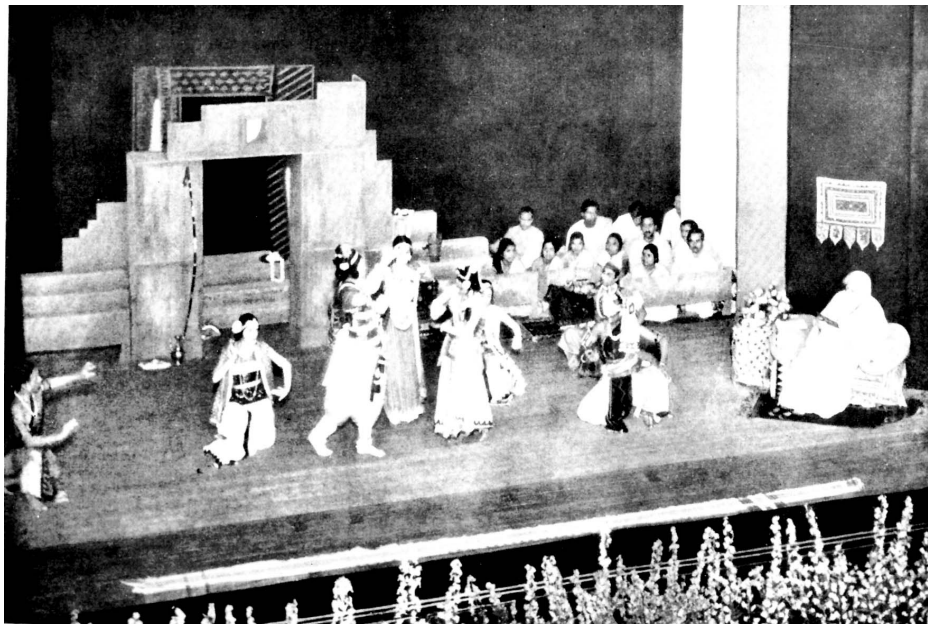


Figure 7 Scene from *Raja* performance, 1935

This time around I was given the responsibility to decorate the stage... The stage for *Phalguni* was constructed at the *Salbithika griha* (house) with flowers, leaves and creepers. I even engaged women of the Tagore

family who had come down from Calcutta and others present in making garlands and helping in the decoration... (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1995: 122)

From Sita Devi's account of the same performance we learn that the whole stage was covered with flowers, leaves and creepers and on opposite sides of the stage were placed two swings (120). From the only existing photograph from the said *Phalguni* performance of Tagore as dancing as *andha baul*, which we have already seen in the previous chapter, we get a more tangible idea of the stage décor. The purpose of such decorations was often to mark the performance space and to contribute to the general mood of the play.

In later symbolic plays, one even begins to find minimal stage devices which relate to the play at a symbolically suggestive level. For instance in the performance of *Raja* at the New Empire Theater in Calcutta on 11 and 12 of December 1935, we learn that the stage was decorated in this manner:

At one corner of the stage, set with appropriate background of a blaze of colour- of blue, red and reddish brown- there is the gate of purely oriental conception supported by four pillar- this is the simple setting in which the play was enacted. (*Amritabazar Patrika*, 12 December, 1935)

Throughout the play *Raja* one finds the metaphor of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ being manifested often geographically between the King’s chambers where darkness prevails and the king resides, and outside the chamber, where in the illusion of daylight, the king cannot be seen. The whole point of the play is the queen Sudarshana’s journey from the outside to the inside. The gate on the stage suggestively marked this spiritual journey, the passage from one to the other.



Figure 8 Scene from *Dakghar* performance at Jorasanko, 1917

the *Indian Daily News* on 19 September, 1922, we learn:

But a word must be said about the decoration of the stage which contributed not a little of its success. A screen of light blue with silver white borders symbolizing the autumn sky formed the simple but suggestive background of the stage. The king’s court arranged in tiers of seats overlaid with richly embroidered carpets, the ladies in their shimmering ‘saries’, the Sannyasi in his flowing robe of saffron silk, the boys and girls in their gala attire of many colours, all went to heighten the effect of the stage-setting which was in the able hands of the well-known artists Messrs, Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar. (*Indian Daily News*, 19 September 1922)

Despite the otherwise simple stage décor one notices the insertion of embroidered carpets, silk robe of the *sannyasi* and multi-coloured, gala attire of the boys and girls. One believes

Against this symbolic scenography, when one sees the photographs of occasional performances of the plays done at Jorasanko or Calcutta one often finds the stage décor being done in a naturalistic manner. We find detailed description of the stage from the 1922 *Sarodotsav* production we have discussed in the beginning of this section. In a report which was published by

that these were included keeping in mind the urban audience or at the request of the theater owners.

In the historic 1917 *Dakghar* production at Jorasanko where Gandhi and Annie Besant were among the audience, we find the stage being set in a naturalistic manner with a “real” cottage being constructed on stage. Abanindranath and Gaganendranath were in charge of the stage décor. In a masterful finishing touch and an inspired instance of suggestive stage décor, Abanindranath hung an empty bird-keeping swivel (visible in figure 3) from the right side of the roof of the cottage. The empty swivel was meant to symbolize Amal at the end of the play - a body whose soul has left it. One wonders whether Abanindranath too was gradually warming up to the possibility of a minimalist and symbolic stage décor and its aesthetics.

Not only naturalistic sets but once in 1922 when a slightly altered version of the play *Sarodotsav*, titled *Rinsodh*, was performed indoors at Santiniketan, in the presence of two hundred invited guests, Nandalal Bose is said to have drawn a *pat* evoking the season of *sorot* which was placed as the backdrop. One would be tempted to believe that through the creativity of such experiments that Tagore as a director was ready to compromise with his collaborators in the production. In the process, it is very possible that that he revised his views expressed in the *Rangamancha* once he was exposed to the possibility of a symbolic or suggestive stage décor through the work of a bunch of highly talented artists.

Directorial Interventions

It is often the case that while producing plays by renowned writers, directors feel an obligation to keep the literary text of the plays unaltered. When the play text is considered as a literary classic and its authorial authority gains a certain social currency, it becomes difficult for a director to ignore it totally, especially so in a mode of performance where the emphasis is on the recitative style of acting. We have seen this happening repeatedly with Tagore’s plays after his demise, where directors have been censored for altering the literary text or adding to it. It is seen by the audience and critics alike as a breach of the sanctity of the text. We will discuss the history of such censorships in later chapters.

For now, it would be interesting to know whether Tagore himself as a director of his own plays considered the dramatic work to be sacrosanct; therefore, something that needed to be kept unchanged at all costs. Or was he open to varied sorts of adaptation, addition, deletion

keeping in mind the exigencies of specific performative circumstances? Tagore is indeed often found to be making changes to the text keeping in mind the various performative circumstances of the different productions. One of the very common factors prompting him to do so appears to be a change in the performance site, or in the audience composition. Because of the very geographically and contextually located nature of the productions at Santiniketan beginning with *Sarodotsav*, one could loosely say that they were ‘site-specific’ experiments to use a contemporary term. Therefore, understandably, whenever they were staged at Santiniketan in presence of invited guests, or outside Santiniketan, at Calcutta mostly, we find Tagore adding prologues or introductory scenes to the plays - scenes which often contain a reflection on what the play to be performed is about. For instance, in the 1916 performance of *Phalguni at Jorasanko*, we learn from a newspaper report that the play instead of beginning straightaway began with a

beautiful prologue introducing the King and his court assembled to witness a play celebrating the advent of the autumn. The Minister informs the King that the play is ready and tells him that the poet has written for the occasion a flimsy vagary made of colour and light and song having, like the autumn clouds, neither weight, nor purpose. (*The Statesman*, 18 September, 1922)

In the said prologue, we find the minister telling the king the following lines, which are meant for the audience as well:

The poet says that his play (*pala*) is similarly of the lighter vein, equally meaningless. In the play there is nothing said of any purpose; it is only the gaiety of leisure (*chhuti*) which is expressed. (*Tagore*, 2013: 1032)

It is quite evident that by adding these lines Tagore was trying to frame the play for the audience and thus also direct its reception. It meant telling his audience in a roundabout manner what to expect from his play and what not to expect. But why was he adopting this means of addressing the audience? Why could Tagore not leave matters simply to the audience’s interpretation? Did he fear criticism? I would argue that he must have anticipated criticism on the grounds that he was breaking both contemporary cultural and aesthetic conventions. The new language of theatre including both the subject and aesthetics of his plays were alien to the general public. The plays themselves, as I have already mentioned, were site-specific in certain ways. Thus he anticipated an instinctive reaction against it or at least a perplexed feeling in the audience. Therefore, he felt the need of adding the

introductory scene as a buffer mechanism. It was meant to reduce the element of shock by preparing the audience for viewing something which they were not used to.

Tagore's anxiety was also perhaps not entirely misplaced. The audience at Calcutta was probably, at times, unresponsive to the spirit of the performances of Tagore's plays. We encounter one such instance in a report published in the English daily *Bengalee* of a *Phalguni* performance at Calcutta in 1916. We learn from the report titled *Rabindranath's Phalguni (Notes and Impressions by Jitendralal Bannerjee)* which criticizes the performance on a number of counts:

Scenery, equipment, stage make-up all was of the most sumptuous and elaborate kind in the entertainment given on Saturday last. But the magic touch of sympathy was wanting. The audience, in short, was a motor car audience - plutocratic, cool, indifferent, not intellectual or even critical - a motor car audience is seldom that- but difficult, unresponsive. There on the stage, was a riot and revelry of mirth, movement and colour, but the audience was prim, respectable and most decorous, they escaped heart-whole from the infection of that riotous mirth and life which was heaving and rolling before them. There was an air of oppressive respectability about the audience; they were anxious to preserve their dignity whatever happened. Everyone was dull... (*The Bengalee*, 23rd Jan, 1916)

This brilliant review by veteran critic Jitendralal Banerjee is deeply revealing of the class dynamics and audience behavior at Jorasanko. The review though can be questioned as well, especially in the absence of any opportunity to corroborate from other reports of performances, which mostly inform us of the theater being house-full and sometimes the audience being "kept almost spellbound" (report in *The Statesman*, 16 September, 1924, on the occasion of a performance of *Raja* at Kolkata). It is difficult today to ascertain whether the audience was always an unresponsive one, unable to relate to the mood of the play being performed. Curiously enough, Bannerjee in the same report also criticizes Tagore's addition of a prologue to the play. In fact, it indeed becomes difficult to look at Bannerjee's review as anything but purposeful for its sheer polemical thrust. However, while being polemical he also puts forth some crucial questions regarding Tagore's attempt to frame his play for the audience:

The poet has assured us again and again that we must not look for any deep or profound spiritual significance in the play, that we must take it just as it is and give ourselves up to the swing and buoyancy of life that flows through it. But if people refuse to take him seriously, if they insist upon reading a spiritual significance in the play, the poet himself is to blame for it.

He has made the play ostensibly and deliberately symbolic...if the play has no symbolism as the poet seems anxious to have us believe, then it has nothing...For one thing, the prologue strikes a false note, it is not simply slight, it is almost trivial and it makes one think as if the play itself is to be kind of a comic interlude. Thus it gives a wrong bias to the mind of the audience and injuriously affects the performance; for though *Phalguni* is full of fun and mirth, it is far from being comic... (ibid)

As a sort of background to the discussion, it is pertinent to mention that in the same production of *Phalguni*, Tagore had added a prologue to the play. There appears a character in the prologue named Kabi Sekhar, played by the poet himself, who is similar to the Mantri in *Sarodotsav*. It is he who explains the play to the audience. But, as Bannerjee rightly points out, the explanation that is put forth to the audience seems more of an apologia, not only to the audience, but to the critics too and a misguiding one at that. As Bannerjee mentions, Tagore reveals a peculiar tendency to underplay the symbolic nature of his plays written in the Santiniketan phase and the prologues he added to his plays are replete with the voicing of such sentiments. We will address this problem in greater detail in the following chapter which deals with legendary director Sombhu Mitra's production of one of Tagore's most complicated symbolic play *Raktakarabi*. However, from the above instance, we see how Tagore's attempt to direct the reception of his plays was problematic in certain ways and also not welcome to all.

Not only prologues but we also find instances where Tagore is found willing, as a curatorial strategy, to even let short comic skits be performed at the start of plays like *Sarodotsav* or *Phalguni* when they are performed in Kolkata. While doing so, he does not always seem to have the audience's concentration in mind but the very unique nature of his new plays as well. Before the 1916 performance of *Phalguni*, Tagore is found to have shared his concerns in a letter to Gaganendranath:

Phalguni is an extremely "delicate" piece - it is difficult to reorient oneself, if one loses concentration for even a bit. Those who might be arriving a little late, after the performance has begun, will not be able to understand anything at all. One will also not have the opportunity to read the program after the performance begins, because there will be no use of curtains even once within the performance. Therefore, it would be fitting if something very short can be performed at the beginning - at least it will settle the initial commotion in the audience. Another important thing is that if a few programs can be sold on the day of the play before the performance begins, it will provide a bit of an advertisement as well in helping the audience to

understand the action on stage... name the program “*natyabishaysar*” (a summary of the subject of play). (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1995: 122)

We find Tagore fully aware that *Phalguni*'s vitality depends less upon a well-structured plot and more upon the building up through a series of subtly, inter-linked images a mood of festivity, which required the undivided attention of the audience. He considered the fact that in contemporary Kolkata theatre it was quite common for the audience to be late for performances. A more pragmatic side to the thinking of the director is revealed in his being aware that he has at his disposal artists of the caliber of Abanindranath, Nandalal, Asit Kumar Haldar, who could create a nicely illustrated, informative program, which could be sold before the performance. When one sees the programs of the plays kept at the Rabindra Bhavan archives, one realizes that they used to be art objects in themselves, exquisitely designed.

At times, the very availability or absence of good actors would also oblige Tagore to shorten sections or even add a character or two to his plays. In an insightful essay titled “Writing for Performance, Writing *Raja*” (2012), Spandana Bhowmik, reflects on how Tagore changed the script of his play *Raja* for a performance in 1911, keeping in mind the need and the quality of actors. Not satisfied with the acting of Sudhiranjan Das, a student at Santiniketan, in the role of the queen Sudarsana, Tagore felt obliged to shorten segments:

Still Tagore could not fully depend upon the boy's ability, especially in the sequences of the dark chamber, where the stress would be upon the auditory and not the visual. This made him shorten the poetic conversation between the King and Sudarshana in the first scene. (Bhowmik, 2012: 111)

In a 1939 performance of *Dakghar* at Santiniketan, taking into consideration the presence of good actresses and an absence of good actors, Tagore promptly added a female character to the play. Santideb Ghosh says:

During his last days, once for a performance of *Dakghar* at Santiniketan he was unable to find a suitable actor to play the character of Madhab. When he was informed of the acting prowess of a certain woman in the ashram, he added a character of Madhab Dutta's wife to the play. The character of Madhav Dutta was done away with almost entirely. (Ghosh, 2007: 189)

In another instance, for a production of *Arup Ratan* (1920), a shortened version of *Raja* at Kolkata in 1935, Santideb informs us that a 75-year old Tagore playing the role of Thakurda thought himself not strong enough to sing entire songs and thus:

[I]t was decided that dressing up as a disciple of Thakurda, I will throughout the performance follow him, singing with him whenever he sings. I sang quite a few songs like this. (213)

Not only before performance but Tagore at times, even during the performance took the liberty to interrupt the action as and when he thought necessary. Sita Devi for instance recollects that in a performance of *Dakghar* in 1917 performed at Bichitra, Jorasanko:

[I]n the play no songs were mentioned. However, Tagore, still dressed as a Baul, singing “*Gram chara oi ranga matir path amar mon bhulay re*” and dancing went by the room of Madhab Dutta on stage...Again in another instance he sang from the backstage “*Bela gelo tomar potho cheye. Shunyo ghate eka ami par kore laue kheyar neye*”. (Debi, 2000: 99)

In another instance, while *Achalayatan* was being performed in Santiniketan in 1917:

Finding out that the Darbhak’s song was not lacking in energy, he from the back stage joined in the chorus ... the audience was left astonished. (79-80)

These instances reveal Tagore the director’s keenness not to sacrifice the vitality of the performance at any cost. For this purpose, he was ready to not only make alterations to the text but even to adapt his pre-determined staging to specific circumstances to achieve the desired effect. He is ready to go any length for the sake of it. He is open to any form of alteration to the text not only before the performance but even during the performance itself. It would be pertinent to mention here that he also made shorter versions of his plays which could be easily performed by students at Santiniketan. He often added or edited songs from the plays keeping in mind the quality of the singers available. He was often unhappy with the first versions of the text and tried to rewrite it later, as, for instance, his rewrite of *Raja O Rani* as *Tapati*.

Between acting and not-acting: a new approach to performance

Tagore critic Shankha Ghosh in his two essays *Abhinayer Mukti* (1969) *Abhinayer Mukti O Rabindranath* (1981) notes how Tagore in the latter half of his theatrical endeavors, at

Santiniketan, was trying to think of a new approach to acting, breaking away from the contemporary spectacle-oriented, naturalistic or melodramatic stereotypes. While we find clear mention of such an intention in Tagore's writings, we do not find any clear indication from the existing archive as to what might have characterized this approach. Ghosh too in his essays can only approach the question through negation. In *Abhinayer Mukti* he quotes Tennessee Williams saying, "Acting is always desired, but also necessary in it is a bit of freedom, a bit of not-acting" (Ghosh, 2009: 125). But how exactly would Ghosh define not-acting and differentiate it from acting? Is non-acting a deliberate *not* acting as a preventive measure against over-acting? Or is *not-acting* a moment where acting becomes real and the actor is able to identify with his character completely? We do not get any clear answers from Ghosh.

The fact remains that similar to Jorasanko, any attempt to understand the style of acting prevalent in productions at Santiniketan would have to be more creative rather than evidential. Keeping aside the impossibilities of a re-construction, the existing archive does not even provide enough clues to present an elementary idea of the method followed or the movements, gestures used. In this section what I can only claim to present are some conjectural suppositions regarding how Tagore's ideas on acting were taking shape in the latter half of his theatre career and how these ideas were manifest in the approach to acting in productions at Santiniketan.

We have discussed in the previous chapter, the attitude to acting in performances at Jorasanko. Early in his career, Tagore too reveals his fascination for spectacle-oriented, overacting. In a well-known instance, Tagore witnessed a theatrical adaptation of Walter Scott's novel *Bride of Lamermoor* during his 1890 trip to London, where contemporary English great Henry Irving played the title role. In spite of Irving's unclear pronunciation and peculiar mannerisms, Tagore was impressed by his ability to hold the attention of the audience:

27th September: Today, I had been to the Lyceum Theatre. A theatrical adaptation of Scott's "Bride of Lamermoor" was staged. Famous actor Irving played the role of the male protagonist. His diction is indistinct and mannerisms strange. In spite of that, by some mysterious technique he is able to conquer the hearts of the spectators completely. (Tagore, 1986: 34)

However, in an essay Tagore wrote two decades after this experience, *Antar Bahir*, we find a radical shift in his views. Not only is he vehemently critical of Irving's acting but he presents

a sustained polemic against what he identifies as naturalistic overacting with its focus on detailed mannerisms and peculiar modulations of speech:

Though acting altogether relies more on imitation in comparison to other arts, it is not entirely the business of a *Harbola* (a person who can imitate various animal sounds). Its prime objective is to provide us with a peep through the curtains of what seems *shabhabik* (natural, apparent) to reveal its internal *lila* (play). Whenever there is an attempt to emphasize the natural, simultaneously there is also an erasure of internal play. We often witness upon the stage that in order to exaggerate the human emotions and sentiments, actors tend to overstress the use of their voice and gestures. The reason being, the person who wants to *nakal* (imitate) truth rather than *prakash* (express) it, tends to exaggerate just like a false witness. He cannot dare to practice restraint. In stages in our country that we witness daily, the strenuous and futile exercises of such perjury become evident. But I saw the ultimate instance of this phenomenon at England. There I had been to witness the famous actor Irving's interpretation of *Hamlet* and *Bride of Lamermoor*. I was dumbfounded to witness Irving's imposing acting. Such form of unrestrained extravagance destroys the clarity of the acted subject completely; it only harps on the externality of things, I have not seen greater impediment to in-depth understanding. What art requires most is restraint. Because restraint is the only way of penetrating the inner reality of the world...[T] he commercial artist bears testimony to reality but the virtuous artist bears testimony to truth. We see through our eyes the reality that is apparent but there is no other way to truth than our mind. (Tagore, 1957: 74-75)

Tagore's intention here is clearly to critique any attempt at acting out the reality in its minutest details as can be observed through external sensory perceptions. Such a form of acting relying primarily on physical and verbal skills appears to him as overacting - unnecessarily stretched, and therefore, bordering on caricature. Rather, he is advocating a form of acting which can go beyond the imitation of the facile reality of things and lay bare the deeper, psychological or philosophical truths. He is against an impressionistic sketch and more in favour of an analytical approach to acting. It must also be stated here that overtly physical and detailed forms of naturalistic acting might also be philosophically or psychologically revealing- a fact that eludes Tagore. But what could be an alternative approach? We do not get any clues here.

Let us focus now on the actual practice of theatre at Jorasanko and Santiniketan to find some answers. From whatever little evidence we have, can we get an idea of how the rehearsals were conducted? At times more than the performance, the rehearsal is the space where new ideas are expressed more vigorously. Do we get indications as to how the actors

prepared for their roles? What were they taught? Did Tagore himself teach them acting? How was a scene composed in the rehearsals? As surprising as the absence of any theoretical reflections on theatre is also the complete absence of any directorial notes of any sort in the Tagore archive. We have found many modern directors keeping directorial notes for their own reference but not Tagore. Therefore, we have no other choice but to rely on glimpses we get from Tagore's correspondences, witness accounts or memoirs of those who had taken part in the performances.

From his Jorasanko days we find an insightful instance in Tagore's own writing on how he went about training the actors for any play. Tagore is writing to a friend a few days after the production of one his short comic skit *Goray Golod* at Jorasanko in 1892:

In our country, educated people often cannot act out a play while realizing its "wit and humour". It is indeed a tough task to put oneself completely in the shoes of a character in a play and act exactly as the character would. Apart from that, humans have by nature specific habits and mannerisms which, if not taken into consideration, acting becomes lifeless... When *Goray Golod* was being staged for the *Sangeet Samaj*, I had given the actors odd tasks to perform. Someone would be twirling his moustache while chatting with others, another tearing a piece paper, rolling it and using it to scratch his ears and other such details. All these details make the actor look *sabhabik* (natural) or it merely seems like acting. (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1995: 164)

We find Tagore clearly advocating here a realistic-naturalistic approach to acting where detailed mannerisms are crucial to create a perfect illusion of reality on stage. He even uses the word *sabhabik* to qualify the kind of acting he is hoping to achieve in the actors. If one reason for Tagore doing so is because of he was exploring acting in the early staged of his career, another reason perhaps is because the play happens to be a comedy. Even later on at Santiniketan, while directing comic plays, we find Tagore laying more stress on realist modes of acting. Perhaps, such an allowance was made keeping in mind the fact that comedy as a genre demands over-acting.

Contrary to this assumed norm, we find in Amita Tagore's essay *Rabindra Prasange: Natak O Abhinay* an instance of Tagore training an actor during rehearsals for a performance of *Bisarjan* in 1890:

When Arunendu who was acting in the role of Jaysingha immolated by stabbing himself and fell down on the stage, his legs kept on quivering for a while, reflective of an involuntary

movement. Rabindranath cried out, “What’s that you’re doing? Why are shaking your leg like that?” Arunendu replied, “Bah! Doesn’t the body quiver a little before dying?” Tagore responded, “No - that is not required - no point in acting that realistically”. (Amita Tagore, 2008: 341)

We find here evidence of Tagore’s general reservation against realistic acting even in his Jorasanko days.

Now, if we shift our attention to performances in Santiniketan, we find a few interesting examples of Tagore’s actual theatre practice as a director. First of all, one learns from Tagore’s own letters about systematic rehearsals. Rehearsals for a specific performance would begin at least month before the production opened and, at times, even earlier. There was no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the students and teachers. He writes to Santosh Chandra Majumdar in the letter mentioned above, “We have arranged a performance of a play with the students just before the holidays on the occasion of the autumn festival. Everybody is engrossed in it” (Chakraborty, 1995: 35).

How were the rehearsals? We do find a few instances in the memoirs of those present who recollected particular rehearsals. Sudhiranjan Das, a student at Santiniketan, later to become the Chief Justice of India (1 February 1956 to 30 September 1959), played the role of Sudarshana, the queen in a performance of Tagore’s play *Raja* at Santiniketan in 1911. He recalls in his memoir *Amader Santiniketan*:

Gurudev had to work hard to teach us acting. We practiced a scene repeatedly...the poet used to tell me, “ Dear Sudhiranjan, you are doing fine, but say it with a little more feeling.” Saying this the poet himself used to recite the words for me. He was pleased when I could finally deliver the lines as he directed. He dressed me himself on the day of the performance in a saree and ornaments...Everyday he used to serve me himself warm milk with an egg beaten into it so that the quality of my voice improves. (Das, 1959: 134)

Even before we begin analyzing this fascinating insight into Tagore’s interaction with a particular actor, certain facts about the performances at Santiniketan needs to be noted. First, the undoing of the spectacle at Santiniketan, as we have discussed, meant a renewed focus of the audience upon the actor. At Jorasanko or the Kolkata commercial stage, the actors had as an advantage the distraction of the spectacle, but the bareness of the stage in Santiniketan meant that the actors had to hold the attention of the spectator on their own. Another crucial fact one needs to keep in mind is that the performers at Santiniketan were not professional

performers but teachers and students. Rabindranath himself and Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Dinendranath had acted prior coming to Santiniketan and were experienced actors to variable degrees, but the rest were mostly amateurs, especially the students who had to be taught from scratch.

An important bit of information that we gather from Sudhiranjan's recollection is the fact that in early Santiniketan, in the absence of female students, female roles were played by males. In fact some of Tagore's early plays at Santiniketan like *Sarodotsav* itself had an all-male cast. *Dakghar*, too, to begin with did not have the character of Sudha, which was a later addition. Though as we have already discussed, Rabindranath unlike his contemporaries at Jorasanko had no reservations against cross-dressing and put it into practice quite early at Santiniketan in 1911, on the occasion of a performance of *Raja* which consisted of at least two major female characters, Sudharshana and Suranjana. More importantly, in the passage quoted earlier where Tagore is seen training an actor to repeat the lines according to his intonation, one finds an obvious stress on the vocal and the recitative in actor training at Santiniketan.

The preoccupation with the recitative in performances is corroborated by the accounts of others who were associated with performances at Santiniketan. A majority of the anecdotes in circulation concerning preparations for the performance concern an anxiety regarding the memorizing of the lines of the play. We find a number of such accounts but perhaps the most interesting can be found in Abanindranath's accounts regarding a performance of the play *Sarodotsav*. Abanindranath recollects how in the rehearsal both Abanindranath himself and Rabindranath too, to a certain extent, were often stuck with their lines, unable to memorize the script. Thus Abanindranath decided that it would not be safe to just have a prompter at the side in the wings but the prompter would have to be brought on stage nearer to the actors. Abanindranath proudly recollects how he managed to make this possible:

...Two prompters would be there on the stage. What I did was to make them wear a deep blue and black burqa covering them from head to toe, of course keeping a slit in front of their eyes and their mouth. They were given a long bamboo stick to hold with their hands. On the top of the bamboo stick I stuck a glittering silvery circular paper...it looked almost like two alive "music stands" upon the stage. On the back side of the circular paper I stitched the pages of the script. (Abanindranath, 1988: 67)

While it is difficult to form an idea as to how exactly these two strange figures would have looked upon the stage, it becomes clear from this instance how important the memorizing of the text was in performances at Santiniketan or Kolkata. Interestingly, it was not just the students who were susceptible to forgetting their lines; their teachers as well were equally vulnerable.

But within contemporary recitative forms of acting, was Tagore trying to make a departure? Another instance that is presented in artist Asit Kumar Halder's reminiscences regarding the enactment of *Dakghar* in 1917 and how the boy Ashamukul who played the character of Amal was discovered, takes us to deeper into the question of recitation. We come to know:

One day, in an opportune moment, the poet's close friend Doctor Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis came and informed the poet that a boy named Ashamukul Das of the age 10-12 had acted with success in a performance of the play *Dakghar* organized by Bramha Samaj. Rabida's chief concern in organizing an enactment of *Dakghar* was to focus on the character of Amal. It was beyond his imagination that a small kid would be able to play the role. When Rabida asked Mahalanobis to bring the boy, Mahalanobis brought him to the poet one day at Bichitra. While a test was being conducted, it was found out that though Ashamukul was acting all right, something was amiss. When in an exaggerated style of acting Ashamukul began reciting Amal's lines in a specific tune, with a dragging effect ... Tagore became disheartened by his artificial recitation. At last he put the responsibility on me and Dinu da (Dinendranath Tagore), if we could possibly correct him. Both of us trained Ashamukul for the role. Rabida heard him finally and confirmed him for the role... (Halder, 1948: 159)

A number of things, need to be noted down from this instance: first of all, Tagore's anxiety regarding the role of Amal and whether a kid would be able to perform it. Amal, the small boy is the central protagonist of the tragic play, where he dies in the end. Did Tagore's anxiety arise from the fact that the play is intensely tragic? Did he believe that it would be difficult for a small boy to act out such a morbid situation? Or did he fear that it would be difficult for a small boy to say the apparently simple dialogues but with deep philosophical undertones? When a test is finally conducted, it becomes clear that the major criterion for selecting the actor is whether the lines are being delivered accurately. Lastly, we come to the aspect of saying dialogues with a specific tune, with a dragging effect which appeared artificial to Tagore.

Shankha Ghosh would identify in a new form of recitation, the key to the new approach to acting at Santiniketan. In his essay he argues that Tagore was breaking the convention of the Kolkata stage of delivering the dialogues with a specific tune interspersed by moments of hysteric exuberance by the star actors, which was described in popular parlance as “*jalie deoa*” (to burn down the stage). In these moments, the actors would do different sorts of gimmicks with their voices, varying the pitch in quick succession and often getting carried away to declaim sustained, exaggerated outbursts of emotional speech. These moments would be considered as feats of achievement. Girish Chandra Ghosh’s son, Dani Babu, for instance, is often cited in the context of such moments in the history of Bengali theatre. While indeed such a claim contains a certain degree of truth, what needs to be kept in mind that there was resistance to such a style of acting from within the tradition of Bengali public theatre. As Ghosh would himself acknowledge, actors like Girish Chandra, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi and later Sisir Kumar Bhaduri were known to distinguish themselves by their very departure from such a tune-based, spectacle-centric acting. What would problematize it even further is the fact that a director like Sombhu Mitra credited for cracking the dramaturgical code to Tagore’s plays, especially as to how the lines in Tagore’s plays should be spoken, draws his lineage from the departures in public theatres and not Rabindranath or the theatre practice at Santiniketan.

Was there really an intervention happening in terms of the recitative at Santiniketan? It would appear so from the reviews of the performances at Santiniketan or Kolkata which often speak appreciatively of the delivery of lines. Not only Tagore himself, who often received accolades for his beautiful voice and masterful rendering of the lines, but even the students were praised for recitation and singing, which clearly indicated that they had gone through some kind of a training. This appreciation of the actors’ voices and line delivery extended beyond the acquaintances of Tagore to critics as well. British writer and teacher Edward John Thompson (1886-1946), whose two books on Tagore - *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life & Work* (1921) and *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist* (1926) - contain one of the very few sincere and objective, contemporary critical evaluations of Tagore’s work. Describing a performance of *Phalguni* performance, this is what he had to say:

The play was acted by the Bolpur students and staff and the poet’s family. The result was a cast which no other theatre of Bengal could have commended, of actors who were amateurs but consummate in their art. The poet had composed his own music and arranged the staging and had trained little boys to sing the wild spring lyrics. (Thompson, 1921: 178)

Thompson goes on to speak about Tagore's performance in the play:

But the star performance of the evening was Rabindranath's own rendering of the double part, of Chandra Sekhar (Kabisekhar) and later, in the mask proper, of Baul the blind bard...both parts were generally sustained, but the interpretation of the Baul reached a height of tragic sublimity which could hardly be endured. Not often can man have seen a stage part so piercing in its combination of fervid acting with personal significance. (ibid)

Hemendra Kumar Ray (1888-1963), litterateur and editor of one of the premier theatre magazines of contemporary Kolkata, *Nachghar*, while commenting on Tagore's acting in *Sarodotsav* as *Thakurda* and in *Phalguni* as *Andha Baul* affirms that Tagore relied heavily on his tremendous vocal abilities:

Watching the incredible variety of acting that Rabindranath put on display while playing these two characters established beyond doubt to me what a supreme artist he is... [H]e depended primarily on his facial expressions and his voice and I came to the realization that that through sheer voice alone he was able to portray all sorts of theatrical action on the stage... If voice is considered the key ingredient of theatre then one would be obliged to consider Tagore's voice as exquisite...The incredible variety that I have witnessed in his voice makes him at par with any first class actor. (*Nachghar*, 5 December 1922)

One needs to note here the emphasis on the aspect of vocal variation in Ray's comment. This observation would perhaps help us identify how the recitation technique of Tagore, or that which was practiced at Santiniketan, was different from the typical modes of recitation prevalent on the Kolkata public stage. Sadly, we do not have an existing recording of a performance from Tagore's time, nor even one of Tagore voicing lines from his plays. But from the audio records that exist of Tagore reciting poems or even prose passages, we notice a distinct tune and melody in his mode of delivering the lines. This fact makes us wonder how Tagore's recitation technique was different from conventional modes of vocal acting in the public stages. Ray's account, perhaps, gives us a clue by pointing out that in spite of being based on a tune, Tagore's voice could register varying characters and moods even without engaging in spectacular melodramatic exaggeration.

This fact comes across more clearly in the context of the solo readings of plays that Tagore presented to a select audience mostly right after he had finished writing a play, and, in his later years, sometimes even on various occasions. The witness to these solo reading sessions will bear testimony to how the Tagore played all the characters with equal ease,

capturing their essence, making each of the characters distinctly visible through the modulations of his voice alone. One of the famous instances of solo play readings would be that of his reading of *Rakta-Karabi* at Jorasanko just after he had finished writing the play in October 1923. We learn that not only family members and close acquaintances but theatre critics like Hemendra Kumar Ray were also present at these readings. Ray authored a report of the playreading session in the following issue of the *Nachghar* magazine:

He began reading from his manuscript in a very low voice...When Rabindranath began reciting, the latent subtle textures of the play began revealing themselves like a blooming flower. In my opinion, recitation is a far more difficult art than normal acting. On the stage the actor has as his aid his own physique, co-actors as well as stage devices, lighting and other things. But for the reciter his only tool is his voice. Tagore had a wonderful voice and through his voice he could express a wide array of emotions, a quality found lacking in many of the best actors... In the field Bengali of theatre or literature I have heard no one who can match Tagore's skills as a reciter. (*Nachghar*, 15 September, 1926)

As the editor of the premier Bengali theatre magazine on theater and as someone who was also very close to another much celebrated contemporary actor-director of the Bengali public stage, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, one would have to take Ray at his word when declares Tagore's recitation skills incomparable. What would be very important to note from Ray's comments is also the position he takes in regard to recitation which is contrary to the contemporary American or continental readings which do not even consider it as an independent form of performance. In 20th century theatre and performance criticism, "voice" in general as an embodied entity in performance, as opposed to "text", has been largely neglected. Jacqueline Martin, for instance, reiterates a common critical consensus in her *Voice in Modern Theatre* (1991) when she states that, "In the postmodern theatre, speech has no function except to show its failure as a medium of communication" (Martin, 1991: 31). But, one could argue that the use of voice in recitation is not merely logocentric as contemporary readings would have us believe; rather, there is an embodied dimension to the voice. Contrary to common prejudice, the voice does not merely present an intelligible experience but a sensual experience as well, not merely of hearing but of seeing, feeling and so forth.³ This is the situation in Bengal where recitation is considered as a mode of performance in itself, constituting an integral part of Bengali culture's repertoire of performances. As Ray reminds

³ Keeping in mind this fact becomes especially important while discussing Indian forms of performance because of the existence of various oral storytelling, singing, recitation forms across India, forms which are considered performance in their own right.

us in his report, it is no less challenging to perform these oral forms which demand a mastery of the voice. We will be discussing the issue of voice again, in more detail in the next chapter.

As we can see, Tagore's play-reading sessions were performances in themselves and it would be safe to surmise that these sessions would have definitely formed a key part of the acting training process at Santiniketan. Moreover, we see that fundamental to the new approach to recitation at Santiniketan, entailed a moving away from contemporary popular modes of vocal over-acting. But how did Tagore negotiate contemporary corporeal modes of overacting both of the melodramatic and the naturalistic variety? Could he also deduce any method of "not-acting" to counter that? As I have already mentioned, most of the existing accounts and reviews bear a strange insularity towards identifying corporeal dimensions of acting; a fact which might also indicate the absence of any radical departures in the very conception of acting. However, we can assume that Tagore as a playwright was also undertaking certain strategies to import "not-acting" to performances at Santiniketan when we find him creating characters, much like characters designed in his own image, corresponding to certain individuals or students who were at that point in time living in Santiniketan. This is so that the actors could identify with their characters easily, by playing themselves on the stage. This was one of the major ways in which an element of "not-acting" was being introduced in Santiniketan performances to counter over-acting.

Modes of Singing and Dancing

In this section, I will briefly deal with two elements which were integral to performances at Santiniketan -- singing and dancing. It is crucial, I believe, in the context of Tagore's ideas regarding theater and its practice to look at these two modes of performance simultaneously. While I begin this section by discussing different modes of singing in performances at Jorasanko and Santiniketan, the discussion will lead to the question of dancing as well. This is precisely because singing and dancing are fundamentally interrelated in the way they are conceived and executed in theatrical performances by Tagore. As I have already hinted at in the previous chapter, they owe their origin to the same way of thinking about performance. However, to make it clear at the beginning of this section, I will not engage specifically with the form of *nritya natya* (dance drama), which is an independent genre altogether. While the inclusion of *nritya* in performances at Jorasanko or Santiniketan evolved as a solution to resolve a theatrical problem, I believe any attempt to understand the full-fledged expression

of dance in *nritya natya* would have to be approached also through the methodologies made available in the burgeoning field of dance studies, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, even while I will not be focusing in any detail on *nritya natya*, I will at the end of this chapter put forth a few questions in relation to the *nritya natya* form - especially regarding the nature of the synthesis between two modes of performance: *nritya* or dance, and *natya* or theatre, that it seeks to represent.

A key element of performance at both Jorasanko and Santiniketan requiring a different sort of mastery of the voice than recitation is the art of singing. The performances of plays written at Santiniketan contained numerous songs. For instance, in a production of *Phalguni* at Kolkata in 1916, we learn from Tagore himself, that there would be “30 songs altogether” and that “the success of the performance will depend on the songs...” (Tagore, 2003: 56). At times the number of songs was even increased with the availability of a quality singer. Sahana Debi, who was known to be one of the most talented exponents of *Rabindra Sangeet* during Tagore’s time, and one of Tagore’s own favorite singers, recollects an instance from the production of *Bisarjan* at Kolkata in 1922:

Giving me the responsibility to sing ten songs, Tagore included me in the performance as well. Among these ten songs, the songs written originally for *Bisarjan* were only three... [W]hen I learnt that the rehearsals for *Bisarjan* were going on, I went for a visit. When Tagore saw me there, he wanted me to sing for *Bisarjan*. He even penned a few songs immediately for the purpose. (Chakraborty, 1995: 67)

But how were the songs incorporated? More importantly, how were they performed? Did the actors intermittently go on to sing full-length songs, placing in jeopardy the action on stage and their characters? With the inclusion of so many songs, would they not have affected the performance adversely? Would they not break the flow of the performance itself? If not, then what would the actors be doing while singing? How would they pose/stand/sit or move around the stage? These questions have indeed troubled directors who have wanted to produce Tagore’s plays.

As we have discussed in the first chapter, when theatre began at Jorasanko as a hybrid form, drawing from both traditions of European proscenium theatre and *jatra*, songs would still play an important role in the staging of the plays. However, theatre, unlike *jatra* tried to contextualize the songs more closely within the action of the play, as we have already seen in the case of *Naba Natok*. Subsequently, in the plays by Jyotirindranath and early plays

by Rabindranath like *Raja O Rani*, *Bisarjan*, *Muktir Upay*, this was the normal convention. Though the songs were contextually better situated within the action in the play, there was still no new idiom of acting which could be devised to make the songs an integral part of the natural flow of action in the play. The songs would still remain as moments of interruption and interpolation. Not only at Jorasanko, but in the Kolkata commercial stage as well, this was the general practice.

Rabindranath was, however, aware of this dilemma quite early in his theatrical career. Even before he would perform a full-fledged experiment in *Balmiki Protibha*, and would officially bring in the element of dance for the first time on the Jorasanko stage to accompany songs, in Jyotirindranath's recollections we find an instance where we find such an association between dance and theatre taking shape in Tagore's mind. As Jyotirindranath recalls, a thirteen/fourteen-year old Rabindranath would be taking Sanskrit lessons from his tutor Ramsarvasya, while Jyotirindranath would also be sitting in the same room discussing and finalizing the draft of his play *Sarojini* (1875) with Ramsarvasya. There was a scene in the play where the Rajput women would jump into a burning pier to save their honour, a custom known as *jawhar* in Rajasthan. Jyotirindranath had written a prose piece to be recited in the particular scene. While the scene was being read, Rabindranath was listening intently, taking a break from his study. Realizing that the section was not working at all, he intervened and asserted that the desired intensity could not be developed without verse. Jyotirindranath, too, had realized the dramaturgical weakness of the scene but was unsure as to how a verse piece could be composed at such short notice. Tagore took the responsibility on himself to pen the song "*Jol Jol Chita Digun Digun*" (Burn burn, you pyre, twice as vigorously). The play became a hit and the scene where the women would make rounds in a circle around the pyre and jump inside went on to become one of the iconic moments associated with the play. We find how Tagore at even at such a young age understood that only a song would work in a moment of heightened melodrama in the play, accompanying the ritualistic dance involving movements of jumping into the pyre.

Songs would play a vital role in Tagore's plays throughout his career and unlike his contemporaries, Tagore would undertake a number of experimental strategies to make songs seem less interruptive to the action on stage, or conversely, more integral to it. In one of his earliest plays *Raja O Rani*, we find Tagore still adhering to the prevalent *jatra* or *baithaki* style of performing songs. In another of his early play *Bisarjan*, perhaps keeping in mind the problem of staging the play, we find the number of songs drastically reduced. All the songs in

Bisarjan are sung by one character in the play, the beggar girl, Aparna, with the exception of another sung by Jaisingha. The archival sources do not indicate any fundamental change in the way these songs were sung but the play text reveals an interesting strategy to avoid the interruption of action. We often find songs being placed strategically at the beginning of a scene and not in-between so that the action begins with it. The song in this case almost sets the mood for the action on stage to follow.

Giti natya, as has been already discussed in the first section of this chapter, is a radical experiment in terms of adapting indigenous songs to theatre. In this arguably new genre, two apparently distinct modes of performance - singing and acting – were brought together to forge a new idiom of theatre. While in Europe, opera as a form had already anticipated such an interaction between singing and acting, it needs to be noted that in the Indian context *Balmiki Protibha* was the first attempt in this direction. The form of *Balmiki Protibha*, however, is different from opera, as we have already discussed. In the play, the attempt is to stretch the songs by breaking their strict conventions of rhythm and tempo, bringing them as close as possible to speech. Here it must be mentioned that Tagore was self-confessedly influenced by the British thinker Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) essay *Origin and Functions of Music* (1857), which argued that music and songs are nothing but human emotions and passions expressed vocally taken to their most extreme expression. It implied that, if conversely, the song is toned down in its effect and freed from its strict conventional constraints of rhythm, tempo and other structural devices, it can come closer to ordinary speech. As we have also discussed, corresponding to such an attempt to bring the songs closer to everyday speech, in the *Balmiki Protibha* production we find an attempt to extend everyday gestures to introduce a new basic rhythmic movement of the body very close to dancing but not dancing proper with all its technicalities. Thus, in the performance of *giti natyas* like *Balmiki Protibha*, *Kalmrigaya* or *Mayar Khela*, we already find an anticipation of a particular dance-like movement of the body which would develop further in Santiniketan through more explicit explorations of dance. Such movement, which has a dance-like quality, even as it is not dance *per se*, would serve as a solution to the problem of merging of singing with acting.

Thus we find how in the *giti natya* a gestural but rhythmic movement anticipating dance was accompanying songs, but what about Tagore's other plays? What about the whole series of symbolic plays beginning with *Sarodotsav* followed by *Raja*, *Prayeschitto*, *Mukto dhara*, *Dakghar*, *Phalguni* and others which, unlike *Balmiki Protibha*, are not written wholly

to be sung but prose plays to be enacted, with songs interspersed in the enactment? How did Tagore negotiate the profusion of songs (which could be as many as thirty) in the productions of these plays? Even among the symbolic plays, the function of songs is not uniformly similar. For instance, in a play like *Phalguni*, songs play a special role as Tagore himself indicates in the prologue to *Phalguni*. The character of Kabi Sekhar played by the poet himself explains in the prologue to the play that, “*Ganer chabi diei er ek ekti onker dorja khola hobe*” (It will be through songs that the doors of each scene would be opened). Indeed, we find each of the scenes beginning with a couple of songs, not related to the action in the play directly but for setting the mood. In plays like *Sarodotsav* or *Phalguni* bearing the festive spirit in them, songs play a crucial role in setting the general mood.

Here too, Tagore the playwright attempted to solve the problem through forging a passage between the everyday and the theatrical. Tagore would devise characters and situations in his symbolic plays to which dance would be integral along with natural bodily expressions. From the Bhikarini Aparna in *Bisarjan* to Sannyasi and his group of child followers in *Sarodotsav*, Dhananjay Bairagi in *Prayeschitto* and *Muktadhara*, *Andha Baul* in *Phalguni*, Bishu Pagol in *Raktakarabi* are all socially deviant characters, who could easily be imagined to make dance-like movements or sing even outside the framework of the stage. It is such characters who would sing a major chunk of the songs present in the play and a good number of them would be played by Tagore himself. Inevitably, it was quite natural for these characters to burst into songs accompanied by impromptu dance-like movements. Thus song and dance would be re-constituted within the logic of the action and performance. In plays like *Sarodotsav* or *Phalguni*, the very festive mood of playfulness would also make singing and dancing seem like logical actions.

While Tagore would be inspired by a repertoire of poet-prophet figures like the Baul, the Sufi Saint, The Fakir, The Sannyasi, The Mad Poet and others, who would be historically known to partake in singing and dancing, his personal experiences would also shape his imagination. In his memoir *Jibansmriti*, for instance, Tagore recollects a fascinating real-life character Srikantha Singha whom he had encountered during his childhood days at Jorasanko. This real-life character would provide the model for Tagore to imagine fictional characters like *Thakurda* in his plays:

I would commence singing, he would begin playing the sitar with a thrust on the beginning tune and where in a refrain of the song, there is a stress on the words, he would get excited and join

me and recite it, again and again, impatiently... At times when he was unable to restrain his joy, he would stand up and dance while playing the sitar, his eyes bursting with laughter... (Tagore, 2002: 66)

A clear performative idiom emerges from this recollection in which we can almost visualize the character from the description, a person to whom spontaneous emotion gets expressed naturally in his voice and dance-like gestures, sharply differentiated from civilized behavior and mannerisms.

In spite of Tagore's attempts to assimilate singing and dance in the theatrical mode at Santiniketan, songs would still maintain their own identity as an art form, appealing directly to audiences not only in Kolkata but also at Santiniketan. Tagore too was perhaps not unaware of the fact and thus in the advertisements to the productions at Kolkata, we find the number of songs and the artists singing them being specifically mentioned. Thus we see singing and dance did not manifest themselves in Tagore's conception of theatre as separate art forms in themselves but as integral elements of theatre. To convert such an idea into reality Tagore took recourse to various modes of experimentation. It might seem that it is this idea that finally developed and found its fullest expression in the *nritya natyas* like *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika* performed at Santiniketan during the last decade of Tagore's life.

Thus we see, at Santiniketan, Tagore stumbled upon a language of theatre which would fulfil multiple functions for him - political, aesthetic and communitarian. While it might be argued that not all of his experiments were successful, it has to be acknowledged that theatre practice at Santiniketan is one of the very first of its kind - not only in the Indian context, but globally as well - to think of theatre beyond the emulation of realistic-naturalistic aesthetics of the European proscenium stage. But how did the mainstream, Kolkata-centric, Bengali commercial theatre react to Tagore's radical but niche experiments in playwriting or theatre practice? Were they interested in staging Tagore's unconventional plays or influenced by Tagore's ideas regarding theatre? We will find out in the next chapter where we discuss Tagore's associations with the contemporary commercial theatre in Bengal.

Chapter III

Tagore in the Public Theatre of Bengal

Introduction

Though established around the same time in the latter half of the 19th century, amateur theatre practice at Jorasanko, or later, at Santiniketan, was antithetical to the tradition of contemporary commercial-professional theatre practice in Calcutta. If the objective of the first was *sokh*, that of the second was to promote the profession of theatre through a predominantly populist form of entertainment as well as earning a livelihood through regular theatre practice. If the underlying quest of the first was primarily aesthetic and perhaps to an extent political, the second prioritized popularity and financial success. The two theatres were fundamentally distinct in terms of their participants, location and intended audience. The key category which separated them was “class”. The first was predominantly a closet drama practice performed by an educated upper class group in a private, restricted space for the viewing of a selected (often invited) elite audience. The second affirmed a popular form of entertainment, performed by actors mostly of lowly origin, often even uneducated, at public theatres for the common mass. In fact, the commercial theatre was established in the early 1870’s as a popular counterpart to the theatre existing in the elite houses. At a time when theatre as a form was becoming a craze, its sole objective was to bring theatre out of its class confines and make it accessible to the common people. Often considered the founding father of Bengali commercial theatre, Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), late in his career, would recollect the conditions under which Bengali commercial theatre came into being in his essay *Bartaman Rangabhumi* (1901):

The *crème de la crème* of Bengali society became interested in doing theatre. Theatre was an ostentatious event in those days... Tickets were mostly unavailable; those among the common people who were lucky enough to procure one would reiterate their experience a hundred times, boasting of their good fortune. Those who did not get an opportunity to see theatre would only build castles in air. If a play was enacted, people would talk about it for days to come. (Ghosh, Vol. 3, 2006-12: 119-126)

Oppositional by birth, it was natural for the two contrasting modes of theatre practice, at Jorasanko and the commercial theatre, to be antipathetic towards each other.

Jorasanko's attitude towards commercial theatre was mostly one of snobbish disdain while the commercial theatre's attitude towards Jorasanko was, at best, awed and perplexed, at worst, morally judgmental. Though a number of Jyotirindranath Tagore's plays were often performed with great success at the early commercial theatre and some of Rabindranath's early works too were staged and achieved considerable popularity, as I shall discuss, it did little to alter the dynamics of the relationship between these two theatres. However, in spite of this apparent disparity between the two theatre traditions, since the second decade of the 20th century one finds growing instances of association and even collaboration between these two traditions of theatre. While key figures from both the theatre practices played significant roles in making such collaboration possible - in the case of Jorasanko (Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Dinendranath) and, in the case of the commercial theatre (Ahindra Choudhury, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri), Rabindranath, expectedly, was at the centre of such exchanges. In spite of the fact that class prerogatives are still found to be largely operative even in these sporadic associations, one also witnesses an attempt on both sides to accommodate each other's preferences.

Keeping the relationship of the two theatre traditions as the backdrop of this chapter, I will focus in particular on Rabindranath Tagore's relationship with the contemporary commercial theatre. As a contemporary literary and cultural icon, Tagore proved to be equally challenging for the commercial theatre either to produce or to ignore his plays. Tagore's unsurpassed literary fame meant that producing him successfully was considered the Holy Grail of the Bengali commercial theatre - an achievement in itself. But, on the other hand, the producer-directors were equally aware of the pitfalls of producing Tagore's plays, which often did not conform to standardized modes of playwriting. Particularly, Tagore's later experimental, symbolic plays in which he deliberately subverted the conventions of the contemporary commercial theatre, often proved to be too complex, radical or demanding for the majority of the producers. Moreover, another factor which needs to be kept in mind is Tagore's adverse public image as a writer amongst the common populace: too obscure for their understanding and too refined for their taste.

In spite of such impediments, or perhaps even supplemented by them, since the second decade of the 20th century, we find ambitious producers and directors from the commercial theatre accepting the challenge of producing Tagore, often putting their own reputations or careers at risk. Art Theatre Ltd., Calcutta, a theatre company established in

1923 with Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay as the actor-manager and director-producer Sisir Kumar Bhaduri were at the forefront of such intrepid and committed efforts. If Art Theatre Ltd. was responsible for breaking the ice between the two theatres, it was in the legendary Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's long-standing friendship with Rabindranath that the association reached its pinnacle.

Revisiting this history in itself can result in a fascinating narrative, but my objective in this chapter lies particularly in probing how Tagore's contemporary commercial theatre producers and directors approached the archive of his plays and dramaturgy. With the intention to unearth the gamut of factors which shaped their approach, I will put forth a number of questions. First, which of Tagore's plays were selected to be produced, and why? Conversely, why could not certain other plays be performed in spite of Tagore's personal insistence at times and even the director's desire to do so? To present an instance, Sisir Bhaduri in spite of his desire to do so and Tagore urging him multiple times to that effect, could not produce any of Tagore's symbolic plays including *Raktakarabi*.

A second question would be, while producing Tagore's plays, whether or how the producers and the directors were revising their own positions *vis-à-vis* the conditions and conventions of the commercial theatre which Tagore in many cases despised? To what extent were they ready to sacrifice their own conventions and think anew? I must mention here that in most of the productions which resulted out of this alliance, the Tagores were not satisfied to simply allow their plays to be performed but felt obliged to intervene in the directorial and aesthetic process as well. How did the commercial theatre companies and directors react to such encroachments within their territory? Were there any conflicts? How did they respond to the challenge of placing Tagore's plays in front of an apprehensive audience?

How were producer-directors tackling the specific demands of Tagore's text? To mention a few: the complexity, the refinement of language, the songs, the absence of opportunities to create 'melodrama' and 'sensation', which were crucial elements of contemporary popular plays in Bengali commercial theatre. Did they consider Tagore's texts to be sacrosanct? Did they request Tagore personally for alterations to be made? An important fact that needs to be noted is that both Art Theatre Ltd. and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri shared cordial relations with Tagore. How did these personal associations shape the possibilities of theatrical collaboration? To what extent could commercial entrepreneurs evade the authorial specter of a renowned literary figure like Tagore?

How did the producer-directors react to productions directed by Tagore himself? Tagore's plays though performed mostly at Jorasanko and Santiniketan were also at times, on special occasions, performed on Calcutta stages. The questions becomes more interesting when we keep in mind, for instance, the production of *Bisarjan*, which was produced by Tagore first in 1923 and three years later by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri at Natya Mandir. Did Bhaduri attempt to follow Tagore in his dramaturgical and directorial choices? Tagore acted in the *Bisarjan* production on first night as Raghupati and then on the next four nights as Jaisingha. When we find Bhaduri too enacting the role of Raghupati for the first ten nights of the production and then playing the character of Jaisingha in the latter productions, we wonder whether Bhaduri the actor is not following in the footsteps of Tagore.

The association between the two antithetical modes theatre worked both ways. Not only were the producer-directors of the commercial theatre reacting towards Tagore's plays but Tagore too on his part found himself responding to the demands of the commercial stage. Was Tagore too eager to see his plays being staged in the commercial theatre? How much compromise was he open to? How enthusiastic was he towards these associations? What were his reactions to the productions? Not only Tagore himself but the other members of the Thakurbari associated with theatre are also seen to respond to these collaborations in active ways. It would be interesting study their approach as well.

Last but not the least, a crucial element of analysis must be the public responses to the commercial theatres' adaptation of Tagore's plays. Were these productions successful? How did the critics react to the productions and how did the audience at large react to them? Did they react differently?

Early Commercial Theatre in Bengal

As a short background to our discussion, it would be pertinent to begin by briefly mapping the history of the beginning and the early development of Bengali commercial theatre. It is a common fact that the Bengali commercial theatre began its journey with the historic production of Dinabandhu Mitra's (1830-1973) *Nil Darpan* (7 December 1872), approximately a decade after the *Naba Natak* production at Thakurbari. The three legendary actors of the early Bengali commercial theatre Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi (1850-1908) and Amritalal Basu (1853-1929) were a part of the *Nil Darpan*

production. However, from artist and stage designer Dharmadas Sur's (1852-1910) memoirs quoted in Prabhat Kumar Das's essay on Girish Chandra titled "*Bangla Natya Projojonar Adijug: Natyacharjya Girish Chandra*" (Early Days of Bengali Theatre: Girish Chandra, 1994) we learn that even before this production, Girish Chandra and Ardhendu Sekhar had previously set up *akhdas* (an open-air space with a temporary thatched roofed structure demarcated for theater training purposes as well as performance) in 1869, for the enactment of Dinabandhu's popular satire *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1866). They had put up a few shows of this play which were appreciated as well. *Sadhabar Ekadashi* did not have ticketed shows and was open to all as was the convention with the *akhdas*. It was with the overwhelming response of the *Nil Darpan* production organized at one Brindaban Pal's house at Shyambazar, Calcutta, that the group decided "*ticket bechiya theater koribo*" (to do theatre selling tickets) (Sur, Quoted in *Natya Akademi Patrika 4*, 1994: 23-24). It was this production which gave them confidence to accept theatre as a living.

The newly emergent group of performers began the process by doing shows at various elite houses around Calcutta, but, finally, settled at the newly constructed Great National Theatre at Beadon Street which can be technically called the first commercial theatre of Calcutta. Sur lets us know more that he had arranged for a "Drop Scene" and a few more scenes to be drawn by the British painter, Mr. Garrick, which were used intermittently in the early productions. The first plays produced at the Great National were adaptations of stories collected from *The Arabian Nights - Hunchback, Three Apples* and *Aladin* chosen obviously for their sensational quality and potential for creating a spectacle on the stage (ibid). Girish Chandra later, however, would bring more aesthetic preoccupations to the commercial stage by producing Shakespeare in his own translation, as well as Bengali plays by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) and would be finally forced to write plays himself in order to counter the sheer dearth of good plays in Bengali.

In the late 19th century, both the Bengali commercial theatre and the Jorasanko theatre would be similar in their fundamental aesthetic principles. They would both adopt hybrid forms merging European proscenium theatre, conventions of Sanskrit drama and Bengali *jatra* with the underlying objective of mesmerizing the audience. Theatre as a new form would still bear a sense of magic to the spectators who were previously unacquainted with it. As we learn from Girish Chandra:

Theatre was still an object of mystery to the common people. From where the actors appear, how the scene is changed, the expensive and glittery costumes, jewelries; unlike *jatra*, the actors not addressing the audience while delivering their lines: all of this seemed new to the public (ibid).

We have discussed in the first chapter how at Jorasanko the primary objective had been to create a visual spectacle. Notwithstanding the class dynamics and aesthetic preoccupations of the Tagores, the more empirical difference between the two theatre practices, however, would lie in their access to resources. Jorasanko being one of the elite houses in Calcutta had access to material resources unavailable to the commercial theatre. The material resources were crucial to the success of theatre in those days with its thrust on visual spectacle. Girish Chandra paying his respects to Dinabandhu Mitra, and dedicating his play *Shasti ki Shanti?* (Penance or Peace, 1909) to Mitra, says:

At the time we produced *Sadhabar Ekadashi*, it was practically impossible putting up a play without the patronage of a wealthy person; the exorbitant expenses of costumes was beyond the reach of the common man. But your (Mitra's) social satire did not require spending money. It is only thus that it became possible for the group of youths with all the enthusiasm but no resources whatsoever to produce your play. If your plays were not available, this group of youths would not have dared to set up the "National Theatre" (Ghosh, 1972: 198).

Not only in terms of material resources but the commercial theatre suffered from an acute shortage of intellectual resources as well. A perpetual dearth of quality plays, educated, well-groomed actors and an audience constantly craving for sensation meant that the quality of the productions was inconsistent. The absence of resources also meant compromise at various levels, as we learn from the sorry account presented by Hemendra Kumar Ray in his work *Bangla Rangalay O Sisir Kumar* (1954):

In the Girish age - even when Ghosh, a towering personality in the world of theatre, was at the helm - it would be impossible to list here for the sheer lack of space, the poverty and haphazardness that I have witnessed in the productions. I can only mention one or two instances here. Even in the most serious of social plays, farcical singing and dancing scenes would be inserted. Most of the times, the drop scenes in the background and the costumes would be completely out of synchrony with the time-space-characters in the play. (Ray, 2014: 19-20)

It becomes evident from Ray's description that it was not viable in contemporary commercial theatre to design costumes and paint backdrops separately for each of the different plays

produced. Plagued by financial problems, the theatre managers had to make do with whatever materials they had with them. Though Girish Chandra himself and some of his contemporaries like Ardhedu Sekhar Mustafi (1850-1908), Amritalal Basu (1853-1929), Ahindra Choudhury (1896-1974) were educated and first-rate actors, the supporting cast was often uneducated and even illiterate at a time when no respectable gentleman willfully joined professional theatre. The actresses, mostly prostitutes, were often talented and industrious as in the case of Binodini Dasi (1862-1941) but almost always illiterate to begin with. Though these workers of the commercial theatre did not lack in passion, culturally they were undernourished.¹

Jyotirindranath and Rabindranath: Formal Exchanges

Jyotirindranath: Finding Common Ground

Coming back to early associations between commercial theatre and the Jorasanko theatre, the first connection was facilitated by Jyotirindranath. Apart from both being spectacle-oriented theatres, the two found new grounds of reciprocity in the late 19th century Hindu nationalist upsurge in the cultural space. It would be interesting to briefly discuss that history here. When the Bengali commercial theatre was exploiting the nationalist sentiments to their advantage, Jyotirindranath, too, affected by the nationalist fervor, wrote the play *Purubikram* (1874) valorizing the Indian past. The play narrating the heroic exploits of Hindu king Puru (Porus, 3 Century BC) in his battle (Battle of Hydaspes, 326 B.C.) against Alexander the Great (356 BC –323 BC) was able to respond to the spirit of the times and became quite popular not only within Bengal but in other states of India as well. Under these circumstances, the newly established Great National Theatre looking for suitable plays to perform after producing Dinabandhu and Michael's plays sensed a golden opportunity in *Purubikram*.

We learn from Jyotirindranath's account that after the play was published Nagendranath Badopadhyay and Amritalal Basu on behalf of Great National Theatre came to

¹ Legendary 20th century Bengali director Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) would present a brilliant portrayal of the commercial theatre of the late 19th century in his play *Tiner Talawar* (1971).

get permission from Jyotirindranath for producing the play. We learn from Amritalal Basu that “though at the time there were no strict restrictions of copyright as such, as a gesture of courtesy, we still went for asking permission from Jyotirindranath” (Basu, Quoted in *Jyotirindranath Natak Samagra 1*, 2002: 21). Jyotirindranath “happily” obliged and the play was produced on 3 October 1874. It should be noted that even before Great National Theatre produced the play, the play was produced at a private theater house named Bengal Theatre on 22 August 1874. It was however Great National Theatre’s production which made the play available for the viewing of the larger public. We do not we find any existing reviews of the production, nor do learn how many shows of the play were put up, but we learn from Basu that the production was successful and well received. Such an evaluation can be corroborated from the fact that around the same time that the play was being produced, the name of the theatre was changed from Great National Theatre to The Indian National Theatre. The inclusion of the word ‘Indian’ in the name indicates an obvious thrust on the patriotic which was also the key affect that Jyotirindranath’s play highlighted. This indicates the influence that the play had on the theatre and, correspondingly, on the larger culture of that time.

The most alluring element of the play which caught the public imagination was the songs. One song in the play which was first written and sung on the occasion of Hindu Mela, becoming a leitmotif in *Purubikram* and sung repeatedly by a number of characters through the play, became exceedingly popular. The song “*Mile Saba Bharat Santan*” (come together, the children of Bharat) representing the nationalistic spirit of the play became the quintessential Bengali song before Bankim Chandra wrote his “*Bande Mataram*”. Bankim Chandra himself wrote of this song that “this *mahagit* should be sung throughout India...the hearts of two million Indians may beat to the rhythm of this song” (Chattopadhyay, *Bangadarshan*, March 1873).

If Jyotirindranath’s first full length play, *Purbikram* became popular with the commercial theatre, his next *Sarajini* (1875) became a sensation. *Sarajini* was a play based on the ritual of self-immolation named *jawahar*, practiced by the Rajput women of Rajasthan. In its choice of subject matter it was a master stroke on the part of Jyotirindranath who was able to impart an artistic vision to the cultural ideology of Hindu nationalism. As Tanika Sarkar has explained in her work on the period, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation* (2001), the domesticated woman was at the center of the formation of Hindu nationalist subjectivity. As it was impossible for the contemporary champions of Hindu nationalism to exert their influence on the public sphere, they projected it on to the domain of domesticity and the

figure of the Hindu wife. By valorizing the figure of the *sati*, Jyotirindranath's play fed into this cultural ideology. *Sarojini* was performed at the Great National Theatre within a month and half of its publication. The advertisement for the first show of the play held on 15 January 1876, published in the daily *The Statesman*, went like this:

'To-Night! To-Night!! To-Night!!!

Tremendous Attraction!!!

GREAT NATIONAL THEATRE

SAROJINI

BY THE RENOWNED AUTHOR OF

PURUBIKRAM

THE SELF IMMOLATION OF RAJPUT LADIES.'

(*The Statesman*, 15 January 1876)

A number of facts must be noticed in the advertisement. First, the very fact that the advertisement was published in English daily proves that the producers were also expecting an educated, literate audience. Secondly, the very effort to evoke sensation among the prospective audience by the use of exclamations and words like "to-night" and "tremendous" gives one an idea as to what the theatre producers and the audience expected from a theatre production in those days. Though Jyotirindranath's name is not directly mentioned, we find it indirectly implied in the phrase "by the renowned author of Purubikram". This indicates the immense popularity of *Purubikram*, and, secondly, it is possible to assume that Jyotirindranath may have deliberately requested the deletion of his name. We find in the published version of the two plays *Purubikram* and *Sarojini* too, no direct mention of Jyotirindranath's name. Why did Jyotirindranath chose not to name himself? Did he feel ashamed to lend his name to the commercial theatre which was looked down upon as an institution in those times? But that does not explain the omission of his name in the book. Or did he fear a backlash from the British Government with whom the Tagores had a cordial relationship at the time? This possibility also seems invalid when we consider his more direct confrontations with the British in matters of grave economic implications for the empire. A third possibility seems that Jyotirindranath was following a 19th century legacy of publishing books and plays, especially social-satires, anonymously.

Following the first show, we learn that the play was produced on the 22 January, 29 January and 19 February, 1876, respectively. The advertisement published in *The Statesman* on the occasion of the fourth show mentioned “For the fourth and last time that established favourite *Sarajini*” [sic] (*The Statesman*, 19 February 1876). Thus we can presume that the play was already a “favourite” among the audience and that it was to be the last show of the play. However, this was not to be because around the same time the Bengali commercial theatre received a jolt from the government. The British government was taking note of the growing nationalist fervor on the Bengali commercial stage and in March 1876, a draft titled “Dramatic Performances Control Bill” was presented to the viceroy council. The notorious Dramatic Performances Control Act was passed the same year in December. However, even in the preceding months of the passing of the law, the police randomly arrested theatre workers and filed cases against them. It was to collect money for providing financial assistance to these theatre actors in “distress” that a fifth show of *Sarajini* was organized on the 11 March 1876. *The Statesman* advertisement of the show reads as follows:

‘GREAT ANTIONAL THEATRE

This day, Saturday, 11th March 1876

For the benefit of the distressed Actors

The established favourite and romantic Tragedy

SAROJINI

SRIMATI SUKUMARI DUTTA, AS SAROJINI.

Plenty of Songs!

PATRIOTS AND COUNTRYMEN,

Come and support us now!

NOW OR NEVER!!

(*The Statesman*, 11 March, 1876)

The fact is clearly mentioned in the advertisement that the performance is a beneficiary event and the earnings will go towards assistance of the “distressed actors”. Secondly, as opposed to the first advertisement, we find the actress’s name being mentioned. Thirdly, Great National Theatre clearly voices its nationalist agenda and uses that to generate mass appeal.

The use of the phrase “Now or Never” makes it read almost like a call for revolution. We find the songs claiming a special mention in the advertisement.

Sarojini gained immense popularity not only within the city, but we learn that it was once performed in the neighboring town of Howrah, with Jyotirindranath himself present in the audience. In a particularly intense scene, the audience had cried out together “Thanks to the young author” (Jyotirindranath, 1931: 148). We learn from Jyotirindranath that owing to its immense popularity the contemporary teacher of painting at the Calcutta Art School, Annadaprasad Bagchi (1849-1905) drew a painting of the last scene in the play where Rajput women immolate themselves. Sold along with the paintings of gods and goddesses, innumerable copies of the painting were sold. The play’s popularity meant it was also adapted into *jatra*. We learn from Abanindranath’s memoirs *Gharoa* (1941) of a *jatra* performance of *Sarojini* being held at the Jorasanko Thakurbari.

How were these productions staged and received by the audience? While we have no details of the performances of *Purubikram*, we do find a few interesting reflections in Binodini’s autobiography *Amar Katha* (1912) regarding *Sarojini*. Binodini writes:

Performances of *Sarojini* were intoxicating. We would get carried away and be beside ourselves while acting. Not only us but the audience too would be completely overwhelmed with emotion. It would suffice here as explanation to narrate what happened during one of the performances. I would play the character of Sarojini. Sarojini was brought to the sacrificial space. The king stood heartbroken after ordering the sacrifice of his own daughter, for the good of his kingdom, ignoring the imploring queen’s appeals...As soon as the imposter Bhairabacharya disguised as a brahmin went towards Sarojini with sword in his hand to cut off her head, Bijay Singha ran into the scene and shouting “all of this is a big lie, Bhairabacharya is not a brahmin but a Muslim, he is a Muslim spy”. Immediately the audience stood on their feet crying “beat him, kill him”! A couple of them got so excited that they could not restrain themselves any longer and jumping over the footlights, leapt right onto the stage. They fainted immediately. The curtain fell promptly on the stage. (Binodini, 1998: 101)

From Binodini’s words we can sense how emotionally charged the productions could be and how it would affect the audience. The audience would not generally be a critical and sensible body of spectators, but rather a naïve gathering, easily influenced by emotions. In the heat of the moment, they often disregarded the fact that the action on stage was unreal. What can also be drawn from this incident is how Jyotirindranath was using Hindu-Muslim tensions to play on the communal sentiments of the audience.

In another instance that Binodini presents, she describes the iconic moment in the play where the Rajput women jump on the burning pier committing suicide:

In one of the scenes in *Sarojini* the Rajput women are singing and immolating themselves jumping into the burning pyre. That particular scene turned the audience mad. Four pyres could be seen burning on different spots of the stage. The flames would be almost three to four feet tall. At the time there were no provisions for electric lights on the stage, so four to five feet long tin sheets were spread upon which thin burning wooden sticks were placed. A group of Rajput women wearing red coloured sarees, some of them bedecked with flowers would sing-

“*Jal jal chita digun digun*

Paran sanpibe bidhaba bala...”

and move in a circle around the stage and jump suddenly into the fire. Promptly kerosene is being sprayed into the fire to make it burn with increased intensity; some are burning their hairs, some their clothes but no-one is bothered about it. They return again and jump again into the fire. It is impossible for me to make understand through my writing the tremendous exhilaration that I sensed in those moments. (ibid)

We have already discussed in Chapter Two under what circumstances a young Rabindranath had penned the song in the play. This instance would suggest how the producers and actors of the commercial theatre would go to any extent to stun the audience. Acting was less about subtle gestures or nuanced delivering of the lines than it was about gimmicks and acrobatics, sometimes even at the risk of actual physical danger to the actors.

Asrumati (1879) which followed *Sarojini*, was not nearly as popular as *Sarojini* on the commercial stage. It is probably because Jyotirindranath, almost as a form of compensation for the anti-Muslim stance in *Sarojini*, in *Asrumati*, made Maharana Pratap's daughter Ashrumati fall in love with a Muslim named Salim. This fact did not fare well with many and there was a flurry of criticism directed at Jyotirindranath for having dishonored a heroic figure like Maharana Pratap. Perhaps, as a reaction to this criticism, Jyotirindranath based his next play *Sapnomoyee* (1882) on a Bengali *zamindar* named Shova Singh who fought against Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Jyotirindranath took this historical figure and used his imagination to forge a national hero out of him. Unlike the earlier plays, this play was written completely in verse interspersed with lots of songs. Rabindranath wrote as many as fourteen for the play. The play was staged by National Theatre with considerable success, the first show being on 15 September 1883.

Jyotirindranath's plays formed a major part of the Hindu nationalist ideology of the late 19th century and contributed greatly towards the creation of its iconography not only in the context of Bengal but in other parts of Northern India as well through translations. Apart from the series of four plays that we mentioned which contribute to the Hindu nationalist ideology, Jyotirindranath also wrote a series of comedies, mostly adaptations from French playwright Moliere's plays like *Emon Kormo ar Korbo Na*, *Alik Babu*, *Kichit Jalojog* and others. Significantly, these plays were acted at Jorasanko but the commercial theatre showed no interest in staging them. The subtle humor of these comedies of manners obviously did not fit the formula of plays represented by the commercial theatre.

Rabindranath: Uneasy First Brushes

As I have mentioned earlier, few of Tagore's early plays and adaptations of his novels from his Jorasanko days were staged at the commercial theatre and were also quite popular. Unlike Jyotirindranath, Tagore's plays or novels would not attempt to deliberately stir up Hindu nationalist sentiments in such a blatant manner. But the fact that his writings still confirmed largely to standard literary and theatrical conventions made them appear stageable to commercial directors and producers facing a perennial drought of good plays. However, the flip side was, as we shall find out, that even in his early days, some of Tagore's writings were deemed unstageable due to immoral or socially non-conformist content.

Technically speaking, Rabindranath's Tagore's first association with Bengali commercial theatre happened with the songs he wrote for Jyotirindranath Tagore's plays produced in the commercial circuit. More concretely, it happened with the production of the play *Raja Basanta Ray* (1886) adapted from his novel *Bau Thakuranir Hat* (1883) by Kedar Nath Choudhury on the commercial stage. While I have already stated in the introduction of this dissertation that barring exceptional instances, it will not deal with the play adaptations of Rabindranath's novels or their productions, while discussing productions of Tagore's plays on the commercial theatre stage it has to be acknowledged that his novels were often of more interest to the producers than his much celebrated plays. Even among his plays, the ones which were most often staged were his earlier plays like *Raja O Rani* (its later rewritten version *Tapati*) and *Bisarjan*; comic skits like *Sesh Rakha*, *Sodh Bodh*, *Mini Poisar Bhoj*, *Boshikoron* and full-length comic plays like *Baikuther Khata* or *Chira Kumar Sabha*. His most valued body of dramatic work - his symbolic plays written at Santiniketan - did not find favor with the commercial stage. Neither did his *Giti Natyas* or *Nritya Natyas*. In comparison,

the play adaptations of a number of his novels like *Bau Thakuranir Hat*, *Chokher Bali*, *Gora*, *Ghare Baire*, *Jogajog* and even adaptations of short stories like *Dalia* were produced successfully and repeatedly on the Bengali commercial stage.

As early as 3 July 1886 *Raja Basanta Ray* was produced by the Great National Theatre under the direction of Kedar Nath Choudhury who achieved fame working alongside Girish Chandra Ghosh. The play was staged a number of times between 1876-77, indicating its popularity, but it stopped being enacted once Girish Chandra Ghosh replaced Kedar Nath Choudhury as the director of Great National theatre. Incidentally, it needs to be mentioned here that Girish Chandra Ghosh was not a big fan, either of Tagore, or his plays. In one instance, when Ghosh was requested by Amarendranath Dutta to adapt Rabindranath's newly written novel *Chokher Bali* (1903), he replied:

What! I will adapt that corrupted text? I shall never allow such shameful stuff to be acted in the theatre that I am a part of. (Ghosh, Quoted in Dutta, 1983:11)

Chokher Bali was a progressive novel for its times depicting a widow Binodini in relationship with a married man Mahendra. Ghosh, who was conservative in his social outlook, considered Tagore's work immoral. In spite of Ghosh's objections, *Chokher Bali* was staged in contemporary commercial stage by Amarendranath Dutta (1876-1916), that too in Girish's translation. Apart from Girish's personal dislike for Tagore as a next generation literary competitor, what also seems important to take notice of in Girish's rejection of *Choker Bali* is that Tagore's writings were often considered unsuitable for the commercial theatre on account of its progressive positions on a number of social issues. A notable instance in this matter is also Tagore's play *Bisarjan*. In spite of being written in the model of tragedy, having Shakespearean inspiration for its characters and having the potential to be produced successfully on the commercial stage, the principal reason that it was not performed on the commercial stage before Sisir Kumar Bhaduri staged it in 1926 is because of its critical attitude towards religious rituals and idolatry. The producers had to keep in mind that the audience in the commercial theatre came from diverse classes and were often quite conservative in their beliefs and tastes.

Coming back to the shows of *Raja Basanta Ray*, the play was performed again after Girish left Great National Theatre in 1889. The play was produced in the Emerald Theatre as well from 1890 onwards, with acclaimed actor Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi playing the role of the central protagonist Pratapaditya. We learn from literary historian Sukumar Sen's accounts

that the songs from the play achieved much popularity and it was the first time that Tagore's songs became known to the general public. The play was performed forty-five times altogether in the history of Bengali commercial theatre by various companies including an enactment at the Minerva Theatre in 16 September 1919 for the memorial fund of Ardhendu Sekahr Mustafi.

Although Rabindranath was not quite pleased himself with his first full-length play, *Raja O Rani* (1882) became quite a hit on the Bengali commercial stage and was performed by multiple theatre companies at different points in time. The play was first produced by the Emerald Theater in on 7 June 1890. The advertisement in *The Statesman* for the production mentioned the play as a "grim tragedy by our charming bird baboo Rabindranath Tagore" (*The Statesman*, 7 June 1890). We learn that prior to the commercial performance, a special performance was arranged for the private viewing of Rabindranath, his family and friends. We do not get to know whether Tagore approved of the performance or had any suggestions of his own. However, we note that in spite of Jyotirindranath and Rabindranath's plays being performed at the commercial theatre, it was not considered proper for Jorasanko residents to visit the commercial theatre. Therefore, a special screening was organized for them; in fact it had become a norm to do so.

About the production we learn from a report published in *Sahitya* magazine that it was a success and in fact "the one or two sections in the book which had appeared vague and confusing while reading appeared quite lucid and "natyarastmak" (bearing dramatic qualities) in performance" (*Sahitya*, July 1890). The Emerald Theatre alone performed the play thirty six times from 1890 to 1893, all the shows being held on weekly holidays - Saturdays and Sundays, indicating the huge popularity of the play with the audience. It was performed again in 1897 by the Classic Theatrical Company under the directorial aegis of Amarendranath Dutta and in 1912 at the Star Theatre under the direction of Amritalal Basu. Though Star Theatre performed almost twenty shows of the play indicating its popularity, one of the shows even being attended by king Jagadindranath of Natore province of Midnapur in undivided Bengal, theatre critic Hemendra Kumar Ray asserted the production was an utter failure because the actors were not able to recite Tagore's poetry satisfactorily. *Raja O Rani* was next produced at the Star Theatre by the The Art Theatre Ltd. in 1923 following its historical production of *Bisarjan*. We will be discussing this particular *Raja O Rani* production shortly when we discuss Art Theater Ltd.'s productions of Tagore's plays separately.

A prime example of how an oeuvre of work by Tagore, which is otherwise less recognized in critical circles, was extremely popular with the Bengali commercial theatre is an adaptation of Tagore's comic short story *Muktir Upay* (1926) titled *Dashchakra*. Often forgotten under the aura of his more serious work, Tagore engagement with comedy has not received its due attention. Apart from a number of comic short stories, non-sense poetry and prose for children, he wrote three full-length comic plays broadly confirming to the genre of "comedy of manners"- *Baikunther Khata* (1897), *Muktir Upay* (1938) and *Chirakumar Sabha* (1908) - and as many as nineteen short comic skits compiled in two separate anthologies titled *Hasya Koutuk* and *Bynga Koutuk*. Tagore's comic work was often produced with great success in the commercial theatre. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Tagore himself was aware of this fact which is why he thought of adding short comic skits to his more serious symbolic plays, whenever they were staged in Calcutta. He was sure that if the audience felt dissatisfied with the seriousness of his writing, they would be definitely be entertained by the comedy. Though Tagore was following in the footsteps of Jyotrindranath in writing comic plays, Tagore's *oeuvre* shows much more originality and variety than Jyotindranath, almost all of whose comic plays were Bengali adaptations of Moliere's works.

Technically speaking, Tagore's first comic piece to be performed in the commercial theatre was the short comic skit *Goray Golod* (1892) produced at the Kohinoor theatre organized by Sangit Samaj. It was a special performance repeated only once. The play *Goray Golod* would be produced by Sisir Bhaduri later under a changed title *Sesh Rakha*. We will be discussing the production of *Sesh Rakha* when we discuss Sisir Bhadur's productions of Tagore's plays separately. However, for more practical purposes *Dashchakra* was, in fact, the first comic work by Tagore to be successfully produced by the commercial theatre. Interestingly, the adaptation of the short story *Muktir Upay* into the play *Dashachakra* was done not by Tagore but Sourindro Mohan Mukhopadhyay. We learn from Sourindro Mohan Mukhopadhyay's memoirs:

In 1910, in a marriage ceremony organized at one of Tagores' close relatives' place, we (Satyendranath Dutta, Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay, Maninlal Gangopadhyay and myself) requested him (Rabindranath) for permission to adapt his short story "*Muktir Upay*" and perform it. Tagore obliged and after I penned the adaptation and I read it to him for suggestions. Once Tagore approved of the adaptation Amritalal Basu produced it at the Star Theatre in March 1911. The production was a great success, and on public demand, with

Tagore's consent, the adaptation *Dashachakra* was published. It is perhaps the only instance that a Tagore short story adapted by someone else was published independently as a book. (Mukhopadhyay, Quoted in Chakraborty, 1999: 15)

In the above instance we find Tagore having no reservations of his short story being adapted into a play by someone else and even published independently. Though Tagore remains an approving authority, it is still a liberal position that contrasts sharply with the strong reservations he expressed against any alteration of his work later in his correspondence with Dilip Kumar Ray published in *Sangeet Chinta* (1966) Surprisingly, when the play was enacted at the Star Theatre in February in 1910, the advertisement mentioned Mukhopadhyay's name but had no mention of Tagore's name in it. Whether the omission was accidental or deliberate we cannot tell, though the second time the play was produced in 1911, it was accompanied by a long note from Mukhopadhyay mentioning his indebtedness to Tagore. Mukhopadhyay in his memoirs mentioned this second enactment but does not mention the first. At a time when it was difficult for any new play to hold the interest of the audience for long, *Dashachakra* was enacted sixty-one times in the span of nine years (1910-1919), indicating its tremendous popularity. Tagore later himself adapted the short story into a play titled *Muktir Upay*.

Rabindranath and Art Theatre Ltd.: Breaking of the Ice

While a number of plays by Jyotirindranath and Rabindranath were performed at the commercial stage, the relation they shared with the commercial theatre still remained one of formal distance. The producers from the commercial stage would come to the Tagores for permission to produce their plays which they would mostly grant but there was still no scope for mutual collaboration, of working together hands-on. The commercial theatre as a space was still mostly looked down upon by the Thakurbari members and remained out of bounds. The equation, however, was to change with the Art Theatre Ltd.'s endeavors in the middle of 1920s. Not only did this company accomplish the most successful productions of Tagore in the commercial theatre, it also broke the ice and created a new scope for collaboration between the Tagores and the commercial theatre.

Interestingly, by the time Art Theatre would produce *Chira Kumar Sabha* in July 1925, Tagore had already been particularly impressed with at least one of the directors of the

commercial theatre and even struck a degree of friendship with him- Sisir Kumar Bhaduri (1889-1959). Tagore had witnessed Bhaduri first, in a one-off performance of his own, comic play *Baikunther Khata* (1911) organized at the Calcutta University Institute celebrating Tagore's fiftieth birthday, and then almost a decade later in the historic production of Yogeshchandra's play *Sita* (1924) directed by Bhaduri. In *Baikunther Khata*, Bhaduri played the role of the character named Kedar whom Tagore had played himself in the Jorasanko production. Tagore was hugely impressed by Bhaduri's acting skills in the role of Kedar and directorial mastery in *Sita* and at once was keen to see his plays directed by Bhaduri. We will discuss the Tagore-Bhaduri connection later in greater detail. However, for the moment, what needs to be mentioned is that Tagore after completing the writing of *Chirakumar Sabha*, a full-length comedy in 1925 for publication in the *Bharati* magazine, and even before it was published as a book, gave it not to the Art Theatre Ltd. but to Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, urging him to produce the play. As Sisir Kumar would recollect:

He (Tagore) gave that play (*Chirakumar Sabha*) to me too. The first edition of the work (published in the magazine) with handwritten editing and corrections by Rabibabu himself happened to be with me for a long time before I lost it while shifting my house... While I was producing other plays after receiving the book, Probodhchandra (of Art Theatre Ltd.) went and asked him, "Sisir babu is sitting idle with the play for quite some time, he is even producing other plays now. He won't do it". (Quoted in Mitra, 1963: 115)

Thus we see though Art Theatre Ltd. did produce *Chira Kumar Sabha* first and initiated the first collaborative venture between the Thakurbari and the commercial stage, if the credit for the Tagores' opening up to commercial theatre has to be bestowed on anybody, it has to be Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. It was Bhaduri who was able to establish an amount of respect for the commercial theatre in the Tagore household following which Art Theatre Ltd. could build on the collaboration.

Raja O Rani

Chirakumar Sabha, however, was not the first Tagore play to be produced by the Art Theatre Ltd. In 1924 Art Theatre had already produced Tagore's *Raja O Rani*. It will not be out of context to discuss the *Raja O Rani* production briefly to set the scene for *Chirakumar Sabha*. The production of *Raja O Rani* was indeed a daring act by the Art Theatre Ltd. at a time when Rabindranath's full-length plays were considered not economically viable for the

public theatres in Calcutta. By producing *Raja O Rani* on the commercial stage, Art Theatre was taking a huge risk as the report on the production published in the magazine *Sisir* tells us:

Though Rabindranath's plays have been performed a few times on the public stage, those who run the public theatre in Calcutta were generally of the opinion that Tagore's plays do not do well there. Art theatre could afford to act against such a conception so early is perhaps to owing their extraordinary success with *Karnarjun*. There can be another explanation as well... Art Theatre perhaps wants to make a final attempt at producing the classics of the past intending to see how the Bengali audience warms up to such a phenomenon. (*Sisir*, August 1924: 34)

Of course *Raja O Rani* would not be Art Theatre's last attempt at taking such a risk. We find them producing *Chirakumar Sabha* the very next year even after *Raja O Rani* had been staged with merely six shows. In this context, it must be noted that though *Sisir* Bhaduri was responsible for making the Tagores to take note of the public theatres, some credit for showing that it is possible to stage Rabindranath on the public stage must go to the Art Theatre Ltd. as well. It is mainly due to their risk-taking that we find Tagore's plays being staged in the commercial theatre quite a number times in the 1920s and early 1930s after almost a decade-long distancing from producing Tagore. We learn from the reports that Art Theatre left no stone unturned to make the production a success. They went out of their way to ensure the professional qualities of the production unlike the usual careless efforts of the public stage. This is confirmed in the report published in *The Servant* along with the advertisement of the play:

Along with the sensation created in the city by the Tagore's production of *Visarjan*, the Art Theatre Ltd. is going to stage his masterpiece *Raj O Rani* at the Star Theatre tonight by a company of talented artists including Messrs Tincory Chakraborty, Naresh C. Mitra, Aparesh Ch. Mukherjee, Misses Nihar Bala and Krishnavaminy. A songstress of reputation has also been added to the staff, and we are informed that no money or trouble has been spared to make the play a success... Kashmir Shawls and Kingkhaps of over two thousand years old will be worn by Raja Bikramdev and Kumar Sen and a '*musnad*' of the period will be spread in the court of Kashmir. Mr. Rabindranath Tagore and party will grace the occasion. (*The Servant*, 27 August 1923)

Though Tagore himself could not witness the production despite being in Calcutta, possibly due to illness or being preoccupied with other social engagements, we find Art Theatre having delved deep into their resources to make the performance successful. We learn from Ahindra Choudhury's autobiography *Nijere Haraye Khunji* (1963), that renowned

Bengali historian and archeologist Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay (1885-1930) of Harappa/Mohenjodaro fame did the historical research for the set as well as designed the costumes based on historical evidence and even used to tie the turbans of the actors himself to ensure accuracy. No stone was left unturned to create the period feel of a three-hundred-year-old Kashmir which forms the backdrop of the action in the play. Interestingly, it must be mentioned here that aspirations for such historical accuracy in the *mis-en-scene* again owed much to the pioneering role played by Sisir Bhaduri, who in his early productions at the University Institute and at the commercial theatre had already set the precedence of inducting his historian friends (which included Rakhaldas) to collaborate in creating the stage décor. Thus Art Theatre was following in Bhaduri's footsteps here.

However, we learn from the *Sisir* magazine that all the scenes used in the play were new, designed specifically for this production: "Almost all the scenes are newly painted - costumes are mostly new and exquisite" (*Sisir*, August 1924: 36). At that time, in public theatres, the general convention was to keep a fixed set of scenes, which would be used intermittently for various plays. This would obviously mean that often the scenes in the background would have no relation whatsoever with the plays being enacted, as we have already discussed. Thus, seen in this context, Art Theatre's efforts have to be considered special. What also deserves our notice is the fact that the report above was published along with the advertisement of the play, and thus, could be read as an advertisement in its own right. The specific mention of the fact that Tagore would be present in the theatre to witness the performance was enough to attract spectators there. We will deliberate on the last point in more detail later.

Not only was a lot of arrangement being made for the production, which one would understand was meant to please the audience as much as the poet himself, the actors took the opportunity to display their skills. Apart from appreciating the acting of known talents like Ahindra Choudhury, Naresh Chandra Mitra Tincory Chakraborty and Krishnavaminy, the reports published in the dailies also mention a stupendous piece of mute acting:

When the famine-stricken subjects were creating trouble on the stage then an individual was seen busy eating dry leaves and twigs. His silent acting was such a piece of genius that we cannot but salute his efforts. (Ibid)

We hear from Ahindra Choudhury the background story to this piece of mute acting:

His (Durgadas Bandopadyay) enthusiasm about theatre is unmatched, he has tremendous passion in him. He acted in *Karnarjun*; in *Raja O Rani* he went and asked Apareshbabu (the manager of the company), “Though I do not have a role in this play I will perform.” Apareshbabu, a bit taken aback, asked, “But how?” He said, “I will be the in the group of famine-stricken subjects. Let those who want to speak do so, I won’t be talking.” Apareshbabu agreed... Durgadas made his entrance on stage in the second scene of the act of the play in a crowd scene. The starving crowd of subjects was excitedly demanding food, some even at the point of rebelling. But Duragadas went on stage wearing a strange make-up of a starved individual. He looked like a thin emaciated figure, starved for real. He was not speaking at all and while the rest were busy creating a ruckus on the stage, he sat in one corner and started munching on leaves and herbs he had collected and brought with himself. He looked exactly as if he had not eaten for days...his role was noticed by the audience and on one or two nights, he received claps for his efforts. (Choudhury, Vol 1, 2011: 342)

The *Raja O Rani* production though critically successful and in spite of Art Theatre Ltd.’s utmost efforts to woo the audience, could only be staged for five shows between 1923-24. The play was revived for a single show in 1927. In spite of the commercial failure of *Raja O Rani*, Art Theatre would decide on producing Tagore’s *Chirakumar Sabha* next year.

Chirakumar Sabha

Chirakumar Sabha was produced for the first time on 18 July 1925 by the Art Theatre Ltd. and as we learn from Ahindra Choudhury’s autobiography, from the very moment that the production was confirmed, assistance from Jorasanko for the production, on various fronts, was also promised. We do not get to know whether Choudhury requested for the assistance, but it seems more feasible to presume that Rabindranath himself offered it. However, Choudhury says:

The first show of *Chira Kumar Sabha* will be held on 18th of July, Saturday evening, at 7:30. We started preparing. Each of us had received our “parts” though the play was yet to be published as a book. It was decided that Radhacharan (the lead singer for the company) would go and learn the new songs that the poet had decided to incorporate in play. Radhacharan would learn the songs, but in charge of music and songs would be Dinendranath Tagore. Gaganendranath Tagore would supervise the stage design, scenes and the costumes. At that time in theatre the singers knew well a form of “short-hand notation”. Radhacharan too knew it. Thus once a song was sung Radhacharan would immediately note it down in his short-hand

notation and then play it back to the poet. Tagore was amazed at the efficiency. I heard that he expressed his satisfaction of the same. (483)

This was perhaps first time that the Tagores were engaged so deeply in a commercial theatre production. As we learn from Choudhury's recollections, not only Rabindranath but Gaganendranath, Abanindranath and Dinendranath, were also associated with the production. We learn that the initial hesitation was soon overcome and what began only as assistance developed into full-fledged directorial interventions. Choudhury presents a palpable account of how the breaking of the ice took place:

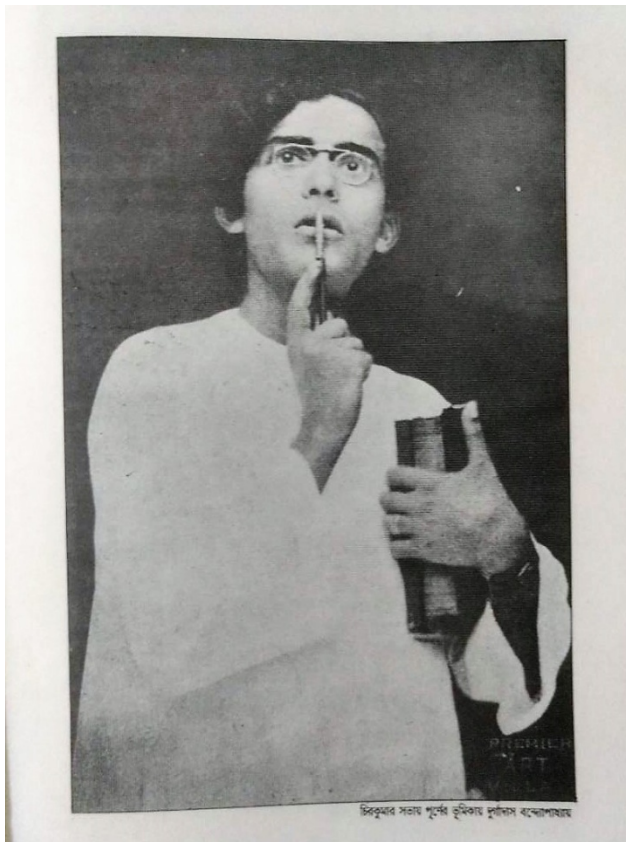


Figure 9 Durgadas Bandyopadhyay as Purna in *Chirakumar Sabha* performance, 1925

[M]any of the poet's friends and accomplices were unwilling to let him lend his play to the public theatres... In the end this, however, did not create any problems. The poet gave us the play quite gladly for producing it...

Anyhow, the preparations were on. Gaganendranath initially used to come, stand in front of the stage and witness the scenes being drawn. Their (Tagores) impression of the public theatres was not a good one and thus he hesitated to come inside. But gradually as he sensed there was nothing objectionable as such in the atmosphere, he came upon the stage himself. The same applies to Dinendranath as well. It was decided that he would merely supervise the singing. But when we saw such

enthusiasm, he in front of him, he began training the singers himself. And Gaganendranath? I still remember the way he designed Chandra Babu's room; I have not forgotten one bit how wonderful it was. There was a staircase which came down inside the room. Gaganendranath did a Cubist composition of the room. Those who did not witness it with their own eyes would not be able to imagine its picturesque quality. With time Gaganbabu and Dinubabu got completely absorbed in their work. They discussed it in friend and family circles - the public theatre is not as what we thought it to be - it is capable enough. (Vol 2, 357)

Not only did Dinendranath and Gaganendranath commit themselves fully towards the production but even consented to the mentioning of their names in the advertisement for the production. It is obvious that Art Theatre wanted to flaunt the fact that Gaganendranath himself was doing the set and Dinendranath was composing the music for the play. While Rabindranath was not present for the premiere show, he was to be present for the second one. Rabindranath was a celebrity in Bengali society and to be able to see him was reason enough for people to throng to any venue. Thus it was obvious that many who attended the show on that day came to see Rabindranath as much as the performance. We learn from a particularly suggestive report published in the daily *Bangla* titled “*Chirakumar O Rabindranath*” (the title contains a pun - the adjective *chirakumar* meaning ever-green is here being bestowed on Rabindranath) that the performance was attended by a number of finely dressed, respectable ladies who usually did not attend the public theatre in those days. Obviously they had come knowing Tagore would be present:

Last Saturday Rabindranath paid a visit to the Star Theatre to watch his play *Chirakumar Sabha* being enacted. The theatre was bursting with people. But the crowd did have a special quality to it. Most were not the usual theatre-going public. Even in the pit one could identify gorgeous hair, nice dresses, and beauties all around. Fresh fragrances as well... thousand lotuses bloomed to celebrate Tagore's arrival at the theatre...The ladies' man Rabindranath, however, was slightly late in making his appearance; the lotuses looked pale and anxious under the cloud of uncertainty...How many had come to the theatre to see the show and how many to see the poet we do not know but many we are sure wanted to do both at the same time. But sadly many had to leave disappointed. The theatre owners had arranged for Rabindranath to sit in the balcony where lotuses had bloomed in greater abundance. The audience sitting below was mostly denied a view of the poet. We do not know as of yet whether the production could impress the poet. We intend to inform our readers as soon as we come to know about it (*Bangla*, 26 July 1925: 9).

We get to know more about the effects of Tagore's visit to the theatre from a report published in the *Nanbajug* daily:

He could not reach exactly at 7:30 - there was a little delay and we had to telephone to remind him as well. Poets by character are not meant to abide by rules - such is their bent...

Nothing went the usual way that day- the costly seats were booked early and the cheaper ones followed. And the ladies had come in far greater numbers than the male audience- almost all of these women were from respectable families, dressed in their best attire, looking absolutely

gorgeous... Many of the Tagores were present with their family members, well-known man of letters Pramatha Choudhury, his wife Indira Debichoudhurani, Kalidas Nag and many of Tagore's friends and accomplices were there.

... There was not much enthusiasm to be perceived among the usual audience. There were keener to see the show being started than seeing the poet- we did not like this fact because poets always belong to their *jati* (community), if we do not respect them, we can only land up disrespecting ourselves.

The Star Theatre owners though procured a few trucks full of *debdaru* leaves and covered the velvet-wrapped footlights in front of the stage with bouquets. The stage was absolutely glittering with lights and adorned with flowers.

...That day shortage of space was to be felt everywhere in the theatre. Even after providing extra chairs, all the sitting arrangements could not be arranged for all of the audience - the one or two scenes that we could witness, we though the acting was not as spontaneous as the first night; it is quite possible that the poet himself presiding, the actors were feeling nervous while performing... (*Nabajug*, 27 July 1925)

One can form an idea from the above report about the sensation that Rabindranath Tagore was in contemporary Calcutta and also of the somewhat elite nature of his popularity. Tagore was extremely popular with the upper-middle class and the upper-class and especially with women for his fine features as indicated in the report above. While many who came to watch the show that day belonged to the educated upper-middle class and upper class waiting in tense anticipation for Tagore to make an appearance, the more ordinary viewer perhaps was more interested in watching the show. The theatre authorities took special preparations to welcome Tagore and the performance started late because of him indicating Tagore's star status even within the ranks of their circle. All of this anticipation for Tagore to come also indicates the fact that it was extremely rare for Rabindranath to pay a visit to the public theatre.

Did Tagore like the production? Ahindra Choudhury recollects:

I was a bit cross with the poet (Rabindranath) because he did not come to watch *Raja O Rani* but this time he fulfilled my wish.

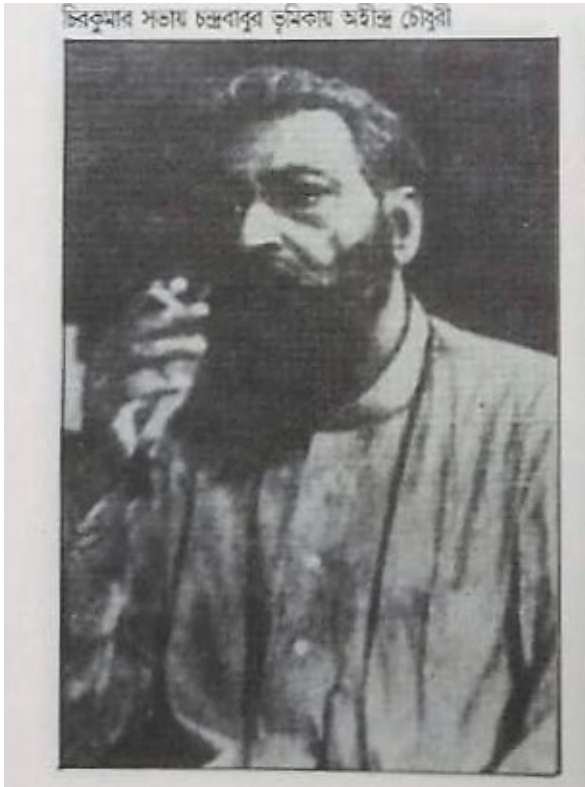


Figure 10 Ahindra Choudhury as Chandra babu in *Chirakumar Sabha* performance, 1925

Dinubabu and Gaganbabu must have spoken to him appreciatively of the production...the poet went back home after witnessing the performance; I could not find the opportunity to ask him how he had liked the performance. However, it was decided that I, Apareshbabu and Probodhbabu would meet the poet the next day for his reaction. The next morning, we first reached the theater and from there left for Jorasanko. I too accompanied them. As soon we reached and I met him, I touched his feet in respect and sat beside him. Charu Chandra Bhattacharya was sitting quite near to poet and he pointed out me to the poet and said, “He played the role of Chandrababu.”

At that time I did not understand but later came to know that poet had thought a comparatively older actor and not a young man like me had played Chandra. The poet looked for a few moments appreciatively towards me and uttered “*Besh Hoeche*”! (Well done)

I thought now he would begin his list of criticisms but he did not, he seemed quite happy...we sat there for some more time and chatted away leisurely. Altogether the poet was appreciative of the production. (Choudhury, Vol 2, 2013: 488)

Though it has not been possible to corroborate this claim from any other source, it appears that Tagore expressed his satisfaction with the production though the stage design and even perhaps the acting might not have fully exemplified his philosophy of theatre and aesthetic sensibility. This illustrates the fact that though by the 1920s Tagore was no longer dismissive of the public theatre, he could appreciate its efforts while still accepting its limitations. Tagore, not being able to recognize Ahindra Choudhury, proves that in comparison to Dinendranth or Gaganendranath, he was not so deeply involved in the preparation process for the production. Moreover, it also proves that he neither visited the public theatre nor was acquainted with even the well-known actors considering that

Choudhury had already achieved considerable fame as an actor. On the other hand, another possible reason behind Tagore's non-recognition of Choudhury also deserves mention here: Choudhury was well known for transforming himself completely on stage into different characters through a brilliant use of makeup, costume and mannerisms. As theatre critic Birendranath Palchoudhury explains in an essay "*Abhineta ar Abhinay*" (Actor and Acting, 1951), "If Ahindra Choudhury must be bestowed with a suitable title it must be "*nata Bohurupee*" (an actor who has mastered the art of disguise)...Mr. Choudhury is an expert in this art" (quoted in Bhattacharya, 1993: 168). However coming back to Choudhury's account, he also reveals a deep reverence for the poet. Tagore's words of appreciation confirmed a sense of significant achievement. This instance can be considered symptomatic of the public theatre in general - the high esteem in which it held Rabindranath.

Not only Rabindranath but the reviews for the *Chirakumar Sabha* production were generally appreciative of the production, complimenting the unpretentious and nuanced performance from the actors as well the scenes designed by Gaganendranath himself. The reviews hailed Art Theater's brave effort in successfully producing a Tagore play, and, in particular, a play from which legendary Sisir Kumar Bhaduri had backed out. Considering the difficulties of acting in a Tagore play, a long and appreciative review of the production published in *Nachghar* magazine praised the actors for their natural acting:

It would be safe to say that we have not seen such acting on the Bengali stage. The primary characteristic of the acting was its *sawbhab-anubortita* (naturalness). Never did the *theatre* mannerisms or the application of tune affect the acting. After quite long time the Bengali public theatre audience has been treated to an excellent comedy - we hope that the Bengali audience does justice to such brilliance. (*Nachghar*, July 1925: 32)

Ahindra Choudhury's acting as the central protagonist Chandra attracted special appreciation in the reviews and so did Aparesh Chandra for his portrayal of Rasik. For instance, theatre critic Niranjan Pal, who had experience of watching theatre in Europe, in his review published in the daily *Englishman*, compared Art Theatre's production to the best he had seen in Europe. He had this to say about Ahindra and Aparesh Chandra:

The success or failure of such a comedy as *Chirakumar Sabha* depends very much on the manner in which it is directed and acted. And in the present production it is helped by two really great performances... Ahindrababu's interpretation of the difficult and complex role of the Chandranath was one of the great performances. I still know very little what the poet meant

by the character of Chandranath - as a person he is vital and intelligent and interesting enough; the point of his drifting from one talk to another, passing from subject to subject, like a juggler keeping uncountable billiard balls in the air at the same time - but Ahindrababu would make me see it clearly if anyone could. The drifting he did as best as he could, but his absent-mindedness and almost boyish simplicity is something I will always remember... Apareshbabu made Rasik a very loveable and likeable creation. (*Englishman*, 25 July, 1925)

Though generally appreciative of the acting, Pal also objected to the technique of “by-play” used in the performance. “By-play” was an acting technique commonly used in public theatre performances, especially in comedies. In the by-play technique, while an action is taking place center stage, there are actors standing in the background doing small actions adding to the scene. Incidentally, Rabindranath as a director also used this technique in the comic plays he directed at Jorasanko. When we find the same technique being applied in the public stage, we wonder whether the style began at the Thakurbari and was then transported on to the public stage. There are instances of actors from the public theatres learning their tricks of the trade by watching performances at Jorasanko; the most famous example being Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi who asserted that he learnt whatever he had to about acting by watching the Jorashnanko productions. However, Pal in his review claimed that the excess of by-play in some of the scenes in *Chirakumar Sabha* was sometimes extremely distracting.

The scenes which were designed for the play under Gaganendranath’s direction received unequivocal admiration from the reviewers. Pal in his review especially appreciated the “general effect of the monochrome and the subdued colouring” of the scenes.

If *Raja O Rani* was only a critical success, *Chirakumar Sabha* found approval with both critics and the theatre-going public alike. Though we learn that on the second show there were more high class spectators than ordinary public, from a report later published in *Nachghar* magazine, we learn of its immense popularity among a wider cross-section of society:

Art Theatre’s *Chirakumar Sabha* has been so popular with the audience that every Saturday a lot of people are being forced to return without seeing the show due to shortage of space. We believe it would be beneficial that shows are arranged on both Saturdays and Sundays so that those denied entry would not have to wait an entire week to get another chance to watch the play. (*Nachghar*, 26 August 1925: 1)

There were as many as 57 shows of the play arranged by Art Theatre alone from 1925-1932, which was extraordinary by contemporary standards. Therefore, we can safely say that the credit of bringing Tagore to commercial theatre and its audience successfully lies with Art Theatre Ltd.

It is interesting to note that Art Theatre collaborated later on with Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's company Natya Mandir to perform *Chirakumar Sabha* in 1930. From a report published in the *Bijoli* magazine of the performance, we come to know:

Last the week the prime attraction in the theater world was the collaborative performance of *Chirakumar Sabha* on behalf of Natyamandir and the Star Theatre. Befitting his genius Sisir babu tried to impart a new interpretation to the character of Chandra and has been successful at that. But - we would have to acknowledge the fact that though not being inferior to Ahindra Choudhury's interpretation of the same, it could not at the same time surpass Choudhury's performance in the role. (*Bijoli*, 29 May 1930: 155)

It is indeed significant to note that Bhaduri played the same character in which Ahindra Choudhury had achieved considerable fame. Undeniably, this was a great risk for Bhaduri who was by then a phenomenon on the Bengali stage.

The claims of the above report, however, stand challenged by other contemporary reports. Theatre historian Sankar Bhattacharya argues in his work on Sisir Bhaduri titled *Natyacharya Sisir Kumar* (1993) that Bhaduri's rendition was informed by a deeper understanding of the character compared to Choudhury. Bhattacharya, in support of his argument, quotes Birendranath Palchoudhury who in an insightful account not only reveals Choudhury's and Bhaduri's distinctly different approach to their roles of Chandra babu but through it also presents a critical and comparative analysis of the acting methods used by the two actors:

Ahindra babu has achieved considerable fame playing the role of Chandra babu in Rabindranath's *Chirakumar Sabha*. This is in spite of the fact that he introduces a fair bit of slapstick in his acting. Ahindra babu's fame is based merely on the fact that the common audience relishes cheap comedy. A central trait of the character of Chandra babu in the play is that he remains so engrossed in his own thoughts and conversations that he hardly finds it possible to concentrate on people or objects lying right in front of him. For the sake of brevity, we can say that he is absent-minded. In Ahindra babu's portrayal of the character, such absent-mindedness appears as a side-effect of aging. But, indeed, it does not even require stating that it

is not a condition caused by aging, but rather an inherent trait of the character itself. In Sisir babu's rendering it appears as an integral part of Chandra babu's character. We also cannot but notice how Choudhury and Bhaduri enact Chandra babu's eating scenes differently. Ahindra babu after putting a rosogolla in his mouth, in a cheap *jatra*-esque trick, keeps licking the sugary syrup stuck to the fingers of his right hand in an attempt to make the audience laugh. But he does not give a damn about the fact that by this action the character loses its logical integrity. Sisir kumar on the other hand handles these scenes with characteristic subtlety. He does not eat even when he is repeatedly requested, nodding his head but all the while continuing to speak. When he is requested later on, he puts a small portion in his mouth and once again gets lost in the conversation. This fits Chandra babu's character. (Quoted in Bhattacharya, 1993: 192)

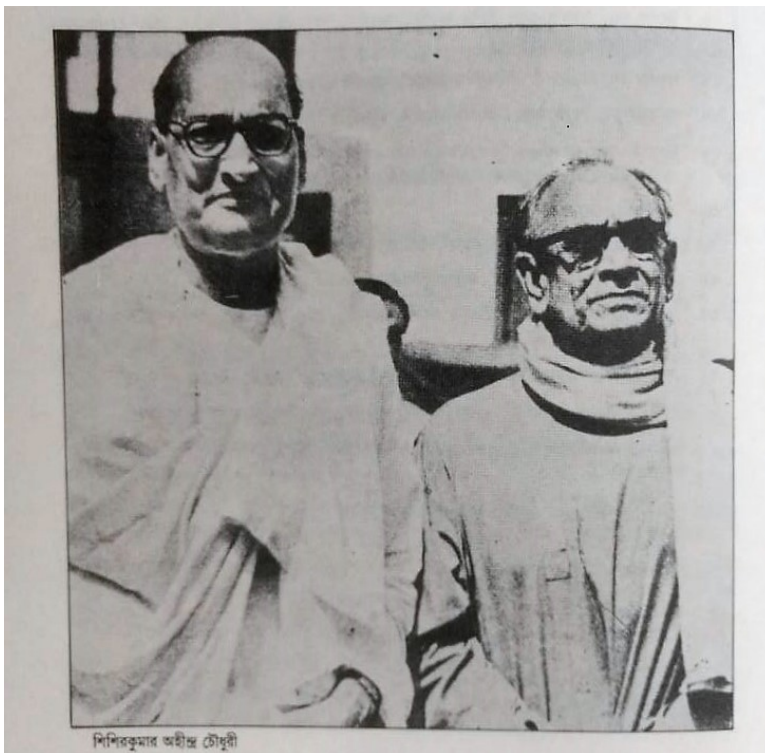


Figure 11 Ahindra Choudhury (left) and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri

The passage very clearly points out the fact that Bhaduri's approach to characters was more sincere and analytical in comparison to Ahindra babu's approach who often resorted to slapstick or cheap tricks (called *pyanch* in Bengali colloquial theatrical parlance) and could even jeopardize the logical integrity of the character to please the audience. Therefore, while Choudhury's acting often received accolades from the

audience, critics would not be so unequivocal in his praise. We find such criticism of Choudhury echoed in writings by other theatre stalwarts like Bhaduri himself (Chatterjee Vol. 1, 2016: 147) and later Sombhu Mitra (Bhattacharya, 1993: 192) as well. However, both of them also acknowledge Choudhury's apparent mastery of transforming into characters at a visual level; they also appreciate his professional attitude as well as discipline seen in the larger context of professional Bengali theatre.

Grihaprabesh

However, coming back to productions of Tagore's plays, in the span of two years 1925-26 Star Theatre produced two more of Tagore's plays *Grihaprabesh* (1925) and *Sodhbodh* (1926). We will briefly discuss certain aspects of these productions before we move on to discuss Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. Rabindranath Tagore adapted one of his short stories titled *Sesher Ratri* ten years after he had written it into a play called *Grihaprabesh* and published it in October 1925. The play was produced by the Star Theatre within a span of two months in December of the same year. While converting his story into a play, Tagore expanded on the incidents in the story, added a few characters and a number of songs. It is significant that Tagore never produced the play himself; nor did he produce *Sodhbodh*, also adapted into a play from a short story, published around the same time. This fact might lead us to assume that maybe he had the commercial theatre in mind when he wrote these plays. Though Tagore did not produce the play himself, it is clear from the advertisement of the play that he was closely associated with the Star Theatre production and so were Dinendranath and Gagnenedranath. The advertisement mentions that:

Star Theatre/...Saturday 5th December 7:30p.m./GRAND OPENING NIGHT OF/[B]ISWAKABI RABINDRANATH'S /GRIHA PRABESH/ Thoroughly Recast by the Author/ For the Stage/Direction and Music Sj. Rabindranath Tagore/ and Sj. Dinendranath Tagore./ Scenery- Sj. Gaganendranath Tagore. (*The Bengalee*, 3 December, 1925)

Rabindranath is credited for the direction of the play as well as the music along with Dinendranath. While it is written that Gaganendranath did the scenery for the play, in reality he designed only the two adjacent rooms on the stage in their minute realistic detail.

The production of *Grihaprabesh* attracted contradictory reviews from the critics. Most were overtly appreciative of the production, especially Gaganendranath's set and Ahindra Choudhury's acting in the role of a challenging central character, Jatin. The play *Grihaprabesh* revolves around a character Jatin who is mortally ill and remains bed-ridden throughout the play. The difficulty of producing a play with a bed-ridden central protagonist, for an audience craving sensation and spectacle, can be imagined. Some of the reviews hailed Choudhury's brilliance in making the impossible possible while others questioned Art

Theatre's judgment in deciding to stage Tagore's "unstagable" play and criticized the production for its monotony, and technical slip-ups.

In a long and admiring review published in *Nachghar*, Choudhury's efforts received heightened adulation. The reviewer expressed astonishment at Choudhury's unbelievable achievement of keeping the spectator glued to the stage for more than three hours without moving once out of the reclining chair in which he was seated. The review claims that even while almost half-lying, Choudhury through his voice and hands alone was able to express a

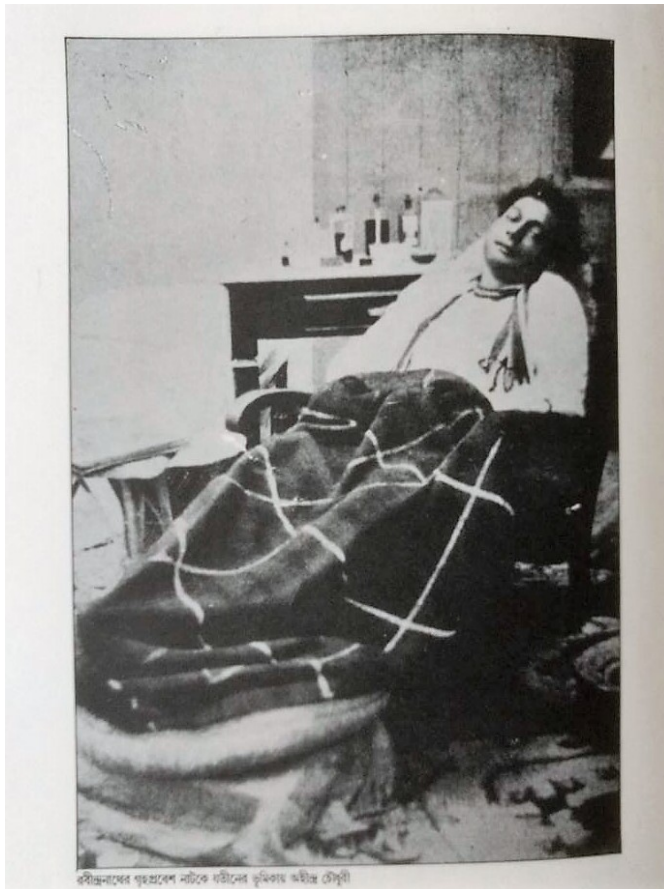


Figure 12 Ahindra Choudhury as Jatin in *Grihaprabesh* performance, 1925

variety of emotions that keep playing through Jatin's mind in the play. On the other hand, a particularly critical review titled "Star-e *Griha Prabesh*" published in the *Sisir* magazine said:

The play *Grihaprabesh* is direly lacking in dramatic quality. There are no dramatic twists in the action - dying Jatin's agony being the sole subject of acting- but how long can people bear to witness a man suffering in his death-bed - it becomes monotonous after a little while... All our hopes were pinned on Ahindrababu. We thought at least he would show us something extraordinary for which the audience will want to see the play. But we were left disheartened. ...Ahindrababu did not use his make-up to make him seem like an ill man about to die; in fact, he seemed quite healthy. Secondly, for the sake of the production he has had to sit on a reclining chair for the better portion of the play and had to die on a reclining sofa. We do not know if anyone has preferred to die the same way in a Bengali household. But Ahindrababu had no choice but to act like this...The poet had no time to think about such practical things while writing the play. Lastly, when Jatin tried to speak like a person on his deathbed, nobody could hear from but from the first row and yet when he started shouting like a fit, normal person, people would consider this unnatural. What could Ahindra Choudhury do? (*Sisir*, January 1926: 5)

Similarly Gaganendranath's stagecraft too drew conflicting responses from the reviewers. The *Nachghar* review presents a detailed description of the set designed by Gaganendranath Tagore and appreciates it for its aesthetic quality and ingenuity:

If the enactment of a play like *Grihaprabesha* opens up a new horizon in Bengali theater, so



Figure 13 Scene from *Grihaprabesh* performance, 1925

does the stage design in the play. It is because the entire action in the play happens in a single time and space, thereby giving the Art Theatre a wonderful opportunity to experiment and they have done the job astonishingly well... Jatin's incomplete house with its ceiling, walls, floor, doors and windows was presented on the stage not through a painted cloth hung on the

background but for real; the glass windows, the venetian spring door inlaid with coloured glass....the paintings of some of the best architecture of India including Jama Masjid and others seen hanging from Jatin's walls, the table full of medicines...[A]ll of this created a wonderful semblance of *bastabata* (reality) which was bound to affect the audience. (*Nachghar*, December 1925: 1-4)

Clearly, in public theatres, backdrop scenes conventionally constituted the stage setting. Gaganendranath's detailed design of a real room upon the stage thus introduced a new three-dimensional idea of stage design. Gaganendranath, the second great artist to come out of Thakurbari after Abanindranath, was influenced by the European Cubist movement. He took keen interest in stage designing especially for Tagore's plays. In the next chapter we will discuss his illustrations of the *Raktakarabi* manuscript and also his Cubist interpretation of the set for *Raktakarabi*. Unfortunately, *Raktakarabi* could not be produced by Rabindranath and even for productions of *Griha Prabesh*, the two existing photographs of the stage do not present us with a very clear idea. Though Gaganendranath's stage décor could not have a lasting impact on the commercial stage, the existence of better photographs could have

provided us with key clues in understanding Gaganendranath's ideas of stage design. It is at such junctures in researching old productions that the incomplete nature of the theatre archive comes back to haunt us.

However, coming back to the reviews, the review in *Sisir* magazine also critiqued certain elements of the Gaganendranath stage design:

We can see that there are electric lights in the room, yet there are no wirings to be found in the room. This seems strange to the eyes. The partitioning of the space into two adjacent rooms has created practical problems. Jatin is ill but not deaf. But when we find people talking loudly in the room adjacent to his own, it seems as if Jatin cannot hear them which seem absurd. In the original play, the action happens in two adjacent rooms simultaneously and people in one of the rooms cannot hear what happens in the next. Making this seem plausible on the stage is difficult and we are of the opinion that plays should be written keeping in mind what is possible to represent on the stage. If the stage is designed keeping in accordance with the play, one side of the audience would be able to witness the action while the other side would not. The stage design thus was extremely impractical... Though it is a patient's room we do not see the presence of any dim light or lantern which might be dimmed. Though Jatin asked to dim the light, the electric lights kept on being lit with the same brightness... (*Sisir*, January 1926: 6)

Thus we see that in spite of the acting and the stagecraft to excel, there were criticisms that the faults inherent in Tagore's play *Grihaprabesh* could not transcend. Indeed, the play was perhaps ill-suited for the commercial stage, or, for that matter, any stage, and therefore, in spite of Choudhury's individual brilliance (which received praise from even Bhaduri who was generally critical of Choudhury's acting) and Gaganendranath's magical set design, the play was not a commercial success with only twelve shows performed altogether. Because the production failed to be popular with the audience in the final few shows, Star Theatre even tried to attract audience by adding a performance of Tagore's short comic skit *Bashikaran*.

Thus we have seen how Art Theatre was taking up the challenge to produce Tagore's plays in the public theatre in spite of the obvious risks of doing so. Despite working within the limitations of the commercial theatre, the management of the Art Theatre was ready to break stereotypes to ensure quality productions, even at the cost of incurring financial loss. Their efforts reveal their utmost sincerity and commitment towards the productions. They must also be credited for the more cordial relation that developed between the Tagores and the commercial theatre, overcoming their past antipathy for each other. They

could provide an atmosphere congenial for the Tagores to be able to work for the first time within the commercial theatre. They were also responsible for some of the most successful productions of Tagore's plays, and without their pioneering efforts, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri might have ended up not producing any of Tagore's plays.

Tagore and Bhaduri: The Fortuitous Friendship

Initial Impressions

If any single person can be credited with the modernization of Bengali commercial stage, it has to be Sisir Kumar Bhaduri (1889-1959). In the early 20th century, following the demise of Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1912, the Bengali commercial theatre was bereft of any proper direction and was in dire straits. At this time Sisir Kumar Bhaduri brought to it a new and an unprecedented educated sophistication, intellectual approach, sense of aesthetics and above all, respectability. He was one of the best actors that Bengali commercial theatre would ever produce and its first director. Before Bhaduri the theatre companies of commercial theatre were run by actor-managers at the helm. The leading actors of the times like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Ardhendu Sekhar, Amarendranath Dutta, Amritalal Basu, Aparesh Chandra also doubled up as managers of the companies. These actor-managers were responsible for the training of the actors but they seldom, like modern directors, organized all aspects of the production to ensure an aesthetic consistency. Practically speaking, it was Bhaduri who first brought to Bengali theatre the concept of the central individual who would coordinate various aspects of a theatre production and ensure an aesthetic consistency in its overall effect.

Bhaduri to begin with was an exception when he decided to join the Bengali commercial theatre after being part of amateur theatre practice for more than a decade. At a time when commercial theatre was considered out of bounds for the educated and the elite, Bhaduri, who was part of this educated elite, joined the theatre out of his own will forsaking a secure career in academia. Bhaduri belonged to one of the elite families in Calcutta and his father was an engineer with the colonial administration. Though Bhaduri's early childhood was spent at his maternal grandfather's place in a small town, he shifted to Calcutta when he was ten. His schooling took place in Bangabashi collegiate school and he graduated from the Scottish Church College, Calcutta, in English, and did his post-graduation studies at the Calcutta University Institute. Though his father wanted him to be a lawyer, and Bhaduri

started training for this purpose, he left his studies midway to teach English at the Vidyasagar College, Calcutta. Bhaduri's love for literature and theatre was inherited from his maternal side during his early stay in their home. We learn he was an avid reader and a wonderful reciter. In his college days itself, Bhaduri began his engagements with theatre associating himself in a number of amateur productions at the Scottish Church and later at the University Institute (established for the cultural activities of the Calcutta University students and faculty). Bhaduri became quite well-known in Calcutta intellectual circles for his acting skills while playing Chankya in a production of D.L. Ray's *Chandragupta* in 1911 at the University Institute.

It was when a production of Rabindranath Tagore's comic play *Baikunther Khata* was organized next year (1912) at the Institute to celebrate the poet's fiftieth birthday that Bhaduri's first encounter with Rabindranath took place. Tagore in a letter written to Amal Home reflected on the performance:

Tell your friends at the institute that it was a pleasure to watch the performance... Such a subtle and well-organized performance of *Baikunther Khata* was not possible by anyone else other than Gagan, Aban and others at our place. Kedar (the negative character in the play) is my subject of jealousy. Once I had acquired fame playing that role. (Tagore, quoted in Pal, 1982-2003, Vol. 7: 4)

While Tagore did not particularly mention Sisir Kumar's name the fact that he mentions Kedar and that he had played the role himself indicates that he had liked Bhaduri's acting in the play. However, Tagore and Bhaduri were still unacquainted. Bhaduri continued to perform in a number of plays at the Institute while teaching. He was quite popular as a teacher too and we learn that poetry was his forte. However, Bhaduri stopped doing theatre for a while after his wife died in a tragic accident, but returned to acting and directing with gusto in what was to be his last performance in amateur theatre: *Pandaber Agyatabas*.

In the meanwhile a new player had emerged in the Bengali commercial theatre business and was trying to establish his interests. Jamshedji Framji Madan (1856-1923) came from a middleclass Bombay Parsee family of theatre enthusiasts. In the 1890s, Madan bought two prominent theatre companies, the Elphinstone and the Khatau-Alfred, including their creative staff and the rights to their repertoire. He founded Elphinstone Bioscope Company in 1908, and began producing and exhibiting silent movies. Some historians claim that J.F. Madan started showing films in a tent bioscope in 1902 on the Calcutta Maidan, but it is more

likely that the Madans did not seriously get into film until 1905 (Rajadhakshya, Willemen, 1998: 139). In Calcutta, Madan, however, was not satisfied with films alone and thought of trying his hands at the Bengali commercial theatre. However, in spite of having money, he could not procure any of the theatres in Calcutta owing to opposition from the existing theatre companies. As an alternative, he decided to conduct theatre performances at multiple theatres owned by him. It was decided, for instance, that the Cornwallis Street Film Theater would stage Bengali plays, two days in a week. He named his company Bengali Theatrical Company putting in charge his son-in-law Rustomji Dotiwala as manager. At a time when Madan was in search of a quality actor-manager to run his company, Sisir Bhaduri was making his presence felt in the city as an actor and director with his amateur production of *Pandaber Agyatabas*. Madan came to know about Bhaduri and gave him an offer to join his company at a salary of twelve hundred rupees a month. Bhaduri after consulting friends and advisers decide that theatre was his passion and true calling and thus left teaching to join Madan's company in 1921 (Bhattacharya, 1993: 34-35).

Bhaduri's first tryst with the commercial theater was to be bitter and short-lived. In spite of producing two back-to-back hits, Khirodprasad Bidyabinod's (1863-1927) new play *Alamgir* (December 1921) and *Chandragupta* (July 1922) within a short span, Bhaduri was soon frustrated with Madan, who, according to Bhaduri, was a businessman first and had neither any respect whatsoever for Bhaduri's art nor any stake in the Bengali culture. Bhaduri left in 1922 itself vowing to do theatre only if he had his own theatre where he could call the shots (Mukhopadhyay, 2016: 31-34).

Opportunity presented itself to Bhaduri again in the winter of 1923. In December 1923 a huge exhibition was being arranged at the Eden Gardens ground, Calcutta. To make the exhibition attractive it was decided to have a theater performance on a temporary stage in the ground. Sisir Kumar was entrusted with the responsibilities of the production. Done on a makeshift stage, on a short notice, Bhaduri's *Sita*, much like his previous productions, received both critical and popular success. So much so that Bhaduri decided to form his own theatre company, taking lease of the Alfred Theatre and open it with the performance of *Sita*. At the very outset, a small setback happened in the form of a copyright problem. Art Theatre conspiring to not let Sisir Kumar to produce *Sita* bought the exclusive rights to the play for a year from an ignorant Dilip Kumar Ray, singer and son of D.L Ray. Ray, who was residing outside the country when Bhaduri was staging *Sita*, did not know of Bhaduri's intentions to produce the play when he signed the agreement with Art Theatre just after returning back.

However, not to be demoralized, Bhaduri's colleagues in his theatrical venture made Jogesh Chandra Choudhury, an actor with Bhaduri's troop who was also a teacher, write a new play under the same title. The play was written and performed for the first time at the Manomohan Theatre House on 6 August 1924. *Sita* was a resounding success. With his all-round brilliance in the production, Bhaduri was considered no less than a phenomenon by the contemporary intellectuals and ordinary theatre goers alike.

It was the production of *Sita* that would account for practically the first encounter between the Tagores and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. Taking notice of the huge popularity of *Sita*, the Tagores went to witness the production and were left highly impressed. We learn from Hemendrakumar Ray's account work on Bhaduri titled *Bangla Rangalay O Sisir Kumar* that Rabindranath was invited by contemporary literary great Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, who had already been overwhelmed by the performance, to see it with him. Tagore obliged and went to see the production. He sat beside Abanindranath's son in law, Sisir Kumar's close associate and the choreographer for the *Sita* production, Maninlal Gangopadhyay. Tagore discussed the performance with Gangopadhyay during the staging and also in the interval and at the end of it, he personally met Bhaduri and appreciated the production by terming it "moulik" (radical/new). Not only did Rabindranath like Bhaduri's production but he was so impressed by *Sita* that he at his own behest urged Bhaduri to produce two of his plays, presenting him the play texts with his own handwritten corrections. This was indeed remarkable for someone like Tagore who seldom visited the commercial stage, even when his own plays were staged, and had very little faith prior to Bhaduri in its exponents. Obviously, Tagore has witnessed unforeseen potentialities in Bhaduri's efforts.

It could well be sensed how threatened the other theatre companies felt by Bhaduri's sudden and meteoric rise. In the absence of any immediate written reactions on behalf of Rabindranath after watching the play, they spread rumors that Tagore had not liked the performance at all. By that time, however, Bhaduri and his associates had not only started a theatre company but also a theater magazine called *Nachghar*, largely meant to promote Bhaduri's theatre, but which nevertheless remained one of the best Bengali theatre magazines in the coming decade. Hemendra Kumar Ray was trusted with the editorship of the magazine. However, following the circulation of the rumors, Manilal Gangopadhyay asked Tagore to personally write something about the performance to repudiate them. Tagore responded in a letter to Gangopadhyay:

It is not possible for me to write a full report regarding the performance for publication purposes. However, you can write yourself that I have a special respect for Sisir Bhaduri's "*proyog-naipunya*" (directorial mastery) and it is only thus that I have entrusted him with producing one or two of my plays. I do not like the play *Sita* at all - it is not even a play and precisely because of this fact, it is extremely difficult to exhibit one's theatrical skills with this play. In spite of such apparent impediments, Bhaduri has, through his brilliance alone, been able to produce even such a play successfully. You can write that you have heard all these things from me. (Tagore, quoted in Ray, 2014: 45)

While Tagore expectedly did not like the play written by an amateur playwright, he was impressed by Bhaduri's ability to stage it successfully. Moreover, Tagore was perhaps the first to identify Bhaduri's directorial function in the production which he termed "*proyog*" in his letter than Gangopadhyay. The word "*proyog*" literally meaning application would be assimilated henceforth in the Bengali theoretical discourse on theater and used as a Bengali alternative to denote the act of direction. Even after Tagore's words to Gangopadhyay were published in *Nachghar*, the rumors did not stop spreading. Tagore was much troubled by such developments immediately prior to his trip abroad. In fear that these rumors may escalate in his absence, he wrote another letter to Gangopadhyay entrusting him with the responsibility of renouncing such rumors in Tagore's absence:

I have been pained to learn that a few people have spread a false polemic against Sisir Bhaduri taking my name. If it is so required you might make it clear that I have had no chance to interact with any of them and I know Bhaduri as a gifted individual.

I will be leaving the country shortly and I fear that in my absence spreading such rumors will intensify. I entrust you with the responsibility of repudiating such falsifications. (ibid)

We find Tagore anxious that such rumors might hurt Bhaduri's interests or might strain the relationship between him and Bhaduri, which Tagore was apparently keen to maintain. What also comes across in this instance is the darker side of the Bengali commercial theatre replete with all kinds of rivalry and petty backbiting.

We learn from Ray that not only Rabindranath but Abanindranath too went to see the production and left impressed. It was, however, not the first time that Abanindranath was witnessing Bhaduri's theatrical talents. He was among the audience of the performance of a Gitinatya titled *Basanta Lila* performed in the opening night of Bhaduri's theatre company in place of *Sita*. Abanindranath in a letter written to Bhaduri named him "*Rup-Dakha*" (the

master of forms) and warned him about the rough road ahead in the commercial theatre business because of his uncompromising attitude towards art:

I have been immensely pleased to witness that your artistic sensibilities have taken you far from the dead professionalism and petty business interests; but those who expect more than five hours of non-stop entertainment at a meager sum of five sikkas, singing even in a broken voice, mad rhythm of bone-breaking dances... will never remain satisfied. (Abanindranath, Quoted in *Natya Akademi Patrika* 4, 1994: 195)

Thus we see even before Tagore witnessed Bhaduri's theatrical work that Abanindranath had already seen it and maybe it was he who had suggested to Tagore to see the play. Though Bhaduri's *Sita* was a huge commercial success with over hundred shows in the span of a year, Abanindranath's premonition, however, proved to be accurate in the long run as Bhaduri suffered from acute financial problems throughout his career.

Bhaduri's Choice of Plays and the Raktakarabi fiasco

After forming his own theatre, Bhaduri did not immediately produce any of Tagore's plays in spite of Tagore urging him to do so. Maybe Bhaduri was still skeptical in his mind about the stageability of Tagore's plays in the commercial theatre or maybe he was still in search of a new dramaturgy which might fit Tagore's plays. At a more practical level, it might also be that Bhaduri was trying to strengthen his group with capable actors before taking up such a challenging venture. However, the first Tagore play that Bhaduri decided to stage was an old play *Bisarjan* in 1926 not before Art Theater had already paved the way for productions of Tagore's plays in the commercial theatre with their productions.

Why did Bhaduri choose *Bisarjan* among Tagore's plays? *Bisarjan* written in 1890 is a tragedy with Shakespearean overtones. In spite of being a verse play, written in Tagore's early years before the symbolic period at Santiniketan, it still qualifies as one of the easiest of Tagore's plays to stage for the commercial stage. However, when Bhaduri produced it, it was produced in the Bengali commercial theatre for the first time; the reason being that the play's critical attitude towards Hindu religion, rituals and idolatry was not thought fit for the commercial stage by its conservative producers. Looking beyond this political or social dimension towards aesthetic considerations, however, Bhaduri's selection would have to be qualified as rather cautious. Neither symbolically complex, nor political like Tagore's later plays, neither demanding of a radically different dramaturgy, the historical backdrop of the

play suited Bhaduri's historical, realistic, three-dimensional ideas of set design, accommodating a lot of songs and bearing enough potential for creating tear-jerking emotions in the audience. *Bisarjan* was a play truly suited for the dominant tastes of the commercial stage.

In fact, Tagore's plays that Bhaduri produced were either his early ones like *Bisarjan* or *Tapati* (a later reworking of the early play *Raja O Rani*) or a comic skit like *Sesh Rakha* or an adaptation of a novel like *Jogajog*. Thus Bhaduri's choice of Tagore's plays conforms to the general trend in commercial theatre, as we have discussed earlier. It must be noted that by 1926 when Bhaduri was staging *Bisarjan*, Tagore had already written almost all of his symbolic plays including *Raktakarabi* which he personally urged Bhaduri to produce and even read it to Bhaduri in a specially arranged reading of the play. Bhaduri, however, backed out terming it, echoing Tagore, *shakta karabi* and indicating as a reason the same provided by Tagore: the inability to find a suitable Nandini. In Anil Mukhopadhyay's account, who was an actor in Bhaduri's Srirangam from 1952-1956 and also quite close personally, we learn more details about the challenge of casting *Raktakarabi* in Bhaduri's own words:

Though our group was quite strong at the time, we did not have any actress who could play Nandini. Later on, Probha became a very powerful actress but in those early years her acting still bore evidence of being taught. Apart from that, Nandini is not built up of such simple sentiments as Sita (the central woman character of *Sita* played by Probah Debi). The other young girl in the team was Usha, who had played Aparna in *Bisarjan* and was not a special talent. You would not be able to imagine now, the amount of labour we had to put into training absolutely illiterate girls and transforming them into actors. One cannot be just trained to play Nandini if one does not have an understanding of one's own. Naren adapted the novel *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) for me but I was unable to produce it as I could not find the right Bimala (the central woman protagonist of *Ghare Baire*). Love makes its appearance in the cruel, life-less world of the *yaksha puri*, in the form of a woman named Nandini, who represents the force of life itself and turns everything upside down - is this a light matter? Moreover, the poet has introduced another character called Bishu Pagol as her companion. Note that the poet calls this character "*pagol*" (mad). Is being a good singer enough qualification to play such a character with a soul which knows no barrier? Is it even possible to teach from scratch how to play such characters? ... Nandini was the most difficult one. If it could have been solved I would have approached Kazi (poet Kazi Nazrul Islam) for the other (Bishu Pagol). (Bhaduri, quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 2016: 301)

The above passage indeed proves to be revealing on multiple fronts. First of all, one can realize the sheer challenge of finding capable actors to perform in such complicated characters as present in Tagore's symbolic plays. The challenge of finding Nandini was exponentially difficult because of the sheer absence of educated actresses bearing refined sensibilities. Bhaduri's mention of Kazi proves that he was even ready to look beyond his usual group or the acting community in search of suitable personnel. Secondly, in spite of the fact that Bhaduri could not produce *Raktakarabi*, one notices Bhaduri's deep understanding of the play and its characters as well as the fact that he had sincerely thought about it and systematically went about planning for the same. We learn from both Mukhopadhyay and Soumitra Chatterjee's accounts that Bhaduri had also made plans for the staging of the play. He had thought of playing the king himself. He wanted to stage it in an open stage without any backdrops or set, or at the most having a suggestion of the *Raktakarabi* (red oleander) flower in the back drop. He had thought of using red lights (Chatterjee, Vol. 1, 2016:144). Renowned actor Soumitra Chatterjee, it must be mentioned here, was also close to Bahduri in his final years.

However, we come to know of another interesting fact from both Mukhopadhyay and Chatterjee's accounts. Tagore was so keen to see his play being staged that he even suggested that Bahduri's brother Biswanath Bhaduri play the character of Nandini, to which Bhaduri did not agree:

Suddenly one day, Tagore got hold of Biswanath Bhaduri and said, "Here it is! He can make a wonderful Nandini!" The more Sisir babu insisted that it is not feasible in Bengali professional theatre; Rabindranath appeared indignant and argued, "Why not? It was possible in the Shakespearean age and in Burbage's time too." Rabindranath began citing instances from history - he attempted to illustrate his position by discussing various theatrical traditions around the world in which the very conception that women's roles have to be played by actual women is extremely shallow. (ibid)

Not only does such an instance bear testimony to Tagore's desperation seeing *Raktakarabi* produced by Bhaduri, but it also reveals his extremely modern aesthetic sensibility which unfortunately Bhaduri could not share probably due to the fact that as a professional director his hands were still tied at the end of the day by certain economic conditions. It could also be kept in mind that the production of the play posed aesthetic difficulties because Bhaduri, unlike Tagore, subscribed more deeply to the ideal of realism in acting. We have already

discussed in the previous chapters how cross-dressing in the context of Bengali theater would be understood to jeopardize the ideal of realism.

Why was Tagore so desperate to find *Raktakarabi* or his other symbolic plays staged at the commercial theatre or by Bhaduri to be more specific? Did he himself doubt the stageability of these plays and thus wanted to find out whether they could be successfully staged outside Santiniketan or Jorasanko at the commercial theatre? Did he suffer from insecurity deep inside? Or did he believe that Bhaduri as a director would be able to impart to them a fresh and perhaps even more suitable treatment than they had received in his own stagings? Such an assumption would seem a probability when we learn from Chatterjee's account that Tagore not only believed in Sisir Kumar's directorial mastery but also in his inventive ability:

It was often that Rabindranath used to tell Sisir Kumar, "Sisir, all of this does not suit you. Professional theatre is for others to run. You should select a team of talented young boys and girls - you should have a separate space for yourself - you could just experiment there. (Chatterjee, 2016, Vol. 1: 145)

In the case of *Raktakarabi*, the fact that Tagore himself could not stage the play in spite of repeated attempts of course added to his desperation.

However, we see that Bhaduri, contrary to his wishes, could not produce plays which Tagore would want him to but rather chose ones which would suit the commercial theatre. Interestingly, in Bhaduri's lone essay on Rabindranath, "*Rangamancha O Rabindranath*" written in 1952, we find a rather dismissive attitude towards the symbolic plays. In the essay, to begin with, Bhaduri reveals a deep reverence for Tagore and claims that Tagore's success as a playwright is due to the fact that he was an actor and a director, thereby having a more clear conception about theatre from first-hand experience in comparison to playwrights who only write plays. However, having made this point, the examples of Tagore's plays that Bhaduri provides to illustrate his point are *Sesh Rakha* and *Tapati*. More importantly, Bhaduri in the essay also expresses his grief at the fact that Tagore though enriching Bengali literature immensely did not spend much of his time or efforts in writing plays (Bhaduri, 1987: 33). This, indeed, seems like an absurd assessment of a writer with more than thirty original full-length plays apart from rewritten versions of earlier plays and short skits to his credit; unless of course Bhaduri did not consider most of these plays to be unstageable, or at least unstageable in the professional or commercial theatre.

Bisarjan: a tale of two productions

Among the Tagore plays that Bhaduri did produce, a fact that makes Bhaduri's choice to stage *Bisarjan* even more interesting is that just three years before Bhaduri staged *Bisarjan*, it had been staged by Rabindranath Tagore at Calcutta quite successfully. In this production, Tagore had played the characters of Raghupati and Jaisingha alternately in successive shows. Inevitably, it seems like a great risk for Bhaduri to have staged *Bisarjan* three years after Tagore had staged it, for the fact remains that his production would always be compared to Tagore's whose accomplishments were still fresh in people's mind. This case of two star performers doing the same play around the same time was indeed an exceptional instance in the history of the Bengali commercial theatre. There is no other instance where a play of Tagore's has been performed in the commercial theatre immediately after being performed under Tagore's direction. In such circumstances, it was indeed a brave thing for Bhaduri to stage the play, as the reviews of the production mention. But why did Bhaduri choose to stage it? Was there a secret sense of competition, an urge to prove himself superior to than Tagore or was he just trying to play safe by walking a tried and tested path? There is nothing one finds in the archive to be able to confirm either of these positions.

In the advertisement to the production, one finds a clear and conscious intention to categorically demarcate the production as a fresh production and not a copy of Tagore's interpretation. The English translation of the advertisement for the play published in *Nachghar* reads as follows:

...Natya Mandir/ Nabaniketan- 138, Cornwallis street, Calcutta/ Telephone Number 3040 Burra bazar/ World renowned Rabindranath's/ Well-known play/ Bisarjan!! Bisarjan!!/ First show 26 June, Sunday Rupees 5/10/ Raghupati- Sisir Kumar Bhaduri/ this/ Bisarjan/ has been created rewriting the usually performed play. / Enough novel elements have been incorporated/ at Rabindranath's instruction and in his sensitive direction this play/ Has seen alterations and additions/ A number of Rabindranath's songs have been added and a lot of changes have been made to the scenes/ thus this Bisarjan does not lack in freshness/ In Dinendranath's training the songs in the play have received a new lease of life/ Backdrops suiting the play have been drawn by a master artist/ We are inviting the audience to witness this new Bisarjan. (*Nachghar*, 25 June 1926)

The strategy to advertise Natya Mandir's *Bisarjan* as a revamped version of the play could have in fact worked in two ways. First, the educated elite audiences who had the chance to witness Tagore's production were being promised a completely refurbished *Bisarjan*. On the other hand, the ordinary audiences who were skeptical about watching productions of Tagore's plays were being promised a production of *Bisarjan* which would not be Tagore's usual play but a fresh treatment to suit their tastes. In the case of *Bisarjan*, however, we find no indications in the archive that the play was majorly edited for the production. We know that a few more songs were added to the play keeping in mind the popularity of Tagore's songs among the public. In fact, contemporary well-known singer

Krishna Chandra Dey, grandfather to later popular singer Manna Dey, would be invited to sing a song in the play dressed as a beggar. However, no other significant alterations are mentioned in the reviews or in the participants' memoirs.

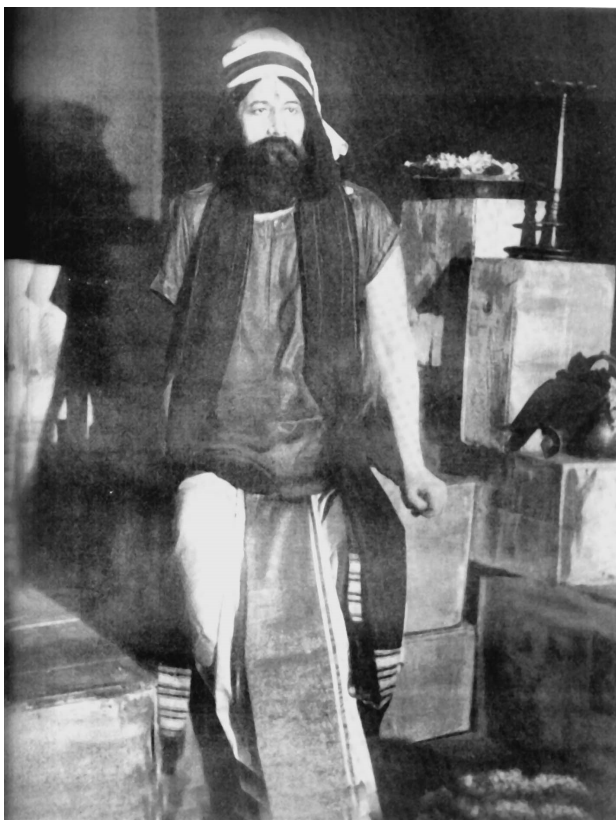


Figure 14 Rabindranath as Jaisingha in *Bisarjan* performance, 1923

But otherwise, how different or similar was Bhaduri's production to Tagore's? How were the productions staged differently? We learn from the reviews and existing photographs that while in Bhaduri's production drop scenes were used, the Tagore production used three-dimensional staging. We find more information about the drop scenes in the Sisir Bhaduri production from a long report of the production published in *Nanchghar* after the first show:

We got to witness a new, talented artist this time at the Natya Mandir. He is Shri Ramendranath Chatoopadhyay. He has been trained in the Abanindranath style by Abanindranath himself...it is following his direction that the drop scenes of *Bisarjan* have been painted...The scene depicting the temple was well planned and nicely painted. The temple has been decorated in detail with lines and figures as is often perceived with the old Indian temples...The royal courtroom is also well designed - fresh and simple. What deserves our special appreciation is

the subtle use of colour in the scenes...if the scenes in a play become more imposing than the play itself, it seems unbearable to us. We wish the young artist immense success in future.
(*Nachghar*, 26 June 1926)

We also come to know about the stage design in the Tagore production from a report published in a magazine *Prabartan*:

[T]here is only one scene we see throughout the play - the open courtyard space in front of Tripureshwari's temple and the marble steps leading inside the temple; there are no other visuals indicating the location or context, the "back cloth" is deep blue - stretching on both sides like a blue sky. The temple or the deity inside the temple is beyond the view of the audience and not outside their imagination. The scene is extremely simple and "suggestive".
(*Prabartan*, 27 June 1926)

Notably, Bhaduri's production went by the conventions of the commercial stage in using drop scenes though aesthetically much improved than what would generally be witnessed in performances of the commercial stage. The stage design in the Tagore production was experimental, minimalist and suggestive. In the only existing photograph of the production, we see Tagore dressed as Jaisingha sitting on the steps of the temple which are visible in the background. The steps as much as they are visible, are presented to us with a Cubist sense of design indicating perhaps the influence of Gaganendranath Tagore, a suspicion we however cannot confirm from the archival evidence. Thus we see that Bhaduri, though revealing aesthetic sensibilities uncharacteristic of the commercial stage, sticks to its conventions in terms of stage design. In spite of being aesthetically sensible, Bhaduri's stage design seems a far cry from the suggestive design adopted by Tagore.

A major comparative paradigm that was to be put forth by Bhaduri's production was the comparison between two actors, Bhaduri and Tagore, playing the same roles. While Tagore performed Raghupati in the first performance of his *Bisarjan* production, in the second performance the then sixty-two year old poet played the character of young Jaisingha. Sisir Bhaduri, too, after acting the role of Raghupati for the first ten shows began performing in the role of Jaisingha. Was this a deliberate attempt on behalf of Bhaduri to emulate Tagore? How did the audience react to this? There was indeed an expectation among the audience that Bhaduri after performing the role of Raghupati would also, much like the poet, perform the role of Jaisingha. In a report published in *Bangla* expectations of seeing Bhaduri perform the role of Jaisingha are expressed:

There is enough opportunity for exhibiting one's acting skill in the role of Jaisingha and it is thus that the poet even with his moustache and beard acted in the role for as many as four nights. People were hoping that Sisir babu would also play the role of Jaisingha. There are people who get annoyed if their expectations are not met, and some of them are spreading rumours that until people forget about Rabindranath's interpretation of the role, Bhaduri is not ready to perform in the role of Jaisingha. What can one do to stop such rumours? (*Bangla* 27 July 1926:11)

We find the report trying to instigate Bhaduri into performing the role of Jaisingha by almost throwing him a challenge. Once Bhaduri performed the role, the magazine congratulated Bhaduri on his success in the role and took the credit for suggesting the same in their earlier report. It might well be possible that Bhaduri was aware of such expectations and also was eager to take up the challenge. Bhaduri, in fact, much like Ardhendu Sekhar, had the reputation to play multiple roles in the same play. We, however, also find much evidence which indicates that Bhaduri's decision might as well be prompted by other circumstances. We learn from the reviews that Bhaduri playing the character of Jaisingha instead of Raghupati was not the only alteration in the cast that happened in the *Bisarjan* productions; rather, a number of casting changes took place in the short history of the production lasting not more than twenty shows. In fact, an audience response published in a magazine *Nabajug* criticizes Natya Mandir for these frequent casting changes and points out the fact that they can have an adverse effect on the performance. Moreover, from a report published in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 1 August 1926, we learn that:

Bisarjan has undergone a great change in the cast. From this Mr. Sisir Kumar Bhaduri will play 'Joy Singha' and Mr. Naresh Chandra Mitra 'Raghupati'. This is particularly due to Mr. Rabindra Mohan Ray's leaving Calcutta for Chittagong for two weeks. (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 August, 1926)

Therefore, Bhaduri's decision to play Jaisingha might have been prompted by practical circumstances relating to who was available to play particular roles.

However, this did not stop reviewers comparing Bhaduri's efforts from Tagore's. Interestingly, Rabindranath had played Raghupati too in the first show of *Bisarjan* produced under his direction. However, in spite of Bhaduri playing the same role at first in his production, one does find the reviewers bringing in the comparative paradigm. Bhaduri's acting as Raghupati attracted appreciation from the reviewers. He was commended for not indulging in a flashy performance for which the character of Raghupati has potential. Rather,

Bhaduri chose an analytical and systematic approach to the character where he laid bare the complex psychological states of the character and let the character grow gradually to its ultimate crisis. It was when Bhaduri played Jaisingha that one finds the comparative paradigm being evoked more emphatically in the reviews. This may be due to the reason that Tagore's acting as Jaisingha caught the imagination of the people in a way that his Raghupati was unable to. The reviews which compared Bhaduri and Tagore mostly voted in favour of Tagore. For instance, the audience's reaction published in *Nabajug* said:

We would like to say this about Bhaduri's acting in the role of Jaisigha that he has exhibited nothing but courage to accept the responsibility to play the character so soon after Rabindranath had acted in it. Comparison comes naturally to human beings. Rabindranath's Jaisingha at the Empire theatre has left a permanent imprint in the audience's mind - an imprint which still remains fresh and glowing. Many would continue to be overwhelmed reflecting on Tagore's performance for a long time... It is but natural under these circumstances to compare Bhaduri's efforts with Rabindranath and in that comparison Bhaduri's acting, recitation and expression of emotions only fail to match up to Tagore's standards. (*Nabajug*, 3 September 1926)

The report published in *Bangla* magazine says:

Though we did get to see the Sisir Bhaduri "patented" style in acting, we were ultimately left dissatisfied. It would not be right to compare his acting with the poet, we will not do that but even compared to Bhaduri's other efforts, it seemed inferior. Though there were a few spectacular moments, mostly it was monotonous, and the exhibition of the typical techniques. (*Bangla*, 3 September 1926)

It was only *Nachghar* which brought out a review terming Bhaduri's performance his best till date. But this was only to be expected because *Nanchghar* was the official magazine of Bhaduri's group. It indeed seems surprising to us today when, by general consensus, Tagore's interpretation of a role was considered superior to arguably the best actor of the commercial stage – Sisir Kumar Bhaduri.

Broadening the context, it would be pertinent here to also know how these two fabulous actors Tagore and Bhaduri evaluated each other's acting. Did they look up to or tried to emulate each other or were they critical of each other? We have already come across the instance of the *Baikunther Katha* production where Tagore was left impressed and even self-confessedly jealous by Bhaduri's superlative performance in the role. This is in spite of the fact that Bhaduri's approach, as Samik Bandyopadhyay rightly points out in his essay on

Bhaduri (2011), can be characterized as one of analytical realism. We have already discussed Tagore's general apathy to realist aesthetics. However, it is quite possible that the instance of Bhaduri might have forced him to inflect his opinion. Tagore perhaps saw in Bhaduri the possibility of an analytical approach to physical acting which could actually lay bare the internal psychological turmoil of the characters - a method which he had always aspired for but, arguably, could never realize. In spite of this, there are no indications that Tagore tried to draw from Bhaduri's model himself or at Santiniketan. On the other hand, Bhaduri though considered Tagore as a wonderful actor, especially in terms of his vocal acting abilities, was also aware of Tagore's limitations. We find a rather insightful instance of Bhaduri's appraisal of Tagore's acting in Chatterjee's account where he quotes a conversation with Bhaduri on the subject:

“He was a great actor - no doubt a great actor - but he also had his limitations. He did not know how to disguise his own body. Besides, whenever there was an opportunity for an emotionally heightened expression, the real-life persona of Rabindranath would reveal itself. It was also difficult for a person of such genius to disguise himself.” I (Chatterjee) interrupted, “Perhaps the poet's personality - the subjective nature of it - overshadowed the actor's objectivity”. He said, “May \be that was the case. But another thing! He never acted in a play, not written by himself (Bhaduri had of course not witnessed young Tagore acting in Jyotirindranath's plays) - this is a limitation too. Because, it becomes difficult to say how successful he would have been playing other kinds of characters. I asked, “How did he look on stage?” “Gorgeous! Half the show was done [sic] in that. Excellent health!” I asked, “Voice?” He replied, “Beautiful! Such modulation, I have never heard in anybody's voice other than Girish Chandra's. His voice had a very thin, high-pitched quality - in his youth there was also an apparent musical quality- later that problem got neutralized”. (Chatterjee, Vol. 1, 2016: 146)

In the course of the same conversation, Bhaduri also clearly mentions that his idol in acting was Girish Chandra and that he considered Ardhendu Sekhar to be the best actor to have performed on the Bengali stage. Tagore and Bhaduri though generally appreciative of each other as actors would never act under each other's direction.

An archival absence regarding the *Bisarjan* production which confounds us is that we do not find any information about Tagore having seen the production or commented on it. Tagore was residing abroad from June 1926 till December the same year. Thus he obviously missed some of the shows. However, we learn that there was a show organized on 30 December 1926 for which also there is no evidence that Tagore attended it despite being

present in Santiniketan. We learn from a report published in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 4 July 1926 that Gaganendranath, Dinendranath and other members of the Tagore family attended the performance. However, we do not find any mention of the performance in their memoirs which also puzzles us no less. While being so enthusiastic about Bhaduri as we have seen earlier, this indifference to Bhaduri's first production of a Tagore play seems mysterious. Is it due to the fact that they did not like the performance much or did not find anything special to talk about? We can only wonder.

Not only in the case of *Bisarjan*, but in the case of Tagore's later plays that Bhaduri produced and even productions which Tagore had the opportunity to see personally, we do not find any straightforward response as to how he liked the performance. In the case of *Sesh Rakha* produced in 1927, for instance, Tagore was not there in Bengal to attend the first few shows but came to the theatre to see the tenth performance of the play. We find an indicative account from writer Achintya Kumar Sengupta's memoirs:

Once, Rabindranath had come to Sisir Kumar's Natya Niketan to witness a performance of *Sesh Rakha*. It was a memorable day for us, as, coincidentally, that very day our *Kallol* (a popular, avant-garde, early 20th century literary magazine) group was also invited to see the show... The show was a great success that day...[I]n the end everyone were left ecstatic. Sisir babu came running to Tagore to find out how Tagore had liked the performance. Tagore in a calm voice told him, "Come tomorrow to my place, we will have a discussion."

Dineshda, Nripen, Budhadeb and myself - I cannot remember if there was anyone else - went the next day. Sisir babu was also there...I don't remember what exactly was said. I however remember that Tagore had translated the English term public into "*loklakhi*"... (*Nachghar*, 30 March, 1928: 2)

Loklakhi literally means 'public wealth'. While we do not get to know specifically whether Tagore pointed out that he thought Bhaduri's production was tailor-made to achieve commercial success and meant it as a criticism; but it might as well be that Tagore had put across such an opinion humorously. It is a coincidence that, indeed, in the *Sesh Rakha* production, Bhaduri did play a directorial master stroke which resulted in his production being an instant hit with the audience with nearly fifty shows to its credit:

...In the final scene of the play Sisir Kumar brought in an unforeseen novelty upon the Bengali commercial stage by obliterating the apparent distance separating the actors in the play and the audience...Sisir Kumar and other actors used to come down from the stage among the

audience. They used to mingle with the audience nonchalantly, conversing casually with them. Not only that but they even invited the audience to the marriage ceremony of Gadaichandra by distributing invitation cards... Many among the audience used to accept the invitations gladly and went onto the stage to join the wedding celebrations. (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1999: 166)

We find another more detailed account of how Bhaduri planned and executed the final scene in Nalinikanta Sarkar's account:

One day Sisir Kumar told me an ingenious plan to stage the final scene of *Sesh Rakha*. At his request I went to the theatre with four or five of my friends. At that time we were having singing rehearsals for *Sesh Rakha*. The teacher was Dinendranath himself. Following Sisir Kumar's instruction, Dinendranath taught us all Rabindranath's song "*Ogo tomra sobai bhalo*" (Hey! you all are good). In the first show of *Sesh Rakha*, one found a set of wooden steps being made leading from the stage to the sitting place of the audience. The steps as well as the walking space in the middle of the sitting arrangements being covered with red *shalu* (a commonly used red cloth) it looked as if a special guest would make his way to the stage from the outside through this red *shalu* covered way. But it was not that. The performance began. According to Sisir Kumar's directions, we, the group of singers went and sat in various places among the audience. Last scene: Gadai's marriage night. Sisir babu came upon stage dressed as Chandra babu and during the scene went down to the audience through the *shalu*-covered steps holding sheets of paper in his hand. He began conversing with the audience, welcoming them, asking them of their comfort as if they were invited guests at Gadai's wedding. While welcoming them, he also began distributing the sheets of paper he held with him as gifts to the audience. The sheets had the song "*Ogo tomra sobai bhalo*" written on them. In the meanwhile, the other actors and actresses were still acting out their respective roles. At last the time came for singing the song. As soon as the actors and actresses on stage sung the first line, we from the audience joined in the chorus together. Then not only us but many voices from the audience joined in the singing as well. It was a wonderful chorus with so many people singing from the audience. Sisir Kumar once again came back amongst the audience and holding the hands of each one of us in the singing group took us to the stage. The chorus started again. (*Nachghar*, 1 September, 1927:2)

Textual Revisions: Subverting the Tagorean Authorial Aura

It is indeed fascinating to note here that Tagore had become so eager to see his plays being staged in the commercial theatre that he was open to editing his plays according to the director's wishes. Bhaduri would often take advantage of this fact as is only too evident in

Shesh Rakha which he produced in 1927. Sisir Kumar had requested Tagore to edit his thirty-six years old play *Goray Golod* to make it more suitable for staging in the commercial theatre. What transpired is now a lore quite well known in Bengali cultural circles:

When Tagore handed over the edited manuscript to Bhaduri, Bhaduri commented on seeing that the title of the play has changed as well, ‘Gurudev the name *Goray Golod* seemed appropriate for attracting the audience.’ A hint of a smile appeared on Tagore’s face but the very next moment trying to appear as serious as possible, he said feigning despair, “There was *Goray Golod* (a fundamental error) which I removed to do *Sesh Rakha* (saving the day) but still I failed to impress you, Sishir. (Chakraborty, 1999: 165)

As it is evident Bhaduri would not shy away from making obligatory requests to Tagore to alter his plays texts and Tagore would more often than not comply. We learn that when Bhaduri produced *Tapati*, Tagore edited it according to Bhaduri’s requirements. Often Tagore himself would suggest such edits. We come to know from Soumitra Chatterjee’s account that when Bhaduri excused himself from playing the role of Dhananjay Bairagi in *Muktadhara* on account of not knowing how to sing, even after Rabindranath had requested him to do so, Rabindranath nonchalantly told him to recite the lines in the songs instead (Chatterjee, 2016: 144).

At times Tagore would even be inspired to make changes to the play after watching the play being produced on the commercial stage. A classic instance of this would be the February 1933 production of *Jibane Marane*, a play adaptation of his short story titled *Dalia* organized at the Empire theatre in aid of Victoria Institute, directed by Madhu Bose. Rabindranath was present to witness the performance. We learn from Bose’s account that:

The performance began. As Gurdeb had not had the opportunity to witness the first performance of *Dalia* (1930), I was worried regarding how he would like the “harmonized” songs. I was a bit nervous. As soon as the first scene ended I ran to meet Gurudev with my makeup still on my face...I asked him anxiously: ‘How do you like the performance?’ Gurudev said: ‘Quite good, it seems’... Priti Majumdar was acting as an old fisherman. Tagore said he liked his acting. When Tagore asked about him, I said: ‘His character has no more appearances in the play’.

Tagore exclaimed: “No, No! How can that be possible? The old fisherman is required in the last scene.” Seeing that at the end of the first scene the section with the old fisherman and Tinni was jelling well, Tagore quickly wrote a few lines on the backside of a programme, which meant that the old fisherman would have to appear again in the last scene.

I immediately ran towards the stage. Priti Majumdar had already removed his make-up by then. I asked him: “Rabindranath has liked your performance. You would have to appear again in the last scene. Here, take your lines for the last scene.” Hearing that Gurudeb has praised him fired him up. With excitement apparent on his face, he sat down to do his make-up again. It was of course a matter of immense pride to be praised by Gurudeb. (Bose, Quoted in Chakraborty, 1999: 87)

It is not always that Tagore’s adaptations would receive approval from the critics when staged in the commercial theatre. The most glaring case would be that of *Jogajog*. Tagore’s adaptation of the novel into a play raised many eyebrows for allegedly the poor quality of the adaptation. While Bhaduri’s production of the play as well as his acting was appreciated, Tagore received harsh criticism from the reviewers. Hemendra Kumar Ray, a staunch admirer of the poet, wrote in his review published in the magazine *Chanda*:

...Recently while visiting the theater to see *Jogajog* being enacted, it seems I came to hear a lot of things. *Jogajog* has been adapted into a play by Rabindranath himself. We all are aware about Tagore’s deep knowledge of the dramatic arts. If the play enacted is his work, indeed, we would have to say that Tagore has intentionally restrained himself from converting the novel into a play...Almost every song in the play hinders the action on stage. The scenes are also ill conceived... (*Chanda*, 22 Jan, 1937)

Many of the reviews questioned whether the adaptation was Tagore’s at all. Apart from the above criticism, they also criticized the characterization, alleging that the characters, particularly Madhusudan’s, were poorly developed in the play. If one investigates the play adaptation, it does appear to contain the inconsistencies mentioned above. Tagore, however, on his part, did not believe this to be so and this fact might have created a slight tension between himself and Bhaduri. Faced with the criticism, Tagore is found to have written in a letter to Prabhat Gupta, “Obliged by financial crisis Sisir is forced to make do with bad actors for his production and the play has to face all the criticisms”(Quoted in Chakraborty, 1999: 214). Tagore however, subsequently, watched the performance and had to eat his words. Before leaving the theater after the performance, Tagore wrote his comments on a piece of paper giving it to Bhaduri. The paper read:

I came to the Naba-Natyamandir, to see the performance of *Jogajog*, with doubt in my mind. But I return full of joy and wonder. One does not usually witness a performance so complete in its every aspect - if, in spite of that, the audience is found dissatisfied with the performance, the

fault definitely does not lie with the *natyadhinayak* (the theatre leader) Sisir Bhaduri. (Quoted in Chakraborty, 1999: 214)

It is ultimately in the light of such instances that we realize what was really at stake in the collaboration between the Tagores and the commercial theatre or between celebrated personalities like Rabindranath and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. Indeed, both parties were reaching beyond their comfort zones making themselves vulnerable to be affected by various sorts of insecurities. The collaboration, although a radical departure seen in the context of its times, was also not without its constraints and often strictly demarcated norms. While the Tagores had their own aesthetic preoccupations to maintain, the commercial theatre tradition was in the final analysis limited by its own financial interests and tradition of realism.

Both were also aware of such self-limitations and were keen to overcome them for the greater cause of Bengali theatre. While Art Theatre Ltd. and Sisir Bhaduri's decision to produce Tagore's plays took place despite the very apparent financial risks, if not bankruptcy, the Tagores, especially Rabindranath, were ready to relax their aesthetic principles and standards. A glaring example would be the use of drop scenes in Bhaduri's staging of Tagore's plays, a practice which Tagore despised and openly critiqued in his solitary essay on theater, *Rangamancha* (1902) but never once complained to Bhaduri about. Tagore would also be found routinely complying with Bhaduri's wishes of editing his plays according to Bhaduri's own requirements.

However, there were boundaries that neither party could cross. The commercial theatre, extending to Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, was selective in producing Tagore's plays and exhibited a consistently dismissive attitude of Tagore's better known set of symbolic plays. Rabindranath, on the other hand, was not always pleased with what he thought were Bhaduri's strategies to woo the *loklakhi*. Underlying the formal courtesy characterizing their collaborative relationship, one suspects that the liaison also had its often unexpressed dimensions of tensions and competitive feelings. Such tensions were heightened by the personal intimacy that both sides shared. But then one would wonder, why did they bother in pursuing this uneasy association, in the first place? Perhaps secretly, both parties yearned for acceptance and recognition from their nemesis, a recognition which is ultimately more valuable than the uncritical adulation received from friends.

Finally, what the retelling of the history of the association between Rabindranath and commercial theatre does offer is a double-sided gaze. A study of these contemporary critical gazes on the two theatre traditions reveals more about their inner contradictions than a linear archival appraisal would make possible. It provides us with opportunities to reflect upon these two traditions in reciprocal performative moments of self-playing. We are provided with rare insights into their psychologies. Most of all, we see Rabindranath in unfamiliar territory, challenged and criticized; a form of seeing that is, indeed, valuable in working against the grain of a history of adulation and iconicity. However, to see Tagore's symbolic plays being staged by other directors in the public theatre, one would have to wait for Sombhu Mitra and his group Bohurupee to stage *Raktakarabi* in 1954, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter IV

Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi* (1954): Performing the Archive

Introduction

As I have already discussed earlier in this dissertation, the productions of Rabindranath Tagore's plays are often haunted by the spectre of his authorial presence. Tagore's play texts are often recognised as literary classics in their own right. Therefore, considered sacrosanct by the audience as well as the critics, any alteration to the texts in performance is regarded as a violation of their sanctity. The issue of authorship, however, does not remain limited to the literary play text alone, but extends beyond to engage with larger issues of philosophy, politics and aesthetics, which are embedded in the text itself. Tagore being a director of his own plays, the authorial authority extends even to the domain of dramaturgy, where a contemporary director is expected to observe the authorial codes. Thus, it is often demanded of any production of Tagore's plays that it should be validated in terms of its concordance with the 'original' authorial intention. Consequently, a large number of directors of Tagore in recent times have felt obliged to search the Tagore archive interminably in pursuit of a fuller realisation of the "true" nature of Tagore's authorial codes, both textual and dramaturgical.

The authority of authorship has indeed an intricate relationship with the archive. It is through the archive that authorship exercises its powers of what Michel Foucault defines as 'selection' and 'exclusion' (1969:153). Taking the argument further, Derrida in *Archive Fever* explores how archives far from being an apparently objective set of documents, often actually play political functions by being the tools through which paradigms of knowledge are set and power asserted. As Derrida says, "There is no political power without control of the archive" (Derrida, 1996:4). Due to its relation with authority, the archive thus often becomes the basis for establishing truth claims which have a direct impact on decisions relating to censorship.

In this chapter, my intention is to problematize the concept of the archive and the relation between the archive, authorship and theatre history through a study of the ways in which the archive of Tagore's plays and their dramaturgy as implied in the theatre practice at Santiniketan have served as a source of authentication and censorship. To sharpen the

problematization of the archive, this chapter will primarily focus on the production history of Tagore's *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander) directed by legendary Bengali theatre director Sombhu Mitra for Bohurupee in 1954. I believe that this production, still considered by many as creating a paradigm shift in the production of Tagore's plays, can be a classic case study for studying the relationship between theatre, authorship and the archive.

However, even before we discuss *Raktakarabi*, the question of the archive necessitates some consideration as to how we can discuss the way it functions. I have already hinted in the introduction at the anti-textual prejudice present in some Performance Studies discourses and also the fact that they fail to take into account entire traditions of dramatic theatre which continue to uphold literary texts as integral to the notion and event of performance. I have also emphasized the necessity to engage with the text as a material and conceptual entity in the context of theatre, to find out how it is played through individual contexts, situations, events and traditions. The question of the text, as we shall see, will be central to our discussion of *Raktakarabi*.

Certainly, the question of authorship dominated critical discourse in the aftermath of Mitra's production. The key question seemed to be whether Mitra had imposed his directorial authority on the text, thereby even distorting it, or whether he had managed to illuminate the dramaturgical potential of the original text itself. Simply put, the question was: Was this production Tagore's *Raktakarabi* or Mitra's *Raktakarabi*, a new work all together? While both sets of critics who criticised the productions and also those who were appreciative of its qualities have stressed that the production was essentially Mitra's interpretation of the play, Mitra himself claimed that his only intention was to understand and stage the *Raktakarabi*, as Tagore would have conceived it. In this chapter, I will first confront this question of authorship which dominates the critical discourse in the aftermath of Mitra's production through histories of claims and counterclaims.

My intention will also be to engage with Mitra's directorial methodology to search for theatrical solutions through a prolonged and rigorous negotiation with the archive of Tagore's dramaturgy as well as the play text. I would like to probe whether Mitra was merely following the archival clues to arrive at an interpretation of *Raktakarabi* which was ostensibly 'true' to Tagore's own ideas about the play or whether in the process of negotiating the archive, he was ultimately led beyond the archive, and indeed, beyond the Tagorean author-function. Broadening the context of my discussion, as another instance of

archival performance, I will end by reflect briefly on Mitra's larger, problematic claims of devising an "Indian" idiom of theatre and his possible misappropriation of the archive of Tagore's plays and dramaturgy to validate such a programme.

Claims and Counter-Claims of Authorship

Before we begin to discuss the claims and counter-claims of authorship, it would be pertinent to present a short synopsis of the play in question for reference. As with most of Tagore's symbolic plays, it is difficult to provide a short synopsis of *Raktakarabi* due to the play's loose and abstract plot structure. Briefly, the action takes place in a mythical, dystopic kingdom called Yakshapuri where a despotic Raja rules without revealing his physical presence. People who live in the Yakshapuri are mostly miners or gold-diggers, who are forced to work in dehumanised conditions and tortured if they protest. At Yakshapuri there are Sardars (governors) to manage the gold-diggers in addition to an Adhaypak (professor), a Puran-bagish (specialist in *Puranas*) and a Gosai (priest), who collectively manufacture consent among the gold-diggers. In this place of dead souls appears the central protagonist Nandini, a girl symbolising the spirit of life. Her lover Ranjan, who symbolises youth, is killed by the Raja in the play. In the final moments of the play, we find Nandini leading the gold-diggers to a revolt against the tyrannical regime. The Raja too is found to come out and join the revolt.

Visva-Bharati Music Board: Authentication and Censorship

Now, coming straight to the contestations regarding authorship, a major stake in the debate was that of the Visva-Bharati Music Board. The Visva-Bharati Music Board reserved the copyright of Tagore's works until the year 2001. During this time, one had to take permission from the Board to publish or perform anything written by Tagore. The Board was founded after Tagore's demise in 1944, upon the prime initiative of his son Rathindranath Tagore. The functions of the Board are clearly mentioned in its charter of objectives listed by Rathindranath in a letter dated 13 July 1943, where he proposes the idea of the board to the Samsad or the contemporary Governing Body of Visva-Bharati:

1. To build a library of disc records (both negative and positive) in order to preserve the songs of the Founder in preserving their authentic tunes. The different gramophone companies in Calcutta could be approached for co-operation in the matter.
2. To teach Rabindra Sangeet outside Santiniketan under the direct control of Visva-Bharati.
3. To set up in Calcutta a central organization to supervise and co-ordinate the work of different music schools teaching Rabindra music.
4. To appoint a small executive to look after the interests of the owner of the music and performance rights, to veto and approve recorded versions of the music by the Founder President (Rabindranath Tagore), and to take such steps as are calculated to diffuse [*sic*] and popularise them. (File NO. RBVB-016 VBP, Visva-Bharati Samsad Proceedings)

Thus we see, in the initial charter of objectives, the primary thrust if not the sole focus was on the performance of Rabindra Sangeet. While we find intentions of preserving and approving the performance of Tagore's music or songs clearly spelt out, we do not find anything specifically mentioned for the performance of plays. However, when the Board was finally constituted, its area of concern and function appears to have been extended to include the "rectification pieces of the Poet and propagation thereof" (Visva-Bharati Website entry on Music Board). This probably implicates that the Board was to be an approving authority for performances of Tagore's works including plays, in any form. The terms "preserving" and "rectification" vaguely anticipates the function of authentication and censorship that the Board was often to perform during its time of existence.

Did Tagore himself believe that the performances of his works needed to be authenticated? It is important to note here Tagore's own strict reservations regarding the alteration of his work in his correspondence with musician and litterateur Dilip Kumar Roy (1897-1980), compiled in the volume *Sangit Chinta* (Thoughts regarding Music, 1967). He writes in a letter to Roy dated 31 December 1926 making his priorities clear:

There was a time, when in literature and music, it was difficult for the author to reserve his own individual right over his work... [T]he common people appropriated it according to their tastes...In earlier times, there were no restrictions in the field of art and thus there was no way to ban the adulteration of art at the hands of the multitude. In today's world it is easier to preserve the right of the author over his work permanently through the help of the printing press and notations and this must be done to put an end to maltreatment at the hands of the masses. Or else where will you put an end to this? (Tagore, 2005: 116)

Tagore's views relating to authorship seem rather formal and founded within the notions of property and an exclusive creativity in regard to keeping his literature and music unaltered. However, here too Tagore's concern appears not to be the performances of his plays themselves. We should also keep in mind, as we have already witnessed, that when Tagore's plays were being produced by directors in commercial theatres at Calcutta during his life time, he did not always intervene in the creative process and was even open to the requests of directors to make alterations to his play texts.

However, coming back to the Visva-Bharati Music Board, though not clearly mentioned in their charter of objectives, it would seem from their reactions to Sombhu Mitra's *Raktakarabi* that they did exercise their power to regulate and censor the performances. After Sombhu Mitra's group Bohurupee decided to perform *Raktakarabi*, they had applied, as per the norms, for permission from the Visva-Bharati Music Board before the production opened through a letter dated June 1954. Within a week of this application, they received permission to stage the play. Incidentally, this was not the first Tagore piece that the Bohurupee group was producing. They had already performed an adaptation of Tagore's novel *Char Adhyay* in 1951, also under the direction of Mitra. Though there are no archival records to confirm this fact, they must have asked and received permission for *Char Adhyay* as well.

However, a month later, after Bohurupee had already performed the play twice, the Board in a letter to Bohurupee demanded the play should be presented in a private performance to the Board members for their approval. What followed were letters of accusations and counter-accusations, a correspondence whose details cannot be presented here verbatim. However, with the help of mediators like Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis and Annada Shankar Ray, and with the threat of a major invited production of Mitra's *Raktakarabi* being cancelled at the yearly National Drama Festival in Delhi in the month of December, the Visva-Bharati Music Board gave permission for the continued staging of the production, under two conditions. The conditions were that the text of the play should be kept intact in the performance with no omissions, additions or alterations; and, secondly, the costumes in the performance needed to be designed in accordance with the scenic details of the "original" play.

The Visva-Bharati Music Board in this precipitous change of stance was of course reacting to the reviews of the production where, among other things, the costumes of the play

had been criticised in addition to the editing of the text where the concluding lines of the play had been cut, allegedly precipitating a complete shift in the politics of the play. The first condition put forth by the Board indicates how the archive of Tagore's text has been used by the Visva-Bharati Music Board as a basis for authentication and censorship. The second condition, however, dramaturgical in nature, is more interesting in so far as Tagore's text does not often indicate any specific directions for the costumes for most of the characters in the play and even when it does, it does so ambiguously. For instance, regarding Nandini's costume in *Rakta Karbai*, Tagore prescribes a *dhani* (paddy)-coloured sari, not mentioning whether he is referring to raw or ripe paddy. The colour of raw paddy differs significantly from its ripe counterpart.

Therefore, it seems more likely that the Board by demanding the costumes to be done in accordance with the "original" play was perhaps implying that the costumes should match the sartorial conventions observed in Santiniketan productions of Tagore's plays. Such an interpretation would bear testimony to how the Santiniketan performances were being promoted as an ideal model for staging Tagore's plays. This dictum becomes even more interesting if we study the Board's directions in relation to fact that Sombhu Mitra, along with the set and costume designer for the production Khaled Choudhury, went to Santiniketan to take the advice of the two premier artists of contemporary Santiniketan, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij, regarding matters relating to costume design.

Critical reception: an un-Tagorean production

The reviews of the production, which were both critical and appreciative, raised the question of authorship and stated that Sombhu Mitra's *Raktakarabi* demonstrated his own interpretation of Tagore's text, which was markedly different, aesthetically and politically, from the original text. *Anandabazar Patrika*, one of the most popular Bengali dailies, for instance, criticized the production in a much-cited scathing review:

When at the last moment we come to our senses we realise that even after such a commendable performance, Rabindranath himself has been erased from the play. The performance ends with a tone which is indeed Un-Tagorean (*a-rabindrik*). The play originally ended with the sacrifice of Nandini meant to show a way out of the horrific confines of Yakshapuri; Bohurupee has ended it with a sloganeering of going to war...Thus the play has turned into Bohurupee's *Rakta-Karabi* rather than remaining Tagore's *Raktakarabi*. (*Anandabazar Patrika*, 13 July, 1954)

Here we find Bohurupee's production of *Raktakarabi* being criticised allegedly for distorting the play to the extent of making it un-Tagorean. Such a category of criticism itself reveals the construction and association of a definite author-function associated with Rabindranath within Bengali culture. *Anandabazar's* review also alleges Bohurupee's appropriation of the play to suit its own political interests. Pankaj Dutta writing under the pseudonym Shoubhik in a report titled *Bohurupeer Raktakarabi* published in *Desh* (a magazine published by *Anandabazar*) on 16 July 1954 elaborated on the above criticisms. However, not only *Anandabazar Patrika*, which was generally known for its centrist and, at times, even conservative views on political and cultural matters, but reports and reviews in other dailies or magazines also posed similar critical views even before the *Anandabazar* report appeared. A report published in the daily *Jugantar* on 22 May 1954, for instance, alleged:

In our opinion Bohurupee has wilfully distorted the *Raktakarabi* play in its interpretation - they have not shown what Rabindranath intended to say in it. It is true that directorially the production is bold and innovative. But such boldness often borders on impudence. Many of us have been left horrified by the Hindi cinematic adaptation of Rabindranath's *Char Adhyay*. Perhaps, reactions to the *Raktakarabi* transformation would not be so biased, but that is because it has been spiced up with political insertions. But to those with good taste, both will seem equally deplorable. (*Jugantar*, 22 May 1954)

In addition to the explicitly negative reviews, even those reviews which were appreciative of Mitra's efforts also pointed out Mitra's un-Tagorean treatment of the play. Gopal Haldar, writer and Communist Party member, comments in a review of the performance titled "*Raktakarabi Rupayan*":

[I]t can possibly be said that Rabindranath would never have planned and never did plan such a staging of *Raktakarabi*. It is thus that the audience, who have become used to witnessing productions trying to imitate Tagore's dramaturgy, have been denied the possibility of seeing the same costumes, stage-décor and other things, as well as hearing the typical musical way of delivering dialogues at Santiniketan. What Sri Sombhu Mitra has indeed accomplished here is not just a sly mimicry, not merely an emulation of Rabindranath, but rather a completely new creation inspired by Rabindranath. For this he would have received the poet's blessings. *Raktakarabi* was born in the hands of the poet, but it has truly come alive in Sombhu Mitra's production. (Haldar, *Notun Sahitya*, July 1954)

Haldar in his review praises Mitra for being innovative and clearly points out why he thinks that Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi* production does not strictly emulate Tagore's ideas regarding theatre or the theatre practice at Santiniketan.

Utpal Dutt, one of the finest theatre directors in the Bengali political theatre tradition, in his critical review written a little later in 1957, hails Mitra's directorial accomplishments. Dutt compliments Mitra for providing a realistic interpretation of Tagore's play in which the characters often become abstract, losing their class identities, turning the play into a fairy-tale (*rup-katha*). Dutt emphatically says that, "Adhyapak, Nandini and the workers in Bohurupee's production are Sambhu Mitra's creation" (Dutt, Quoted in *Bohurupeer Raktakarabi*, 2005: 159). I will be developing Dutt's argument later in this chapter.

For the time being, however, what would seem even more interesting and crucial to the discussion is Mitra's own claim of being faithful to the archive of Tagore's text and thought. Mitra would go so far as to claim that, "The real issue was to reveal the profound nature of truth" (14), embedded in Tagore's text. He further elaborated that the production seemed to be the only "true" way that Tagore's text could be theatrically interpreted (*ibid*). Not only was such a claim restricted to Mitra's own writings, it was directly associated with the performance itself. From the reviews, we learn that at times before the performance would begin, Mitra would come on stage and announce to the audience that Bohurupee agrees with whatever Tagore has thought or said about the play and Bohurupee's staging only desires to give shape to Tagore's ideas regarding the play (Haldar, *Notun Sahitya*, July 1954). In his production notes *Natok Raktakarabi* published in 1992, Mitra would go on to illustrate in great detail how Bohurupee's theatrical interpretation of the text was only a playing out of the possibilities which were already latent in Tagore's text with a few marginal exceptions.

What would problematize Mitra's claim of being faithful to the archive in *Rakta-Karabi* is the fact that Tagore himself was unable to stage the play in spite of his interest in doing so, even after beginning to rehearse the play twice in his own lifetime. Perhaps, in his last days, Tagore became sceptical regarding the stage-ability of the play when he prevented artist Ramkinkar Baij from producing the play by saying, "Would an enactment of that play be possible at all? I had meant it only to be read (and not performed) (174)." But why could Tagore not stage the play? What problems did he face? Tagore himself provided a few clues in a discussion with Abanindranath Tagore when he was trying to stage *Raktakarabi* in 1933:

You know I have never staged *Rakta-Karabi* myself. I will tell you why, because I have been unable to find, in reality, the Nandini, which took shape in my writing. (ibid)

Not only Tagore himself but when Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, was requested by Tagore to stage the play, Bhaduri also confessed his inability to do so. By the time Mitra staged *Rakta-Karabi*, therefore, it had already established a reputation for itself as being the most difficult play to stage in Tagore's repertoire, even to the extent of being termed un-stageable.

Blood or Oleander: Symbolic or Real?

If we choose to delve a little deeper into the critical reception of Mitra's production, we find that those who claim the production as Mitra's own interpretation of Tagore's play, invariably emphasize that his point of departure lies in transforming the essentially *rupak*, or symbolic and abstract, dimensions of the play into a conspicuously perceivable *bastab* or reality on stage. The reviews which were critical of the production alleged that in an attempt to make the world depicted in *Raktakarabi* appear real and contemporary, Mitra had heavily compromised and distorted the aesthetics and politics of Tagore's play. The critical review of the production published in the Bengali daily *Jugantar*, for instance, alleged:

In a bid to convert an "abstract" piece *bastab* (realistic), Bohurupee has not altered Tagore's text a great deal, but has tried to achieve the same through the costumes of the characters; by doing so, it has tried to enhance the understanding of the play, placing it in the context of contemporary political reality. Apparently, it does not appear grossly incongruent to dress the "sardar" (governor) in *jodhpuri pajama* and *sherwani*, the *prahari* (guards) in cross-belt and khaki police uniform and Bishu Pagol in the soot-tainted pants of a worker. It undoubtedly takes exceptional directorial skill to transform the *nirbishesh* (indefinite) into *bishesh* (definite) through these changes in costumes. But leaving apart this apparent discomfort, doing so seems deeply problematic too. There is a good chance of the facile *bastab* (realistic) intruding into the abstract way of expression, appearing utterly ridiculous. Not only theatre but other artistic forms too suffer from such concerns; because it affects the *mul sur* (key note) of the mode of creation. Specifically in the case of this play, there is no way to alter the conversational tone of the characters and it sounds absurd if the characters in Tagore's *sanketic* (symbolic) plays speak their lines in such costumes. (*Jugantar*, 22 May, 1954)

We find the reviewer here criticising Mitra's directorial strategy of contemporising the production through the use of costumes. It appears to the reviewer that the dialogues in the

play are too abstract to suit the characters costumed as people from the everyday world. It is also indicated in the review that the costumes have been conceived keeping in mind an intention of placing the play against a backdrop of contemporary political reality.

We find a more articulate expression of such allegations in a letter by litterateur Annada Shankar Ray to Sombhu Mitra written on 12 October 1954 after watching the production. Ray, who begins the letter by speaking positively about the production, however, soon comes to his sole point of discomfort and dwells on it at length:

But there is one thing that you would have to take into consideration. As I read *Raktakarabi* again it appeared to me that the play is neither a symbolic one, nor realistic. It is a fantasy, just like Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" or Tagore's own *Tasher Desh*... Striving for the real, you turned fantasy into the everyday. This seems like Ravana shown with all his ten heads behaving like an ordinary human being. But in my opinion it is only Nandini and Ranjan whom the author has intended to appear as normal human beings, nobody else in the Yakshapuri is normal - they might have been at some point of time but have been deformed by the Yaksha. Adhyapak, Gosai, Puranbagish are not normal. Not even Bishu or Kishor...Or Raja. I would suggest that apart from Nandini and Ranjan, everybody else's characterisation should bear elements of fantasy. Realism needs to be discarded... I came to hear that by making the Sardars appear in the production wearing *sherwani* and *churidar*, an attempt has been made to mock the Congress leaders or those who work with the Government. It is difficult to imagine why with so many things possible one would have to choose such attire for the Sardar... Would it suffice Bohurupee's interests to unnecessarily create a few enemies?...The struggle that Bishu Pagol mentions is not one of usurping the kingdom but rather it is a fight against dead wealth, against the inhuman work of the gold-diggers, against industrialism upon which both ideologies communism and capitalism rest. But why must we make the politics so obvious? (Ray, Quoted in Bohurupee *Raktakarabi*, 2005: 97)

There are a number of things to be noted from Ray's letter. First, his reading of the play as fantasy, breaking away from the realism-symbolism binary, though debatable is also unusual. Interestingly, it would be pertinent to mention here Sisir Bhaduri's opinion that *Raktakarabi* must be staged as a "horror" play, as we learn from Anil Mukhopadhyay's accounts. If we engage with history of the play's interpretations, such readings of the play would have to be considered unconventional. However, more important to our present discussion is Ray's pointing out the connection between the realism in Mitra's production which is rendered through the costumes and its connection with the political. While agreeing that *Raktakarabi* at its core provides a critique of industrialisation and thus also, by implication, capitalism,

Ray sees no point in making such a politics obvious by placing it within the immediate political reality which he thinks Mitra is trying to do in his production.

Indeed, there was a critical consensus in the aftermath of Mitra's production that his interpretation of Tagore's play has been led by a specific political agenda of furthering the cause of Left ideology and criticising the Congress government at the centre led by Nehru. It must be noted here that Sombhu Mitra was an active member of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1940s, which was an association of theatre artists on the Left and the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. Though Mitra had left the organisation in 1946 due to irreconcilable differences with the party bureaucracy and founded the amateur theatre group *Bohurupee* in 1948, people still perhaps saw him as promoting Left ideology. What would also fit such a schema of things is the Nehru government's thrust on building an industrial economy which was gradually manifesting itself in post-Independence India around the time of the production. Thus critics saw in Mitra's directorial strategies an attempt to appropriate Tagore's play to support the Leftist political context of class conflict. Such concerns are most categorically put forth in the *Anandabazar Patrika* review:

[F]rom the style of acting and the scenes it was evident that contradicting Rabindranath, who had dismissed class conflict and given directions to that effect, Bohurpi has not only inserted these dimensions in its production but has instigated the people to struggle against a particular state [sic]. Thus, instead of becoming Rabindranath's *Raktakarabi*, the performance has ultimately turned into Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi* - in Tagore's play the stress was on the flower (*karabi*), in Bohurpi's the emphasis has been on the blood (*rakta*)...[T]agore had wanted to present *ras* (pleasure) but Bohurupee has used the play as a tool for instigating conflict. (*Anandabazar Patrika*, 13 July, 1954)

We find *Anandabazar Patrika* here accusing *Bohurupee* in no uncertain terms of appropriating Tagore's play to suit the Left political context of a violent class conflict. More importantly, however, the claim that Tagore's intention in the play was to present *ras* or pleasure and the flower analogy alerts us to a crucial fact: the apparently non-political manner in which Tagore's plays are often read in the Bengali context.

Reviews of the *Rakta-Karabi* production, which were appreciative, as for instance Utpal Dutt's, acknowledged Mitra's achievement in being able to give human shape to a play which "bears a symbolic representation of the contemporary society" (Dutt, Quoted in *Bohurupee Raktakarabi*, 2005: 157) consisting of characters who are merely "embodied

ideas” (ibid) and not corporeal beings. Dutt compliments Mitra for being able to “free the characters of their symbolic weightiness while retaining the *rupak* or symbolic character of the play” (ibid). Dutt also points out that to make this possible Mitra had to break free from the existing conventions of performing Tagore’s plays. Dutt even presents a dismal picture of the contemporary conventions of producing Tagore’s plays followed by whom he calls the *sarkari* (official) followers of Tagore:

First of all, you would find a musical troupe sitting in front of a black curtain: Tagore’s advocacy of doing away with the artificiality in stage décor has been turned into the most pretentious hoax, as if they shout it out every moment - we do not use stage décor as *Gurudeb* has prohibited us from doing so. Secondly, what has happened to that style of acting? In *Bachik abhinay*, you would only hear Brihanalla’s [Arjun in *Mahabharata*’s *Birat Parva* disguised as a woman named Brihanalla] cries; a well-built young man straining himself to cry in the voice of a twelve-year old girl. Once I saw a Jaisingha [from *Bisarjan*] with his knee-length beard in the moment of his self-sacrifice begin to wail pitifully...though according to pundits this scene is a wonderful instance of *Vir Rasa*. Tagore’s bold experiments in *Angik Abhinay* have been turned into a few meaningless movements of limbs – bearing no resemblance whatsoever with *Kathak*, *Manipuri*, *Bharat Natyam* or any such other form... I was left speechless to witness a performance of *Natir Puja* once: in the concluding scene, Srimati’s final dance was being performed in a foreign style and had become intense when suddenly the *pratihari* (the female guard) came forward and swatted a fly on Srimati’s neck - the very next moment, accompanied with a melancholic tune played in Sarangi, Srimati keeping tempo with the tune slowly died and fell upon the stage. Blind me, I could not realize that it was what Tagore describes as *nidarun astraghat* (cruel blow of the sword) - the climax of the play. (158)

By “official”, Dutt is obviously indicating the productions staged by the Visva-Bharati University faculty and students. He is pointing out how Tagore’s views regarding theatre being implemented as mandatory by performers from Santiniketan, is proving severely damaging to their theatrical imagination. Sombhu Mitra, Dutt emphasizes, has not followed such a non-realistic or stylized approach, but has rather adopted as directorial strategy a deliberate underplaying of the poetic or the symbolic or the abstract, especially in the dialogue, in order to be able to stage the play successfully. In short, Dutt appreciates Mitra’s dual strategy of delivering the poetic dialogue in an everyday matter-of-fact manner and designing realistic costumes for the characters of the play.

However, in spite of being impressed by Mitra's efforts, Dutt too expresses his unease at the conflict of the realistic and the symbolic or abstract aesthetics that has been starkly manifest in certain aspects of the production. Dutt explains:

But while emancipating every character out of its symbolic loadedness, Sambhu *babu* has found himself stuck at a point. Probably because the symbolic characters are so much integral to the form and aesthetics of the play, as conceived by Tagore, that if one tries to do away with one altogether, the other is also heavily jeopardized. It is in the character of the raja that such integrity is best exemplified and Mitra has felt obliged to keep intact the symbolic nature of the character and its dialogues, heavy with philosophizing. But this fact has given birth to a very apparent conflict in the performance. The conversation of the symbolic king with the simple, earthly girl from Ishanipara (Nandini) seems unbearable. Similarly, it is self-defeating to see a few real workers tired and clothes covered with soot stand in front of a symbolic net. (160)

As Dutt points out, Mitra's failure in the production can be attributed to the fact that he has stopped his creative process halfway, without pushing through with his realistic interpretation of the play. While he has strived to turn the characters into real, living people, he has ultimately felt obliged to keep untouched the character of the Raja, as well as design a symbolic and abstract set for the play resulting in an apparent conflict between the two different aesthetics on the stage.

Inquiring into Tagore's Symbolist Plays

In the light of such criticisms and debate regarding the symbolic and the real emerging in the aftermath of Mitra's production, it would be useful for us to discuss in detail Tagore's symbolic play texts with special reference to *Raktakarabi*. This would enable us to judge whether such contestations were being caused by Mitra's alleged adherence to the authorial codes in his interpretation or because of his exercising a degree of directorial freedom. In the larger context, it would perhaps also help us understand why Tagore's symbolic plays have often been labeled "unstageable" on the grounds that they are either too obscure or poetic (*kabyik*) in a predominantly literary mode.

As I have discussed earlier, Tagore's plays reveal a symbolic character beginning with his very first play written at Santiniketan, *Sarodotsav* (1908). It has seemed more than coincidental to some critics that Tagore began writing plays in a symbolic mode almost at the same time that the Symbolist movement in drama was manifesting itself in Europe, consisting of playwrights like August Strindberg (1849-1912), W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) and Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949). Tagore critic Pratap Narayan Biswas, in his essay "*Rabindranather Raktakarabi: Tathya O Tatta*" (1990) has claimed that Tagore borrowed the idea and the form of his symbolic plays from the European symbolic plays, especially from August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901). Indeed, if one compares the plays by Tagore and Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, one does find striking resemblances in the use of symbols, characterization and even dialogue.

However, Shankha Ghosh in a response to Biswas's essay "*Raktakarabi: Tatta O Tathya*" (1990) refutes such a claim. He illustrates how Tagore's symbolic plays are significantly distinct from Strindberg's *A Dream Play* or for that matter any other European symbolic play on a number of counts. Ghosh also traces the genesis of some of the symbols that Tagore uses repeatedly in his symbolic plays to show how they owe their origin to Tagore's own individual, independent thought process. It is also almost impossible to know to what degree Tagore was acquainted with the work of the European symbolic playwrights. Jyotirindranath translated Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Blue Bird* in 1908, the same year in which *Sarodotsav*, Tagore's first symbolic play, was published. However, as Ghosh rightly argues, it does seem highly improbable that Tagore specifically knew Strindberg's *A Dream Play* when he wrote *Sarodotsav*, as neither Strindberg's oeuvre nor his play had gained much popularity in Europe by the time. What also needs to be pointed out, as Tagore scholar Tapabrata Ghosh does in his essay "*Raktakarabi O Smritilok*" (2012), is that Tagore drew abundantly from indigenous sources to create the mythical world of his symbolic plays.

I believe the similarities between Tagore's plays and European ones need to be seen in the light of the common formal concerns that they share. As I have discussed in the earlier chapter, both Tagore and the symbolic playwrights are equally tuned in terms of their formal intention of trying to break away from the dominant realistic-naturalistic mode of theatre. Tagore might not have read the symbolists but he was close to them in sharing the legacy of the Romantics. The Symbolists were hugely influenced by the Romantics especially in their use of myth. Tagore's identification with the Romantics is self-attested and much discussed. Thematically speaking, the *fin de siècle* pessimism and cynicism of the Symbolists led to the

portrayal of a dark, cruel, nightmarish world in their plays, which corresponded at a formal level with Tagore's envisioning of a civilizational critique in his symbolic plays like *Raktakarabi* and *Muktadhara*. However, while both Tagore and the Symbolists paint a world of darkness and crisis, their philosophical aims are fundamentally different. Tagore's philosophical principles, as complex, ambiguous and even contradictory as they are, bear no resemblance to the nihilism of the Symbolists.

Immanent Contradictions

Coming back to the question of real and the symbolic in the context of Mitra's production, a fact to be noted is that in the discourse of contestation around these terms, the former is often implied as "political" whereas the latter is considered to be "aesthetic". As the *Anandabazar Patrika* review clearly points out, Mitra's production had forcefully traded in the real or the political at the cost of sacrificing the symbolic aesthetics of the play. But was it only Mitra who was bringing in the real or the political in his interpretation or were they already present in Tagore's play in the first place? It must be acknowledged that the problem of the said conflict between the two modes of representation is not exclusively characteristic of Mitra's production of the play; rather, they can be said to inhabit Tagore's text itself and provide a framework for his conceptions in general.

A close study of the play *Raktakarabi* and Tagore's own comments on it reveal that though Tagore was portraying a mythical world in the play, he was also trying to address through it what he thought was a contemporary political crisis. Contrary to what *Anandabazar Patrika* review would claim, few of Tagore's plays, notably *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi*, manifestly deal with real and exigent political problems. While political issues like caste, gender, nation and community are invoked in other plays of Tagore as well, *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi* are much more directly political in a statist sense. When the play *Raktakarabi* was translated in English and published in England in 1925 under the title *Red Oleanders*, it was criticized as vague and confusing. In defense of his play, Tagore wrote a piece titled *Red Oleanders: Author's Interpretation* for publication in *The Manchester Guardian* in which he clearly pointed out the political objective of the play:

It is an organized passion of greed that is stalking abroad in the name of European civilization. I know that this does not represent the whole truth as to its character, and therefore the pity of it is all the greater when mainly this aspect of it is forcibly represented to us, causing the spread

of dumb sadness over a vast portion of the world and the dread of a devastation of its future into an utterly bankrupt life. Such an objectified passion lacks the true majesty of human nature; it only assumes a terrifying bigness, its physiognomy blurred through its cover of an intricate network - the scientific system. It barricades itself against all direct human touch with barriers of race pride and prestige of power. (Tagore, *Manchester Guardian*, 5 August, 1925)

Tagore makes it quite clear that his desire is to present a critique of the dehumanized, scientific, mechanical sense of organization which permeates the political constellation of nationalist, imperialist European nations.

If we broaden the context of discussion, we find that not only in these two plays but throughout the last two decades of his life, Tagore reiterated such criticisms in his trips to Europe, America and Japan. As political thinker Partha Chatterjee aptly sums up in his essay *Tagore's Non-Nation*:

The aspect of the modern state that disturbed Tagore most profoundly in his last years was the “scientization” of power, the attempt to reduce the multifarious social exchanges among people to certain rules of technology. This is what he had earlier repeatedly condemned as the dominance of “the machine”. (Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*: 125)

In the play *Raktakarabi*, the metaphor of the machine as the scientific, impersonal organisation is made manifest thematically through multifarious techniques. The unseen, king of *Raktakarabi*, for instance, by his very invisibility as he remains concealed behind a tortuous veil, invokes an idea not of a person but rather of an inhuman, gargantuan, monstrous organisation. The governors, preacher, professor, *puran bagish* (the one who specialises in *Puranas*), those who are entrusted with the task of governing the *Yaksha Puri*, represent a bureaucracy not concerned with the wellbeing of its residents but only interested in exploiting the maximum amount of labour. The miners can be said to represent in a Foucauldian sense only “labouring bodies” existing never in their singular individuality but taken together as a profit-churning machine. An utter erasure of individuality is most starkly exhibited in the fact that in *Yaksha Puri* the miners are not even called by their respective names but by the numbers that they have been assigned to. The torture chamber exists to break at the very inception any attempt on behalf of the miners to become critically aware of the horrific nature of their existence at *Yaksha Puri*.

Not only does Tagore present a critique of imperialist political structures in the play but, more importantly, he identifies the modalities through which any capitalist exploitation

asserts its hegemony. The characters of the governors, preacher, professor, *puran bagish* present a sharp analysis of how ideological consent for exploitation is generated through a bureaucracy, by means of religious, philosophical and historical knowledge. When at the end of the play we learn from Bishu Pagol that the miners have broken the door to the armoury or hear his call to fellow miners for going to war, we find Tagore even advocating a violent, armed struggle against the capitalist forces. Thus, arguably, Tagore was aware of class conflict and of the opinion that the resolution of any such conflict must be activated through armed rebellion. At different points in the play, the colour red recurs as a metaphor, as an ominous reminder of the inevitable revolution. In an introduction added to the second edition of the play – there was no introduction for the first edition published in 1925 - he clearly mentions that his play is “is at the same time concerned with individual human beings as well as human classes” (Tagore, 2012: 118).

While *Raktakarabi* definitely deals with these modern political problems at its core, what creates problems for any director attempting to stage the play is that these problems are mediated through certain structural complications. In the play one witnesses an ongoing conflict between a mythological, symbolic framework, and a seemingly ambivalent political ideology. We have discussed in the second chapter in the context of *Sarodotsav* how Tagore had embraced a mythological language for his plays written at Santiniketan. Through these mythological symbols he had voiced his own spiritual and political ideas as well as commented on his times. While such a strategy was rewarding at multiple levels, as plays like *Dakghar* would bear testimony, the transposition of these ideas into mythological symbols would also present problems to the modern reader or producer in some of the plays. In some of his early plays like *Sarodotsav*, *Phalguni*, *Dakghar*, we find the strategy working perfectly. It is, however, the plays that follow like *Raja*, *Mukto Dhara* or *Raktakarabi* that we find the strategy running into trouble.

If we compare the two sets of plays, we find a major difference between them. While in the former set of plays, there is no narrative structure or plot at all, or at best, a very simple one as in the case of *Dakghar*, in the later set we find the plays having intricate realistic narratives. As I have discussed in the second chapter, *Sarodotsav* or *Phalguni* more than presenting a narrative, had worked through an assortment of images which were meant to evoke certain moods in the audience. In this dramaturgical mode they were much closer to the tenor of European symbolic plays or the Symbolist movement in general. In *Raja*, *Mukto Dhara* and *Raktakarabi*, however, we find well-formed narratives which progress through the

play and reach a resolution at the end. The plays are woven around conflicts or problems which are real in a very material sense of the term. It is within this realistic narrative structure that Tagore places the symbolic and out of this transposition arise certain complications.

Rather than feeding into each other, we often find the realistic narrative of the play and its symbolic inner meaning in conflict against each other. The logic of the realistic narrative is often found to be suspended or distorted to accommodate the symbolic. Neither can Tagore completely forsake the logic of the narrative; nor can he do away with the symbolic overtones, which refuse to remain latent but often come to the forefront through the poetic lines that the characters speak or through the apparently absurd actions that they perform. Thus, throughout the plays, we find two conflicting forms vying with each other, never coming to reconciliation. A very apparent manifestation of this fact can be noticed in the dialogue of the characters which often keeps hovering between the poetic and the everyday. At a broader level, entire scenes like the “crowd scenes” present in each of the above plays and which maintain a realistic course of action, are followed by scenes which have a poetic quality demanding a non-realist dramaturgy.

In *Raktakarabi* this problem is exponentially magnified as Tagore tries to tackle a complicated political theme symbolically within a mythological framework. For instance, if we consider the characterisation in the play, characters like Raja, Sardar, Adhyapak, Gosai, Puran Bagis are all symbolic as indicated in their very generic naming. However, gold diggers or miners like Chandra, Phagualal, Gokul are situated at the very opposite pole in terms of their realistic rendering. Unlike the former characters, they are even given specific proper names. Even more complex are the characters of Nandini, Bishu Pagol and Rajan who are meant to be both symbolic and real at the same time as their names suggest. In an attempt at staging the play, therefore, any director is troubled by such a radical polarisation of the characters.

The spatial dynamics of staging is also troubled by the presence of two distinctly different topographies in the play. At the beginning of the play Tagore mentions:

The subject of this play concerns a city named *Yaksha Puri*. In this city the labourers are employed in extracting gold from the earth. The king of the city lives shrouded behind a covering of complex network. The whole play is an act happening in front of the webbed covering of the king's palace. All the action happens at the outer side of the covering. (Tagore: 2001: 6)

While such a singular symbolic staging is indicated at the beginning of the play, we find the action in the play shifting between two distinctly different topographies - topographies which are both materially and qualitatively distinct. The first is the front of the king's palace where the invisible king's poetic interactions with Nandini takes place and the more realistic everyday space where all the other actions materialize. This division is further complicated by the fact that the characters Nandini and Raja inhabit both these spaces at different points in the play. While Nandini is found to be present intermittently in both these spaces, a far greater problem is presented by the character of Raja who is invisible and resides behind the symbolic veil of the palace walls but decides to come out into the realistic everyday space in the final scene of the play.

What complicates the symbolic-real conflict further is the idealistic and even apparently ambiguous political resolution Tagore presents to a very real and contemporary political crisis in the play. As we have already discussed, Tagore's primary intention in the play was to critique the mechanistic civilisation, the inhuman nature of life and social protocols in European nations. However, to be able to do so, Tagore in the play pits the capitalistic society which thrives on exploitation and accumulation of wealth against the farming society. In an introduction he names it as a conflict between *akarshan jibi sabhyata* and *karshan jibi sabhyata*. Such oppositional reading however renders invisible the various forms of oppression which might inhabit a farming society as well. One must remember here that coming from an upper class, feudal family, Tagore also had to negotiate in this play with numerous aspects of his own identity.

In the introduction, Tagore also presents a sustained comparison of his play with Valmiki's *Ramayana* and claims that the principal problem addressed in both texts is the same: the conflict of a farming society represented by Ram, and the wealth and power hungry, exploitative Ravana. Tagore says that the king who rules Yakshapuri is Ravana and Bibhishan combined into one and that the possibility of his better self is potentially latent within himself. It is for this reason, he explains, that the king comes out of his chambers at the end of the play to join in revolt of the miners against his regime. Tagore underlines his political study by saying that the contemporary problem of mechanical civilisation is not in fact a contemporary one but an age-old conflict between two forms of societal structure, one which bases itself on greed and exploitation, and the other closer to nature celebrating the human spirit and the principle of egalitarianism. According to Tagore, therefore, the most tenacious problems of human society are not modern but eternal. *Raktakarabi* presents such

an eternal truth, a reading which fails to take into consideration the uniqueness of the problems of the post-industrial capitalist society.

Tagore's treatment of the political crisis of the West leaves us with plenty of over-simplification, idealisation and vagueness. While the alienated life of the migrant miners and the way they are treated by the bureaucracy at *Yakshapuri* bear close resemblance to living and working conditions in capitalist society, there are also elements in the play which do not fit into this framework. On the one hand, for instance, one understands that the Raja in *Raktakarabi* rules through a well-organised bureaucracy while himself remaining unseen, to induce fear among the residents of *Yakhshapuri* and thereby aid in the governance and exploitation of his kingdom. Thus when the Raja comes out from behind the façade at the end of the play, we witness him as a human being and the façade breaks. Such logic can be argued to be consistent with modern leaders who govern by creating a public persona through the help of various media. However, on the other hand, it does seem problematic that towards the end of the play the king gets inexplicably transformed from being a tyrant into joining in the revolt against himself and the system. The king, unlike the bureaucrats in the play, is shown to be a human of extraordinary abilities. We hear Nandini fascinated by the King's physical attributes while watching him arrange gold in his chamber. Unlike the bureaucrats, the king also manifests growing disillusionment with the oppressive system of *Yakshapuri* throughout the play and ultimately succeeds in breaking out of it. Such transformative possibilities, however, are denied to the bureaucrats of *Yakshapuri*. One wonders why this should be the case. In this context, one is reminded of a Tagore's peculiar fascination for a singular head of state with a strong personality. On various occasions, Tagore revealed his propensity for being captivated by the charisma of personality of an autocrat, none so blatantly misleading and controversial than his encounter with Mussolini. Tagore visited Italy in May-June 1926 at the height of Mussolini's fascist regime. While by his own self-admission, Tagore was brainwashed by the agents of Mussolini's government into believing that Italy was peaceful and making great progress after a period of economic breakdown, Tagore's admiration of what he saw in Italy bordered on adulation for Mussolini the leader:

It is for me to study and not criticise from outside. I am glad of this opportunity to see for myself the work of one (Mussolini), who is assuredly a great man and a movement that will certainly be remembered in history. (*Daily News*, London-11 June, 1926)

Fascination for the cult of personality can also be identified in the characterisation of Nandini leads the revolt against the king and becomes the first one to die for the cause. The play itself ends with slogans from the miners “*Nandinir Joy*” (Hail Nandini).

If we inquire more into the character of Nandini, it also reveals elements of vagueness and other problematic manifestations. First, we do not get to know why someone like Nandini, who is not a miner, neither a wife of one, has been allowed to stay at Yakshapuri. What purpose does she fulfil at Yakshapuri where being purposeful is the only meaning of existence? Secondly, her interactions with the king of Yakshapuri belie a strong physical attraction towards him. Though Tagore makes it clear that Nandini’s heart ultimately throbs for Ranjan, a character we do not see in the play at all, what registers in our mind are her interactions with the king, at once intimate, physical and philosophical. Such proximity of Raja and Nandini hurts the logic of class-conflict which lies at the centre of any fascist or capitalist exploitative system. If we analyse Nandini’s function in the play further, other problems surface. Nandini’s character symbolises love and life in the life-less universe of *Yakshapuri*. But in what form does love manifest itself? We find most of the male characters in the play like Kishor, Adhyapak, Bishu Pagol, Raja are entranced by Nandini. Kishor is ready to die in order to bring Nandini a few of her favourite *Raktakarabi* flowers; the otherwise serious *bastubagish* (material theorist) Adhyapak is ready to open himself to Nandini and reveal to her the deep sadness that is concealed within himself. It is Nandini, her presence, her attractive personality, which re-kindles the dead spirit of the Yakshapuri residents. But does that mean the only revolt against the oppressive system that Yakshapuri signifies lies in such individual acts of rejuvenation? Is love of the heterosexual, romantic variety the only human-relation that can break through this loveless, inhuman universe? Can love manifest itself in only one form?

Likewise, the prospect of a collective revolt against system is indicated at the end but we do not witness its preparations through the play. A glaring absence in the play is Nandini’s conversation with any of the female residents of the Yakshapuri. The only other woman in the play Chandra, the wife of miner Phagulal, hates Nandini as she thinks Phagulal like all other male residents of Yakshapuri is hypnotised by the enchantress Nandini. Thus in the play we do not notice the coming together of equals, camaraderie or friendship, community formation of any sort, any form of human association other than romantic love.

It is important to note here that while Tagore was acutely aware of the evils that the modern West presented with its thrust of racist nationalism and exploitative capitalism, his political analysis of the forces at work in Europe or in America was not always accurate, up-to-date or consistent. Especially in regard to Communism and its possibilities, Tagore's opinions were often less informed and even contradictory. For instance, in a lecture presented on 31 October 1920 at New York during his visit to America, where Tagore would perhaps have the most intimate and depressing encounter with capitalism and which, arguably, would have been on his mind while writing *Raktakarabi* a few years later, we find him speaking approvingly of Bolshevism:

Most nations to-day and you in the United States particularly, are building a great organisation which are constantly growing more complex, and the machinery of civilization is dominating you and stifling individual expression. That is what is at the back of Bolshevism - a craving for individual expression and the desire to get free from the cumbersome machinery of existence. (*New York Herald*, Nov 1, 1920)

We see how the metaphor of the machine to mark the contemporary modern western civilisation was already taking shape in Tagore's mind. We also find Tagore acknowledging Bolshevism as a revolt against capitalist forces. However, a few lines into the lecture we find Tagore saying:

Of course, Bolshevism is wrong because it is thoroughly selfish, it exploits one class at the expense of all others. So selfishness is at the bottom of the conflict between the forces of capital and labour. Labour asks for shorter hours and more pay, but proposes to give nothing; capital asks for more capital, but proposes to give nothing. These conflicting forces of which labour and capital are only two, will wreck the world unless men find a new spiritual faith in which they can all grow together, I do not believe that one religion can serve the world for all time. (ibid)

We see here that Tagore cannot align himself fully with Bolshevism and presents a rather ambiguous critique of it. Clearly, Tagore here is seeing capitalism as not the oppression of one class by another but rather the inability of all classes to exist in harmony. Such a position reveals his ambivalent reading of the contemporary political situation. One might even suspect that his knowledge of the Bolshevik revolution was also not complete. Such an ambiguous political position, however, did not also prevent him from presenting a scathing critique of both the European nations and Indian society in one of his letters written on witnessing worker strikes at the Bombay port before boarding the ship for America:

In Europe, in the name of *rashtra dharma* (nation religion) human beings are being sacrificed. In the name of this *dharma*, workers pull the wagon wheel of the wealth god and are trampled to death under those very wheels. The army men consider themselves fortunate to sacrifice their heads at the altar of the nation state. And, in our country we have demanded human sacrifice as well, in the name of *samaj dharma* (social religion); we have asked the *shudra* to consent to his indignity...we have told women to consent to their confinement... (Tagore, 197: 45)

Therefore, as we see, though Tagore's understanding of contemporary political reality was often quite accurate, he also had his share of confusions, misinformation, and reservations to deal with. His major reservations concerning Communism were that it took recourse to violence; its political ideology and party formation also contributed towards a machinistic organisational principle. Tagore was in principle against any form of violence through mechanization. Such a view, however, did not remain intact as we find in *Raktakarabi* itself. In *Muktadhara* the philosophy of non-violence plays a major role in the play but is totally absent in *Raktakarabi* where a violent revolt is indicated in the conclusion.

Last but not the least, another factor to be considered is Rabindranath's reluctance for his plays or for that matter any of his literary pieces to be considered as political propaganda. In the piece he wrote in his defence of *Raktakarabi* for *The Manchester Guardian*, after discussing in detail how his play presented a critique of European political thinking, Tagore says almost in the form of an apologia:

I can assure my reader that I never meant to use this book as propaganda. It is a vision that has come to me in darkest hour of dismay. (Tagore, *Manchester Guardian*, 5 August 1925)

Tagore more than once expressed his desire to keep himself and his *ashram* at Santiniketan distanced from political turmoil. During his 1920 visit to America, when he learns about the growing tensions in India regarding the Non-Cooperation movement, he becomes extremely anxious that the spirit of the movement might affect the Sanintiketan Ashram. He writes to C. F. Andrews upon whom he had entrusted the responsibility of the ashram in his absence:

[M]y earnest request to you is to keep your mind high above politics. The problem of this new age is to help to build the world anew. Let us accept this great task... Santiniketan is to make accommodation for the workers from all parts of the world. All other things can wait... (Tagore, 1928: 103)

Not only in regard to his Ashram but even at a personal level, Tagore desired to keep a distance from politics. As he tells Andrews in another one of his letters, "I do not belong to

the present age, the age of conflicting politics. Nevertheless I cannot repudiate the age which has given me birth. I suffer and struggle..." (ibid: 111). Thus we see how Tagore set himself objectives which extended beyond the limits of immediate political concerns of his own age; he was not ready to sacrifice these objectives to the demands of his own time. He sees himself as a poet and knowing that it is impossible to dissociate himself altogether from the political reality in front him, he still prefers to keep a distance from politics. For his Ashram at Santiniketan Tagore imagines the role of creating harmony between nations, civilisations, races and cultures and sees "political conflict" as something detrimental to the achievement of such a goal.

Such a position might seem problematic and, indeed, was criticised by many of Tagore's contemporaries including Gandhi. Gandhi in an open letter published in *Young India*, written in response to Tagore's piece titled "A Call of Truth" criticising the Non-Cooperation movement published in *Modern Review* in October 1921, made his criticism clear:

[W]hen there is war, the poet lays down the lyre, the lawyer his law reports, the schoolboy his books. The poet will sing the true note after the war is over...when a house is on fire, all inmates go out, each one takes up a bucket to quench the fire... It is my conviction that India is a house on fire because its manhood is being scorched daily... (Gandhi, *Mahatma*-Vol II: 61)

It seems an interesting fact in the light of the above discussion that Tagore was unable to stage two of his most overtly political plays *Raktakarabi* and *Muktadhara*. While we know of his desire to produce *Raktakarabi* and consequent failure to find a suitable Nandini, one wonders whether the poet was also troubled in finding an appropriate production strategy for these plays, although we do not have any archival evidence to support such a speculation. One, however, suspects that his reservations against direct political engagement would have manifested themselves in performances of these plays at Santiniketan and that the more political facets of his plays would have been rendered invisible.

Thus, Tagore, as we see, was torn between conflicting ideals in politics and aesthetics and these contradictions get represented in plays like *Muktadhara* or *Raktakarabi* which deal with politics more directly in comparison to the rest of the plays. and account for much of its abstruseness through an oscillation between the symbolic and real, the mythical and the contemporary, the aesthetic and the political. It is these elements of abstruseness which makes *Raktakarabi* and the above plays extremely challenging to interpret and

produce. Sombhu Mitra in his directorial notes, however, does not discuss any of these elements of abstruseness. He does not consider them as abstruse. He believes they are the deliberate, rational creation of an artist only awaiting deeper engagement to be understood. Thus, he takes up that task in his production and in his notes on explaining Tagore's *Raktakarabi* based on clues that are latent in the play itself. He promises to do so, based on the clues he believes are latent in the play itself. His approach is clearly revealed when he says:

It is in this manner that any intelligent and sensitive artist reveals the deeper reality of his times in his works through innumerable *ingit* (indications). We remain indebted to them all our life if we can follow these *ingits* and realise the magnanimity of their creation in its completeness. (Mitra, 1992: 23)

Mitra too, on his part intends to read these indications to reveal the true nature of Tagore's text. It is thus that we find many of the contradictions which exist in the play manifest in Mitra's production as well. But are they the only elements of contradiction? Or does Mitra, in an attempt to make the play contemporary and communicable at the same time, bind himself in a conflict - a conflict between creative interpretation and loyalty to the author-function. Was Mitra just revealing the truth of Tagore's text or was he also presenting a new text, an interpretation of his own? We will try to answer these questions in the next section where we will discuss Mitra's dramaturgical methodology.

A Dramaturgy of Textual Deconstruction

How did Mitra go about deducing his dramaturgy from the archive? Was he really closely following Tagore's own ideas about *Rakta-Karabi* and theatre in general as he claimed? To find out, let us analyse Mitra's directorial methodology of searching for solutions through a prolonged and rigorous negotiation with the archive on matters relating to Tagore's dramaturgy as well as a deconstruction of the play text, as mentioned in his production notes and other writings.

An exercise that we find Mitra performing throughout his production notes is trying to read between the lines of the play text to arrive at an original Tagorean dramaturgy which he believes is latent in the text itself. Mitra is seen to deconstruct the text, at times even the punctuations, to achieve this effect. It is through this deconstruction that Mitra tries to

understand deduce the psychological traits of the characters, their emotional states, the causality behind their actions, the speech patterns and even their movement on stage. Mitra tries to impart a body and an identifiable meaning to the play which had hitherto seemed too vague and abstruse to stage. He believes the clues to such an embodiment of the text are embedded in the text itself.

Even before analysing Mitra's method of interpreting the text of the play, we encounter facts regarding the text which problematise Mitra's engagement with it. First of all, one of the primary problems of dealing with the archive of the text of Tagore's *Rakta-Karabi* is the fact that the play went through ten different versions written between 1923-1924. The play was finally published in 1924 in the Bengali journal *Prabashi*, and later that year its English translation *Red Oleanders* was completed by Tagore himself and published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. The manuscripts of all the versions except one which the Bohurup group procured from a private collection and published in its journal *Bohurup* in 1986, are preserved at the Rabindra Bhavan archive, Santiniketan. Till 1978, however, the existence of these multiple manuscripts was still not known to the public. It was researcher Pranay Kumar Kundu who first noticed their presence in 1988 and subsequently compiled the nine manuscripts at Rabindra Bhavan in a book published in 1998. More recently, in 2009, all the ten versions have been compiled by Malay Rakshit in a work titled *Raktakarabi: Rupe Rupantore*.

While we find Mitra mentioning the English translation which he referred to, in spite of his alleged loyalty towards Tagore's text, we find no mention of Mitra studying the manuscript of *Raktakarabi* while visiting Santiniketan. If Mitra would have done that, we might have known about the multiple versions of the play much earlier. More importantly, such an exercise might have facilitated a better understanding of the text for Mitra himself. There are significant changes to be perceived if one studies the different manuscript versions of *Raktakarabi* through their gradual development to the final published text. This is particularly true for anyone trying to understand Tagore's own aesthetic and political intentions in *Rakta-Karabi*. For instance, Pranay Kumar Kundu in his essay "*Raktakarabi Nepathye*" (2006) indicates how in the final draft of the play, Tagore edited certain descriptions of physical sexuality which was otherwise present in Nandini's remembrances of her interactions with Ranjan. Kundu rightly diagnoses that this editing affects the character of Nandini in the play making her seem considerably less human as an embodied entity and more of an idea. One understands that if Mitra had consulted the manuscript of the play it

might have provided him with crucial hints into the understanding of the psychological process that went into the writing and re-writing of Nandini's character. Thus we see that in his methodology of rigorous engagement with the Tagore archive, Mitra often perhaps did not entirely exhaust the archival possibilities. He often took the play text as it is, not looking to question its multiple dimensions; rather, he was more interested in explaining its components and using it as an inception point for the triggering of his own imagination. However, the problem is that his imagination does not necessarily travel the path that Tagore might have preferred. We will find more supporting evidence to corroborate this hypothesis.

Embodying characters and anticipating the action

To be able to stage the play, a crucial task that Mitra had to perform is to imagine the characters of the play in their sheer bodily existence. As we have discussed already and as one of the reviews of Mitra's Delhi production of the play aptly noted, the characters in *Raktakarabi* are "not entirely human...nor are they mere ideas...they are spectral figures inhabiting a kind of intermediate world between men and ideas" (*Hindusthan Standard*, 22 December 1954). We do not know much about the characters' past - where they come from and how they have reached where they are, when we encounter them in the play. The most complicated among the characters are Nandini and Raja. In the case of the other characters, we are at least assured of their class status and their specific function in *Yakshapuri*. In contrast, the characters of Raja and Nandini exhibit the symbolic nature of characterisation at its most extreme which far transcends the specificities of class and social background. What complicates the characters further is their shift within the play between the realm of the symbolic and the poetic, juxtaposed against the everyday, both physically and in terms of their vocal registers.

Let us discuss here Mitra's interpretation of the character of Nandini and whether, as Mitra claims, his interpretation reciprocated Tagore's conception of her character. Imagining the character of Nandini is perhaps the most challenging task of producing *Raktakarabi*, a challenge even Tagore himself could not overcome. Nandini's age is not indicated in the play, neither is her background, nor her specific function in *Yakshapuri*. We find in the play that most of the male characters are attracted to Nandini. Nandini is aware of this fact and accepts it easily. She is fearless and can speak her mind to anybody including the terrifying Raja. Nandini, although she clearly loves Ranjan, is also strongly attracted to Raja and Bishu Pagol. While such an attraction, if suppressed and only implied in the action of the play

would not have been difficult to deal with, the point is that she articulates her desires clearly in entire scenes of the play in a language which is often poetic and metaphorical. With regard to such scenes, Mitra believes:

We thought the effortlessness of Nandini's character will be better expressed if she is able to say these words without any exaggeration, with a respectful ease.... Then it will be revealed how effortlessly she can establish relations with a variety of people...not through any girlish affectation...but as a woman through her tremendous ability to understand...a balanced woman of modern sensibilities, full of life. A woman not reduced by her inhibitions and at the same time also not indecent. (Mitra, 2004: 58)

To Mitra, therefore, Nandini appears as a modern woman, not limited by her inhibitions.

But did Tripti Mitra's rendition of Nandini succeed in actualising such a reading? What struck most reviewers of *Raktakarabi* production was Tripti Mitra's tremendous free-flowing energy in the role, typical of a girl on the threshold of youth and womanhood. A report on the Delhi production published in *Times of India* noted that "Tripti Mitra as Nandini gave a memorable performance though at times she seemed far too worked up" (*Times of India*, 22 December, 1954). Gopal Haldar in his review also expresses such apprehensions:

Though, it must be said that the Nandini as conceived in the play and the Nandini given shape by Sombhu babu are not the same. Nandini of the play has a strong personality; everybody else in Yakshapuri is under the influence of her philosophical acuity. Sri Sombhu Mitra's Nandini's personality, however, is comparatively less self-assured -- full of gaiety; she represents the spontaneous effervescence of a young country-girl. (Haldar, *Natun Sahitya*, July 1954)

While we do not have with us any video recordings of the 1954 performance, such views are corroborated by the only audio recording of the play (done much later) that exists and which we shall discuss a little later in further detail. However, in the audio recording, one cannot but notice the very apparent effervescence of laughter and frivolous quality in Tripti Mitra's voice. It is this relentless energy, a lightness of being, which perhaps also gives Tripti Mitra the licence to say things almost half-realising and half-meaning them.

But would Tagore have agreed to such a rendition of Nandini? Interestingly, the instance when Ram Kinkar Baij's attempt at producing *Raktakarabi* was aborted with the disapproval of Tagore, one of Tagore's chief objections with Baij's interpretation was with the characterization of Nandini. Tagore told Ram Kinkar, "My Nandini, as much she is playful, is serious too. Yours, however, has no seriousness at all" (Baij, quoted in *Bohurupeer*

Raktakarabi, 2005: 174). Moreover, it is it would also be largely debatable whether Tagore himself subscribed to the idea of a modern woman bereft of inhibitions. While Tagore's ideas regarding women were remarkably progressive for his times, yet he also had his share of reservations against the "modern woman". The point is that, transcending the elements of contradiction and ambiguity that the character of Nandini presents to us, it is almost impossible today to imagine how Tagore might have conceived her. Thus, any claim on the part of Mitra to interpret Nandini as Tagore might have conceived her is unacceptable to us.

One of the characteristics of Tagore's plays is the absence of any detailed descriptions of the characters' actions which make the text open to the director's interpretation in terms of movement. Mitra claims, however, that the movements are anticipated in the dialogue itself. For instance, at a particular moment in the play, Phagulal,



Figure 15 The Set Design for Bohurupee *Raktakarabi* production by Khaled Choudhury, 1954 one of the workers in Yakshapuri, asks his wife to bring out his bottle of liquor which she has hidden in order not to let him drink. The wife asks Phagulal why he drinks and consequently they have a conversation about the depressing life in Yakshapuri. Phagulal never asks again for liquor in the scene. However, Mitra reads into the fact that Phagulal does not ask for liquor again because he has already found the bottle and is drinking from it (Mitra, 2004: 36). Whether a drinking scene on stage done in naturalistic manner would fit Tagore's sense of aesthetics is a question which is open to interpretation. Especially, it would have to noted here that around time of the writing of the play, Tagore had also written in essays like *Sahityer Dharma* that certain aspects of life and the world are inherently un-aesthetic and have no place in art. There's no telling that drinking would not be one of them. Such doubts

receive impetus when contemporary literary critic, Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay, who was close to Tagore and had seen the productions of Tagore's other plays at Santiniketan as well as Mitra's production, would mark Mitra's dramaturgy as significantly different from Tagore's, whose dramaturgy, he claimed, was much more "lyrical".

Aesthetics of the stage

Let us now turn to the stage design for the *Rakta-Karabi* production done by Khaled Choudhury. As I have discussed earlier in the essay, Choudhury along with Mitra himself



Figure 16 Bishu Pagol and Nandini sitting in front of the King's door designed following Gaganendranath's painting in the *Raktakarabi*, performance, 1954

went to Santiniketan on the advice of Annada Shankar Roy to receive suggestions regarding the aesthetics of the production. As Choudhury clearly mentions in his own memoirs *Srmitir Sarani* (2011), he designed the stage and costumes following suggestions from Nandalal Bose and Ram Kinkar Baij, the two leading artists at Santiniketan. If we see the stage design of *Raktakarabi*, we find that it is a peculiar concoction of the symbolic as well as the realistic as Utpal Dutt makes it clear in his review of the production. In the photograph of the set, the decorated façade on the left side is the door behind which the king lives. The structures in the middle are the flag pole on the left and the alligator-shaped back door of the king's palace on the right. To the extreme right is the raised platform

above which the leaders through whom the king rules Yakshapuri stand. As Dutt has indicated, Mitra was clearly thinking in terms of a western notion of the theatre stage in *Raktakarabi*, a conception which as a matter of fact Tagore himself despised. As we have already discussed early in the dissertation, Tagore's sole essay on theatre *Rangamancha* is a

pamphlet criticising the very idea of a constructed stage which he believes is an unnecessary importation from European theatres.

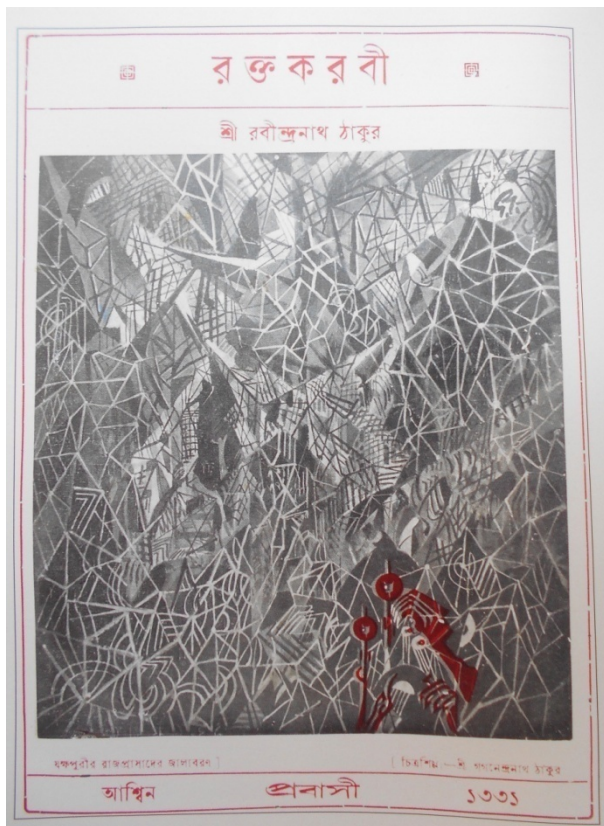


Figure 17 Painting by Gaganendranath in the cover page to the *Raktakarabi* text, published in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, 1924

Mitra, however, does not refer to this essay even once in his production notes. Not only that, he even puts forth in his pre-performance speech, a claim that the *Raktakarabi* production strives to give shape to an Indian theatrical idiom through Rabindranath. Within the stage design, the decorated King’s door is a re-interpretation of Gaganendranath Tagore’s black-and-white painting which accompanied the play when published in Bengali in the *Prabashi* magazine. The subject of the painting was the *Yakshapuri* which seems to be covered by a spider’s web. The illustration had a caption, ‘The network/netting of the palace in Yaksha city by the painter Gaganendranath Thakur.’ However, for the English translation of *Raktakarabi* titled *Red Oleanders* published in *Visva-Bharati*

Quarterly, Gaganendranath did a series of nine black- and-white illustrations to accompany the text. These illustrations reveal Cubist influences and are not referred to in the *Raktakarabi* stage design. One might wonder why Rabindranath choose to have Gaganendranath’s visuals in his English translation and not the Bengali original. Swati Ganguly in her essay “The illustration of *Red Oleanders*: Rabindranath, modernism and visual culture” rightly argues:

[T]his was perhaps a conscious decision; Rabindranath wanted Gaganendranath’s Cubist/Expressionist paintings to be part of *Red Oleanders* as a special kind of visual address. This he may have felt could best be appreciated by a circle of readers who were familiar with and subscribed to the aesthetic discourse of contemporary avant-garde English language journals like *Modern Review* or art journals like *Rupam*. (Ganguly, 2008, *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*)

This deliberate choice on behalf of Rabindranath is in sharp contrast with the intentions of Mitra who claims to find in Tagore's plays an Indian mode of doing theater. Tagore's choice signals towards a commitment to a certain ideal of art, his espousal of the notion of the artist who should have the freedom to draw from sources that belonged both to Indian and Western/European cultures. In concurrence with his critique of nationalism, Rabindranath abjured any attempt to limit and confine visual or performing art according to creeds of region or nation. We will discuss this point in greater detail and in the larger context of Mitra's general approach to Tagore and his ideas regarding theatre, in the next section.

Costumes

As we have already witnessed, an element of the *Raktakarabi* production which would take centre stage in the debates regarding authorship concerns the design of costumes. Indeed, the process through which the costumes were decided upon and the reactions they generated in the critics reveal the complexities of authorship in intricate ways. I have already discussed how the critics who chastised Mitra's production for being un-Tagorean primarily pointed out that the costumes in the play appeared totally incongruent to the aesthetics of a Tagore play. To go by the sartorial conventions prevalent in performances at Santiniketan, they were indeed correct. While commenting on *Sarodotsav* and the making of the new aesthetics of stage at Santiniketan, I have pointed out how the costumes in early Sanitniketan performances usually meant the use of everyday attire with minor additions in the form of coloured or designed *uttariya* or pieces of cloth tied to the waist or the head. The characters in plays like *Sarodotsav*, *Phalguni*, *Dakghar* were also designed to fit to the format of such costuming. Later on, in plays having women characters like *Raja*, *Tapati*, *Natir Puja*, *Chandalika* and *Chitrangada*, women or boys who dressed as women generally wore *saris* decorated with ornaments, as is evident from the photographs as well as the descriptions of the productions. Thus, in contrast to these protocols, the costumes used in Mitra's production would indeed appear to be deviating from such conventions.

However, what would problematise the claims of the critics is the fact that neither *Muktadahara* nor *Raktakarabi* could be staged by Tagore at Santiniketan. Therefore, how Tagore would have conceived the costumes for these plays can only be speculated on. As I have mentioned, there are also no specific costumes indicated for the characters in the plays

in most cases. Moreover, the uniqueness of the plays themselves and the characters they consist of make it impossible to write off the possibility that Tagore himself would have felt encouraged in thinking differently regarding the costumes.

Mitra, on his part, however, took the critics seriously, or perhaps was also felt forced to do so feeling threatened by the possibility of being censored by the Visva-Bharati Board. On the advice of Annada Shankar Ray, Mitra accompanied Ray on a trip to Santiniketan along with set and costume designer Khaled Choudhury to seek the expert guidance of Nandalal Bose in matters relating to the staging of the play. Predictably, key concerns in the



Figure 18 Costume design sketch for the character of the King by Khaled Choudhury for Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi*, 1954

discussion focused on the costumes of the two central characters of the play, Raja and Nanadini. Mitra in his directorial notes mentions the discussion with Nandalal on the costuming of Raja:

When the Raja's costume came up for discussion, we confessed that we have not been able to conceive it properly. It is because, earlier in our country, there used to be a symbol for *bajra* or thunder which people however will not be able to understand now. He (Nandalal) initially told us that we can incorporate the symbol for electricity on the back of the Raja's attire. We felt that it would appear too much like a commercial

advertisement for an electric company. Many of them actually use that. Then *Mashtarmoshai* (Nandalal) suggested that we can use the "toothed wheel" as a symbol. I replied, "Would it not seem too foreign?" He said- "Not at all! In modern

civilisation it has become a universal element. It no longer belongs to any particular country." It was then that a well-known writer, who was also present, enquired- "Would the Raja not have the usual stuff, like the sword or the *pagri* (turban)?" Nandalal babu replied, "Not at all, this is not that sort of a king. He represents the scientific inclination of the modern man." We were so relieved to hear this! In spite of being an old man, *Mashtarmoshai* could still think like this,

why did the young writer have to ask for swords and turbans? Is it because the writer believed deep inside that Tagore did not possess a modern sensibility? (Mitra, 1992: 26)

In this interesting exchange of ideas, we notice a number of things. First of all, it seems striking that Nandalal who was actively engaged in performances at Santiniketan directed by Rabindranath, did not try to impose any Tagorean idea of aesthetics or staging on Mitra or his colleagues. His suggestion to include the toothed wheel as a symbol of industrialisation and organisation of the modern society in the Raja's costume reveals not only a sensitive, informed and creative mind but also his perceptive understanding of *Raktakarabi*. In fact, if we counterpose Mitra's views against Nandalal's, notwithstanding Mitra's critique of the young writer, he too appears burdened by presuppositions of "Indian-ness", a fact I have already mentioned.

While it is arguable whether Tagore himself would have accepted Nandalal's suggestions, a fact which can be stated with more certainty is that neither Tagore nor Nandalal would probably have been left satisfied by the manner in which Nandalal's suggestions were implemented in the actual production. From the existing photographs, we find Mitra who played Raja having a toothed wheel literally painted on the back of his white *sherwani*. One doubts that this tactless and visually inelegant rendering would have satisfied Tagore or Nandalal, especially if one compares it to the costumes designed for the performance of *Tasher Desh* at Santiniketan where the characters' costumes had to bear the symbolic suggestion of animated cards.

If we take Mitra's reporting of the conversation as evidence, a more important problem regarding the Raja's costume appears to have been left unaddressed. In the *Raktakarabi* production, the Raja was seen to wear a *sherwani* and a *churidar*, which invoked a comparison with the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, prompting critics to call the production politically propagandist. Khaled Choudhury in an essay on the production *Raktakarabi Nirman Prsange* (On the making of *Raktakarabi*, 2004), confesses that he, indeed, had Nehru in mind while designing the costume (Choudhury, *Bohurupeer Raktakarabi*, 2005: 67). He also mentions, anecdotally, how in the first performance at New Delhi, Prasanta Chandra Mahlanobis had pointed out the similarity to Nehru himself who had been left vexed (ibid). We can safely say that Tagore would never have approved of such propagandist tactics.

Regarding Nandini's costumes, the major element of doubt concerned whether the *dhani*-coloured *sari* mentioned in the play suggests the colour of ripe and green paddy. We learn from Choudhury's memoirs that Nandalal had suggested green (Choudhury, 2011: 27). But was Nandalal's instruction followed? Dhurjati Prasad Mukhopadhyay who was quite close to Tagore and is considered one of finest of Tagore scholars was left unhappy with the fact that the colour of Nandini's *sari* in the production was that of ripe paddy



Figure 19 Actors in *Tasher Desh* performance with Tagore, 1933

navy blue costumes as usually worn by factory workers, Choudhury was forced to use khaki instead, as the costumes for the workers had already been borrowed from the tram drivers union, to which a few Bohurupee's members were close. Finally, as we know that in spite of Mitra's diligence of going to Santiniketan and meeting Nandalal, he ran into problems with the Visva-Bharati Music Board regarding the costumes.

The above discussion reveals the complicated nature of the Tagorean authorial function and its unpredictable trajectory of dissemination. Not only are Bohurupee's costumes in multiple instances revealed to be anything but what Tagore would have approved, the very basis of what consists a Tagorean aesthetics of costuming and the process through which such an aesthetics is established and imposed are problematised in the discussion mentioned above.

(Mukhopadhyay, *Bohurupeer Raktakarabi*, 2005: 104). Apart from Nandini's costume, Nandalal's instructions for the other costumes could not always be followed. As Choudhury himself acknowledges, while Nandalal suggested the miners be given

Innovative Music and Lighting

One of the more memorable facets of Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi* production, for which it should be remembered in Bengali or even Indian theatre history, concerns its radically innovative music and lighting done by two remarkably gifted artists, Khaled Choudhury and Tapas Sen, respectively. Khaled Choudhury (1919- 2014), a multi-talented individual who was to enrich the Bengali stage with his brilliant sets as well as innovative music arrangements, by his own confession, practically debuted in theatre with *Raktakarabi*. Though he had been part of Bourupi's earlier productions, it is with *Raktakarabi* as he mentions in his memoirs that he began engaging deeply with the theatrical form in earnest (Choudhury, 2011: 26).

Sombhu Mitra in an essay "*Raktakarabite Sangeet Proyog*" (Arranging music for *Raktakarabi*, 1968) acknowledges Khaled Choudhury's brilliance in being able to respond creatively to the needs of the production:

I realised while producing *Raktakarabi*, that it requires a lot of music but not of the conventional kind - which would not fit the play... We needed a fresh perspective, an exceptional sensibility which could engage with both music and theatre deeply. Khaled Choudhury's music arrangements for the production bore that element. (Mitra, Bohurupee *Raktakarabi*, 2005: 55)

Choudhury in an interview recollects how he went about realising Mitra's desires of having an unconventional music arrangement for the production by devising ways to produce "non-musical" sounds:

To do the music for the production I had to invent sounds which were distinctly different to the usual ones being used. I began with scrap iron parts in the first scene... They were bought directly from the iron scrap-selling shops... It was followed a scene with a procession where I used a hollow wooden instrument. I made the carpenter bore a large hole into a wooden piece. A strange sound emanated out of it. You get *ghungur* near the Nakhoda Masjid. *Rickshawallahs* wear it to alert the pedestrians on the street. I brought out a peculiar sound by tying up a number of them in a cloth... (Choudhury, Bohurupee 122, 2014: 122)

Choudhury not only went out of the way to gather new unconventional sounds but also used them effectively coupled with more conventional instruments to bring forth

unprecedented musical effects, which heightened the impact of the performance. Mitra in his essay presents a detailed account of the music arrangement for the first scene:

The performance opens with Nandini alone on the stage. She is shown to be sitting on the stage making a garland of flowers on her own. We felt the need for a musical insertion here which could possibly establish the interpretation of the play at the very outset. The underlying conception was to express how the harmony of life in Yakshapuri is being jeopardised by the cacophony all around. Khaled Choudhury went out with his tuning fork in search of sounds to the shops selling metal scraps. He gathered a number of metal sheets, which could be played at differing pitches. Accompanied by the brushing of a *nagara* (a kind of percussion) with a broom and beating of a piece of wood, together, a machinist sound was created. Then, this sound was merged with the flute. The flute represented the melody of everyday life, and the other sounds evoked the dissonance of industrial existence which repeatedly tried to suppress it. In narrating, it perhaps sounds too theoretical, but those who remember the beginning scene of the performance would vouch for its unusual musical brilliance. (Mitra, *Bohurupee Raktakarabi*, 2005: 55)

We come to know from Mitra's essay that not only did Choudhury discover new sounds or merge them with conventional musical instruments, but he also at times played the conventional instruments differently to produce novel effects.

Comparable to such creative efforts in music arrangements, Tapas Sen's (1924-2006) masterful and often improvised lighting too gave the *Raktakarabi* production a new dimension. Sen in his essay "*Alo-Chaya, Raktakarabi O Bohurupee*" (1998) as well as Mitra in his directorial notes discuss in details the often impromptu, street-smart ways in which Sen responded to Mitra's demands regarding lighting in the production. Clearly, such innovative music arrangement and lighting were radically new phenomena on the Bengali stage - potentialities to which Tagore had not been exposed. While Tagore was open to the creative use of lighting in performances when available, as we have seen, it is debatable whether he would have approved of more specific light-effects, or whether he would have found them distracting. Though Tagore experimented with the use of music in theatre, one must acknowledge that Tagore's choices regarding theatrical music appears more conventional in comparison to Choudhury's unusual methods.

However, an element in the music arrangement which would have surely not met Tagore's approval is the curtailing of the songs in the production. This too was considered by

some of the contemporary critics as uncalled for. Interestingly though, Visva-Bharati Music Board on its part did not specifically demand that the songs should be sung in full. Mitra and Choudhury, however, during their Santiniketan visit had discussed the curtailing of songs although not with Nandalal but Ramkinkar Baij. Ramkinkar had strongly consented to Bohurupee's curtailing of the songs as we learn from Choudhury's memoirs:

Kinkarda said, "Don't sing more than a line. Leave it at that. As Rabindranath himself has included the songs, so if you don't sing them at all people will object. But we must not forget that Tagore had this distinctive personality about him. Thus when he produced, it worked. But when we have done it ourselves, we have seen, as good as the singing might be, the songs disrupt the flow of the performance. Therefore cut it off. Sing a line and then cut it". (Choudhury, 2011: 28)

Ramkinkar here is clearly not conforming to the Tagorean dramaturgy but speaking from his own experience of doing theatre. Moreover, we have already learnt how Ramkinkar's views on theatre, especially regarding *Raktakarabi*, were not often in agreement with Tagore's. However, intriguingly, Mitra and Choudhury during their visit to Santiniketan did not try to consult any of the performers or exponents of Rabindra Sangeet for suggestions regarding the use of songs and other matters related to the staging. Perhaps, they sensed that their ideas which were often in contradiction with Tagore's own dramaturgy or ideas about theatre would not find approval from them.

Voicing the text

A crucial question which comes up in the discussion regarding the Bohurupee's *Raktakarabi* production is the question of "voice". One of the major problems of dramaturgy that *Raktakarabi* posed was how to speak the lines which encompass a wide range of rhetorical registers shifting between the poetic and the everyday, at times shifting so quickly between one to the other that the distinctness of the registers gets blurred. As Utpal Dutt would clarify in his review of *Raktakarabi*, Tagore's characters, whatever be their social status, often speak in a flowingly poetic-philosophical language. But, on the other hand, Tagore's symbolic plays beginning with *Sarodotsav* are not written entirely in verse as is the case with Shakespeare's plays, for instance, or even modern poetic drama, but in prose. Therefore it becomes difficult to speak the dialogue along with the underlying patterns of everyday speech. What could be the possible reasons behind such a phenomenon? If we go beyond the

archive of theatre itself, we might find a clue. Renowned film director Satyajit Ray was a student at Kala Bhavan in the Fine Arts department at Santiniketan for a year. As he recalls, he had not more than three to four encounters with Tagore. In those meetings it appeared to him that nobody could hold a normal conversation with Tagore because of the fact that “he would not use a wrong word...his normal conversation was like prepared speech” (Ray, 2015: 135). Thus, although the way characters speak in *Raktakarabi* might seem unlike everyday speech, it might actually be the very way in which Tagore spoke in everyday life.

Such a mode of thinking about writing brings a radical change to the way we read literary pieces. It connects the written word to the voice of the author and in a broader sense the embodied presence of the author. Reflecting on such a mode of reading literature, voice theorist Adriana Cavarero in her work *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005) remarks:

The attention here does not fall on the characteristics of oral culture as distinct from literate culture; rather, the focus is on the relationship between vocality and textuality. The aim is to feel how the principle of sound organizes the text and, at the same time, disorganizes language’s claim to control the entire process of signification. Speech, even when it is written, thus gets analyzed through its sonorous matrix. In other words, this is a theoretical perspective that traces both spoken and written language back to a vocal sphere that is the common matrix of both. And this perspective is therefore quite different from those insisting on the dyad orality/writing. (Cavarero, 2005: 130)

Coming back to Mitra, he claims in his directorial notes to have solved the riddle of how to speak the lines in *Rakta-Karabi* in a manner which is understandable, yet does not disturb the realistic grounding of the characters. He explains the method in one of his essays titled “*Ki Bhabhe Rabindranath- e Pouchono Gelo?*” (How did we encounter Rabindranath?, 1978):

By then I had understood that bypassing the blind beliefs in circulation about the language in Tagore’s plays, that if one has to read the texts written by renowned writers, one has to study deeply and understand the writers’ own rhythm of speech... the more original the artist is, the harder we have to try to grasp the rhythm because evidently its rhythm will be distinctly different from the ordinary (Mitra, 1990:183).

As we see, Mitra was also trying to read the play text by relating it to the embodied voice of the author, a mode of reading we discussed above. What realisation did Mitra arrive at from such a mode of reading? Mitra elaborates in the same essay:

We understood that Rabindranath as a person is a thousand times more intelligent than us. Thus if we cannot explain the sharp intellect of his lines, if we read them in a silly “*kabyik-kabyik*” (exaggeratedly poetic way of reading with melody and rhythm) way, we would only be dishonouring the slight intellect that we have. (ibid)

But was his method successful? Could he actually accomplish what he strived to achieve? Is there any way to confirm this? We know from the reviews that Mitra was successful in devising an apt rhetorical register for speaking the lines in *Raktakarabi*. But then one can also question whether the reviewers were conscious of the subtle changes being made in the text itself while spoken in performance.

Such a question comes up especially in the light of the only piece of archival evidence, an audio recording of the play done in 1969, fifteen years after the original production for All India Radio. As critic Dhruba Gupta rightly mentions in his essay on the *Raktakarabi* production, one cannot even begin to understand from the recording of the play what happened in the actual production, not least because it was shortened to fit the slot of an hour from the original two-hour performance duration, resulting in a random editing of the text. However, a most striking fact which comes through if one listens to the recording is that many of the words have been altered from the original text, sentences are inverted, words added, punctuation improvised, in order to make the speech as close as possible to a colloquial idiom. One can question, therefore, under the light of this new information, whether Mitra’s claims of reading the text through the author’s voice were indeed valid. It may as well be that he did the same for the 1954 production. At a time when there were no recordings for ‘live’ performances, it would be difficult for the audience to be conscious of these subtle changes to the text.

A question which needs to be asked is whether Mitra went back to the archive of recordings of Tagore’s own voice. We have no written evidence to confirm the same. However, if one listens to Tagore’s own voice in the recordings of recitation of poems, or even the reading of a lecture, the first things which comes across is the fact that it does have a distinctive tune and rhythm, almost like chanting. When we hear the voice of Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra in the recording, one also notices the dominance of a melodic thrust. One is

thus left to wonder whether Tagore's own voice provided the vital clues. A counter hypothesis, however, can be found in recollections of those who witnessed the 1954 production themselves. Samik Bandyopadhyay, who had witnessed the production, acknowledges that the voices of Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra were much less melodic. According to him, by the 1969 production, the quality of their voice and projection had deteriorated due to aging.

As we see, the problem of the voice and whether Mitra was able to solve its challenges in delivering Tagore's lines can present multiple hypotheses based on the archival evidence today. It points to the fact how the archive at times instead of providing solutions presents us with problems: insolvable aporias. What the writer of theatre history or the director can do in these instances is to be reflexive and bear witness to these aporias that the archive presents. Mitra, however, in his reading of the archive does not appear to entertain such reflexivity.

It can be argued that Mitra's dealings with the text of *Raktakarabi* led him to conceive of a dramaturgy significantly distinct to what Tagore might have conceived for the play. Mitra's engagement with the archive as we see is often partial and his interpretations subjective. His claims of being truthful to the text can also be questioned based on the existing evidence. While on the one hand we see him not being able to justify his claims to being truthful to the archive and to Tagore, his aspirations to do so also seem to place restrictions on his creativity. For instance, his obligation to keep the prolonged philosophical conversations intact or to include the Abanindranath illustration in the set creates an obvious conflict with his otherwise realistic naturalistic aesthetic as Utpal Dutt rightly points out. Mitra's intention to be faithful to Tagore thus seems to us not only ill-founded but implicitly misleading in its somewhat peremptory assumptions.

A Tagorean Idea of Indian Theatre

Reaching beyond the archive of the *Raktakarabi* production, it would be pertinent to discuss here, however briefly, another form of archival performance that we witness in Sombhu Mitra's interpretations of Rabindranath's plays, dramaturgy and his ideas regarding theatre in general. Almost throughout his career, Mitra in many of his writings, speeches and interviews had harped on the importance of devising a *Bharatiya* or Indian idiom of theatre as opposed

to the European, realist, proscenium form which he believes to have colonised Bengali or Indian theatre. Pabitra Sarkar however, in his insightful essay titled *Bharater Jatiya Natyarup: Ekti Bitorko* (1979) has rightly questioned and systematically laid bare the exclusivist nature of Mitra's conceptualisation of Indian theatre. He has pointed out Mitra's fallacy in provincialising European theatre to mean only a realist proscenium form, rendering invisible the other alternatives, especially those which have emerged since the beginning of the 20th Century; as well as the dangerous implications of claiming that any one idiom of theatre practice can be regarded as truly "Indian" in a country which accommodates diverse cultural forms and has a long and arduous history of cultural exchange. More recently, Samik Bandyopadhyay too in an interview published in the *Bratyajon Natyapatra* has presented another form of critique of Mitra's project, which attempts to disown a considerably long history of theatre practice in the country. He says:

My point was that theatre always grows out of a certain "cultural and social reality". Consequently it might take its own shape. It might develop in any direction. Various kinds of experiments might be performed; expressions can be devised. But the "roots will be there, the roots will not be outside there". There is no scope for airy philosophising here...I cannot suddenly abandon everything that I have inherited. But this (Mitra's idea) almost becomes like it. (*Bratyajon Natyapatra*, Vol. 1, 2009)

In this concluding section of the chapter, it is not possible to reflect generally on Mitra's ideological project. Rather, I would like to limit my discussion to Mitra's misappropriation of Tagore for furthering such ideas. In this regard, I have already mentioned Mitra's public claim of adapting a "*Bharatiya Riti*" (Indian idiom) for the *Raktakarabi* performance. Indeed, Rabindranath proves not only to be a referential point but located right at the centre of Mitra's writings which deal with the ideal Indian theatre. Mitra himself acknowledges the genesis of his idea through Rabindranath and, more importantly, during the *Raktakarabi* production in an essay published in the American journal *Theatre and Drama Review* (TDR) co-authored by him and Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1971, which is a partial re-working of Mitra's earlier Bengali essay, *Rajar Kothay* (1965):

Years ago the Bengali novelist Anandashankar Roy had told us that the theatre in Calcutta was merely an imitation of the worst European theatre, and that if we wanted a theatre of our own, we would have to begin with Tagore's plays; there was no other way. At that time I did not understand what he meant... Then in 1956 we produced Tagore's *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*) and things changed for us; we realized that *Raktakarabi* was a distinctive form of Indian

theatrical expression. For example, it uses multiple actions within a single dramatic area and presents inner and outer life, and the individual and the symbol simultaneously. That production made us realize that Anandashankar was indeed right, that a Bengali theatre of the future must first pass through Tagore. (Mitra, Bandyopadhyay, *TDR*, Spring 1971: 202)

We see how Mitra believes that it is the play *Raktakarabi* which had opened him to the possibilities of an Indian theatre which would be an alternative to what he claims to be an “imitation of the European theatre”. Interestingly, we see how in Mitra’s conception too, text is integral to the idea of theatre and, as the statement above bear testimony, he believes that a radical turn in theatre can be initiated through a textual departure. However, strangely enough, coming back to the issue at hand, apart from positing it against European realism, in the whole essay, Mitra fails to clarify the exact nature of such an Indian theatre. Instead, Mitra vaguely explains what he believes to be the fundamental characteristics which qualify *Raktakarabi* to be a representative Indian theatrical expression: multiple actions within a single dramatic area and representation of inner and outer life, and the individual and the symbol, simultaneously. But the generalised nature of such conditions makes them seem equally applicable to many instances of plays from the European repertoire as well.

Later in the essay, while explaining his own project, we find Mitra trying to elaborate on these characteristics in greater detail. He says:

[T]oday Indian actors and audiences are accustomed to plays (mostly Western) in which the action itself is central, where characters are established only in relation to an action. I would like to develop another kind of drama, which has a single central character who discovers life through a conflict with everything around him. In action-oriented drama we are outsiders, watching others' behavior through an imaginary wall. In the more contemplative “Indian” drama that I propose, we come closer to the character and move into his subjective world. (203)

Once again, Mitra’s vague use of categories like “contemplative” again fails to clarify the exact nature of his proposition for the representations of “Indian drama” he provides. Arguably, Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* or *Raja* can be argued to do not fit the criteria he mentions. It can also be argued that neither are the plays purely non-action oriented, nor do they necessarily develop around one central character. Such criteria are also not applicable if we consider the repertoire of Tagore’s plays in general. Again, conversely, there exist a large number European plays which can be claimed to centre round a single character or its development through conflict with immediate surroundings.

At a dramaturgical level, Mitra, however, at least once in the essay, tries to draw a very clear lineage from Tagore's idea of theatre:

Instead, our theatre tried to adapt to the newly imported Western concepts of theatre, and actors doing realistic plays for a long time lost their capacities for gestural and vocal rhythm. The only way out of this now is for an actor to learn to rely on himself on an empty stage and to act with his entire body. His movements will become beautiful, and the poetry will be accessible. The expressiveness of his body must find a style close to reality, touching the very edges of reality, the way good Bengali poetry runs close to common speech, almost touching it. (ibid)

Clearly, Mitra here is evoking here Tagore's propositions in the *Rangamancha* essay, which we have already discussed. However, we have also discussed how the essay itself cannot be considered as a representative of Tagore's ideas on theatre in general. Tagore would be found to revise many of his opinions stated in the essay, if we consider his theatre practice as evidence. Mitra's own staging of *Raktakarabi* would also contradict his desire for an empty stage. Most significantly, Tagore in his essay does not promote any programme for devising an Indian theatre.

Interestingly, Samik Bandyopadhyay has shared with the author in an interview that in 1967, four years before the above essay would make its appearance, Mitra was supposed to submit an essay for a special Asian Theatre issue of TDR. Mitra had asked Bandyopadhyay initially to translate his Bengali essay *Rajar Kothay* on his behalf for that purpose. Once the translation was done, Mitra, however upon seeing it, rejected it, and asked Bandyopadhyay to collaborate on writing a fresh essay on a similar theme. Time being short Bandyopadhyay objected, but, on Mitra's persistence, he felt obliged to draft a new essay. This new essay however was not accepted for publication by the TDR and remained unpublished. This unpublished essay in which Bandyopadhyay claims Mitra had clarified his thoughts in a concrete manner is now lost to history. We wonder if it could have shed new light on the issue. However, in Pabitra Sarkar's essay mentioned above, we find quoted a small section quoted from the now lost unpublished essay where Mitra is found to reveal a more direct debt to Rabindranath for his ideas regarding Indian theatre. He says:

In Indian theatre... we find expressions co-existing in multiple layers—from everyday speech to philosophical reflections. All appears as *lila*. Human beings running around, faltering, or attaining peace through deeper realisations, all of this is “just like a show”, as if a dance is taking place throughout the world - it is this we call *lila*. (Mitra, quoted from Sarkar, 2008: 397)

Mitra is evidently drawing his idea of *lila* from Tagore's essay *Antar Bahir*. In the essay *Antar Bahir* Tagore criticises realistic modes of acting and promotes a more psychological approach:

Though acting altogether relies more on imitation in comparison to other arts, it is not entirely the business of a *harbola* (a person who can imitate various animal sounds). Its real purpose is to present us with a peep through the curtains of what seems *shabhabik* (natural, apparent) in order to reveal its internal *lila* (play). Whenever there is an attempt to emphasize the natural, simultaneously, there is also an erasure of the internal play. We often witness upon the stage that in order to exaggerate the human emotions and sentiments, actors tend to overstress the use of their voice and gestures. The reason being, the person who wants to *nakal* (imitate) truth rather than *prakash* (express) it; he exaggerates just like a false witness. He cannot dare to practice restraint. On stages in our country, we witness daily the strenuous and futile exercises of such perjury. (Tagore, 1995: 34)

Interestingly enough, though Tagore rejects European forms of realistic acting (he specifically criticises British actor Henry Irving) and their Indian mimicry in the essay, he does not try to propose any alternative, essentially "Indian" approach. Tagore's use of the term *lila* also seems to be significantly different from Mitra's rather ambiguous appropriation of the term. Thus we see how in his ideas on "Indian theatre" too, Mitra can be found to not only interpret Tagore's ideas in own manner but even to distort them, however unconsciously, to fit his own ideological programme.

Coming to back to the *Raktakarabi* production, we realise how Mitra's directorial methodology to search for solutions through a prolonged and rigorous negotiation with the archive of Tagore's dramaturgy as well as the play text ultimately leads him beyond the archive. Mitra at the beginning of his directorial notes underlines his intention in the *Raktakarabi* production to reveal and explain the "truth" of Tagore's play to the general public. To be able to do so, he relies on a method of delving deep into the Tagore archive. He puts forth claims of being faithful to the archive, perhaps to legitimise his own theatrical interpretation of the play. But in the process we find him trying to render his departures from the archive invisible. Being haunted by the spectre of the author-function, Mitra also reveals a characteristic unwillingness to question Tagore. His is almost a sacred belief in the intellect and intentions of Rabindranath Tagore. Arguably, Mitra's veneration for Tagore at times prevents him from even acknowledging the challenges presented by *Raktakarabi*. It is thus

that many of the elements of contradiction or abstruseness present in Tagore's text get manifest in Mitra's production as well.

Ultimately, as performance theorist Rebecca Schneider (2011) has substantiated, the archive does not bear testimony to any fixed notions of truth; rather, the archive is always in the becoming, always re-performing itself through new singularities. Power is practiced through truth claims and the generation of the author-function which are validated through the archive. Based on these validations, censorship is exercised. To be truthful, however, there is no one truth, no one point of origin that the archive can lead us to. The archive manifests itself not through truth but only through subjective interpretations. In the case of the Tagore archive, therefore, one may conclude there is no one original dramaturgy that it bears testimony to. The Tagore archive produces multiple contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes, which the director can either hope to bear witness or choose to transcend by his own creative adaptation. Mitra's theatrical interpretation of Tagore's *Raktakarabi* is thus, by default, like all interpretations, always already a new text, affected by his own individuality and creativity. In the production, where Mitra is creative and imaginative he succeeds, but he fails when he limits his imagination by the self-burdening project of explaining and authenticating Tagore in order to reveal the profound truth of *Raktakarabi*, which, in the final analysis, remains elusive.

In the light of the above discussion, we might also question a bit differently whether, for Mitra, in the sharing of his linguistic and cultural allegiances with Tagore, the spectre of Tagorean authority was even more emphatically present and thus more difficult to bypass. Consequently, we might also wonder whether productions of plays outside Bengal might reveal themselves to be less burdened by Tagore's authorial aura. Would they also try to validate themselves *vis-à-vis* the Tagore archive in a similar manner? We will try to find out in the next chapter where we discuss performances of Tagore's play *Dakghar* staged outside Bengal.

Chapter V

Dakghar outside Bengal: Dramaturgy as Contingent Encounter

Introduction

It would perhaps be pertinent to begin this chapter by re-telling an incident narrated in Maitreyi Devi's book *Mongpu-te Rabindranath*. It was 13 June 1940 and World War II had already begun. Rabindranath was resting in the hills, at Maitreyi Devi's place in Mongpu for a while. At night, from a Paris radio station, a reading of Tagore's play *Dakghar* (1912) in Andre Gide's French translation was performed. The very next day the German soldiers occupied Paris and innumerable Parisians lost their lives. Learning about the performance and the consequent massacre, Tagore had remarked, "This is my greatest reward as a playwright" (Devi, 1989: 161). He was left overwhelmed by the fact that his play could be the last sanctum of refuge for the souls marching towards death. This incident illustrates beautifully, how important it was for Tagore to see his plays find relevance, especially if such relevance could be attained outside the precincts of his own linguistic and cultural community.

Reaching out towards the beyond, to perceive it with an open mind and trying to embrace it as one's own: this indeed can be argued to be the central premise of Tagore's play *Dakghar*. Tagore writes: "At the time when I wrote *Dakghar* a sea of emotions had swept me off my feet... I had felt a great emotional force working inside me. [It urged], Let's go out, you would have to see the world before it's time to leave it..." (Tagore). Likewise, Amal in *Dakghar* says: "I would rather go about and see everything that there is". In the same play we find the window beside Amal's bed being opened and shut repeatedly. Does it amount merely to a theatrical action, or does the playwright through it, try to draw our attention to the symbolic nature of the window itself? Does the window in the play not signify a particular way of seeing? But what exemplifies such a way of seeing? It is definitely not the pedantic and bookish way of seeing represented by Madhab Dutta or the Kabiraj in *Dakghar*. It rather considers seeing with an open mind, reaching beyond the blindness of social prejudices and cultural pre-conditioning.

But are we always able to “see” in such an uncluttered manner? Is it not often that we end up being limited by our linguistic and cultural rootedness in our desire to see? At times, in moments of illusory clarity, we sense deeper truths, but, more often than not, the subtler aspects of reality elude our grasp. Attempts to see beyond our cultural and linguistic roots are also always unpredictable where there is as much chance of success as there is of failure. Our discussion in this chapter concerns visions of such contingent nature: the staging of Tagore’s play *Dakghar* outside its cultural-linguistic point of origin, Bengal, in other parts of India and abroad. I will not try to list all the instances of *Dakghar* being produced outside Bengal of which there are numerous to date. Instead, I will focus here on a few notable productions of the play outside Bengal.

Dakghar has been by far the most popular of Tagore’s plays to be staged outside Bengal. Right from the time it was written and even in recent times, producers from across the globe have been able to relate to the play. Why does *Dakghar* among the repertoire of Tagore’s plays enjoy such an exceptionally rich history of dissemination through production? Why have Tagore’s other plays barring the *Nritya Natyas* (which have also been considerably popular outside Bengal, though not comparable to *Dakghar*) not been able to evoke similar responses outside Bengal? This is a question that I intend to address in this chapter.

The more pivotal theoretical intention of the chapter, however, will be to explore what happens when a Tagore play travels outside its spatial-linguistic context and gets staged in an alien cultural context in a distinctly different performance tradition. Under these circumstances, not only does the archive representing the ‘original’ dramaturgy of the production and its traces, however fragmented, become only partially available to the director, such productions are also marked by the encounter of the play text with a different cultural community and theatre tradition with its own archive of distinct understandings of context, space, time, narrative, character, emotion, feeling. I believe an investigation of such productions can reveal fascinating insights into contingent encounters where there is, as mentioned earlier, as much chance of success, as of failure, in the intercultural transaction.

It would also be interesting to find out what happens to the authorial codes of the text and the dramaturgy in such an act of intercultural transfer. We have seen already how the authorial authority has haunted Bengali producers of Tagore’s plays whenever they have thought of producing them. Is it similar in the case of Tagore’s plays being produced outside Bengal? It is crucial to note that whenever a producer from outside Bengal approaches a

Tagore play, the authority of the playwright has to vie for attention with other categories of framing like the ‘Bengali’ or ‘Indian’ context and aesthetics of the play. In this regard, it would be interesting to investigate how the author-function gets moulded under competition from other such factors.

The first production of *Dakghar* I would like to consider here is a 2007 adaptation of the play, directed by the well-known director from Manipur, Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016). Kanhailal adapted the play to his distinctively Manipuri performative idiom of symbolic representation, physically stylised and minimalist, at the same time also relating it to the socio-political realities of Manipur in which Kanhailal’s theatre practice is deeply rooted. My point of enquiry will be to find out how Kanhailal engaged with the immanent symbolic structure of the play to adapt it to his understanding of dramaturgy as well as the socio-political realities of Manipur. Kanhailal’s adaption of *Dakghar* could also serve as an instance in understanding how producers from different regions of India approach and relate to Tagore’s plays.

In the second set of productions of *Dakghar* that I deal with in this chapter, I move outside India by studying the *Post Office* production by Abbey Theatre, Dublin, at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and Court Theatre, London. Enacted by professional players and produced by poet, dramatist and theatre director Lenox Robinson (1886-1958) between May-July 1913, these two productions reveal how such intercultural encounters involving the translation of a text from one language and culture to another can be marked by a contingent process of meaning-making. In the case of the Abbey Theatre production of *Post Office*, we see how the contemporary hegemonic Orientalist perceptions of India variously affect the interpretation of the play. Methodologically speaking, the archival absence of any detailed information regarding the Abbey Theatre performance poses a challenge which I hope to circumvent by trying to engage with the discourses, events and operations happening during the build-up to the performance and in response to it. Such a methodology, I believe, would reveal that in intercultural encounters the meaning-making in a production of a play is not limited to its performance only but spills over to the contextual margins which frame it.

The third production studied in this chapter would involve a dramaturgical citation of the legendary performance of *The Post Office* arranged by writer, educator, doctor and children’s rights activist Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) with the children of an orphanage in Warsaw, Poland on 15 July 1942. This inscription of Korczak’s production was

recontextualized within a new adaptation of *The Post Office* directed by Jill Parvin and produced in London at the Tagore Centre in 1993. In this amateur production, Parvin staged Tagore's play alongside citations of the Korczak production in the Warsaw orphanage, considering the play-within-a-play frame as a way of understanding and staging Tagore's play outside its linguistic and cultural point of origin. I would like to investigate this method of understanding a play through re-enactment, analysing the strategies adopted by Parvin, probing the 'multiple times' in which any re-enactment functions, as pointed out by Rebecca Schneider in her essay "Reenactment and Relative Pain" included in her book *Performing Remains* (2011).

***Dakghar*: Questions Relating to Translation and the Popularity of the Play**

No play written by Tagore has been as popular outside Bengal as *Dakghar*. While there have been exceptional instances of two plays - *Raja* and *Chitrangada* - being staged in Europe in their English translations *King of the Dark Chamber* and *Chitra*, respectively, in addition to a number of other plays like *Muktadhara*, *Chandalika* and *Rather Rashi* as well,¹ the diverse ways in which people across the world have related to *Dakghar* have made the play a phenomenon. Not only has the play been translated in a number of languages and produced on numerous occasions, the very nature of the response it has generated outside Bengal and even India has been exemplary. Consider, for instance, what French translator Bee Formentelli says in an essay "Tagore and Korczak: An Encounter of Minds" (2011) where she shares her own associations with *Dakghar*:

My first encounter with Tagore dates back to when I was about ten. I had been chosen to play the part of Amal in the French version of *Dakghar* (The Post Office) translated by Gide and entitled: *Amal et la lettre du Roi* (Amal and the King's letter). It was implied that such an honour meant some duties, or more precisely, exemplary behaviour, and that the role could be taken away from me if this was not the case. At the time, these words seemed as fearsome as they were enigmatic, for I was unaware that the name Amal meant "pure" or "spotless". Be that as it may, I really put my heart and soul into this play whose radiant memory was a kind of guiding light throughout my childhood and teenage years, continuing to live inside me secretly.

¹ For more details regarding productions of Tagore's plays outside India, see *Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception* (2014) edited by Martin Kämpchen, Imre Bangha and Uma Das Gupta, and the essay titled "Rabindranath Tagore on the European Stage: A Reflection on Theatre and Cross-Cultural Experiments" by Martin Kämpchen published in *IIC Quarterly* (Spring, 1997).

Until the day when, at the sole prompting of a film, it came back to me suddenly with such unsuspected force that I decided to learn Bengali, in order to have a closer insight into Tagore's works and, perhaps, to translate some of them into French one day. (Forementelli, ed. Biswas, Marsh, Kundu, 2011: 108)

It is not often that we find a play having such a huge impact on the life a person. It would seem even more striking if we consider that Formentelli was performing the play in translation and that too twice removed from the original. It would have to be acknowledged that even to date high quality translations of all of Tagore's plays are not readily available. In recent years, there have been translators like the British Tagore scholar William Radice, whose sensitivity to the act of translation contrasts sharply with Tagore's own notoriously careless translations of his plays, which were the only ones available for a long time. Significantly, in the translations of his plays, Tagore exhibits a compulsive desire to shorten them, often in very abrupt ways. In an attempt to mould them to "Western" tastes, he makes bizarre changes. Most of the times, his translations also leave much to be desired in terms of their quality. His poetic prose almost always loses its lyrical quality in translation. In a well know instance, he translated the title of one of his later plays *Rather Rashi* as *Car of Time*. His translations of *Raja*, *Rakta-Karabi* and a few other plays also bear testimony to his apparent lack of faith in the act of translation, which was almost always rushed and occasionally crude.

For the translation of *The Post Office*, the circumstances were even worse. The first translation of the play was not done by Tagore but by one Devabrata Mukhopadhyay, then a student at Oxford University. Tagore edited the translation while he was living in London in 1912 but was ultimately left unsatisfied by the quality of the translation. He says in a letter dated 2 August 2012, just before leaving London that his play "*Dakghar* has been translated by a student here... his language was a bit too pompous - I had to tone it down to a large extent - however I am still not satisfied" (quoted in Pal, 2010: 329). The translation which was later published by The Macmillan Company in 1916 had two very apparent changes from the original Bengali. The second scene of the one-act play had been shortened and joined to the first thereby converting the third into the second. A second more peculiar change introduced in the translation by Tagore himself can be perceived in the name of one of the key characters in the play, *Thakurda* (literally grandfather) being changed to Gaffer. Gaffer is not meant to be a Muslim name as it might sound but rather is derived from the word "guffaw" to mean somebody who makes people laugh. Not only is the coinage peculiar but it

also does not represent the character of Thakurda in the play or, for that matter, in Tagore's repertoire of plays where the *thakurda* figure is repeatedly used with very specific connotations. The translation was at best a shadow of the original play, as we shall discuss later while dealing with the Abbey Theatre productions. It was this translation which would be the basis for the play's translations into other languages including Gide's French version till late into the 20th century.

However, the point here is that in spite of the very apparent problems in the translation, the play managed to have a powerful impact both in its form and content. Let us first focus on the former. As we have already discussed, Tagore experimented with genres throughout his playwriting career and resorted to writing plays in prose consistently – for instance, *Sarodotsav* (1908), *Raja* (1910) and *Achalayatan* (1911), followed by *Dakghar*. It was, however, only in *Dakghar* that Tagore could finally resolve the tension that troubled his previous prose plays. As Shankha Ghosh elaborates in his essay “*Natyamuhurta O Bhasar Sandhan*” (The Dramatic Moment and the Quest for Language):

Certain specific moments in *Raja* and *Achalayatan* have become emotionally intensified - Especially in *Raja* - but usually a major chunk of the prose here too, lacks depth and vivacity, and it may just be because of this that we witness a profusion of songs in these plays.... It was not possible for Tagore to forge a co-relation between a contemporary notion of dramatic moment and dramatic speech unless he could possibly add a sense of depth and movement to the ordinary prose of everyday speech. The key to accomplishing this lay in formulating a layered prose...When Maeterlink in his play *The Blind* makes his blind characters speak in the following manner:

FIRST BLIND MAN: It is thundering!

SECOND BLIND MAN: I think it is a storm rising.

THE OLDEST BLIND WOMAN: I think it is the sea.

THIRD BLIND MAN: The sea? – Is it the sea? – But it is at two steps from us! – It is beside us! I hear it all round me! – It must be something else!

THE YOUNG BLIND WOMAN: I hear the sound of waves at my feet.

FIRST BLIND MAN: I think it is the wind in the dead leaves.

He succeeds even while remaining within the framework of an austere and everyday pattern of speech to impregnate each sentence with layers of impressions which affects any sensitive and empathetic individual...

Tagore ultimately succeeded in devising such a form of speech suitable to theatre in his play *Dakghar*. *Dakghar*'s language is not far removed from the naturalness of everyday speech and yet it has the potential to reach far beyond. It is quite possible to attain a sense of satisfaction if one just chooses to focus on the outside of it, but to the perceptive audience, the same script can unlock layers deeper insights. (Ghosh, 2009: 43-45)

Ghosh points out the fact that Tagore in *Dakghar* was able to deduce a form of speech which was simple, yet rich in its poetic resonance. For instance, we hear Amal telling the watchman in the play, “[S]ometimes when I wake up at night all of a sudden and find our lamp blown out, I can hear through the darkness your gong slowly sounding, Dong, dong, dong!”(Tagore, translated by Mukherjee, 1916: 65). In these matter-of-fact lines, we can sense a deep spiritual significance underlying the apparently factual statement. It is not just the watchman’s dong but rather the aura of god or any such divine being which is also being evoked here. In yet another instance when Amal says, “How curious! Some say time has not yet come, and some say time has gone by!” (35), the philosophical strain seems quite apparent to us.

The text of *Dakghar* is replete with such instances where mere factual utterances bear deep spiritual and philosophical undertones. It is this austere yet rich quality of prose that the play *Dakghar* poses, making it easier to translate the play into other languages and also enact it rather than his other prose plays written before *Dakghar*. As we have already discussed in the chapter on *Raktakarabi*, the delivery of lines can be challenging. In contrast, *Dakghar* is perhaps the easiest of Tagore’s plays to vocalize and produce.

Another reason that could be offered for the relative facility of *Dakghar*'s translation into unfamiliar cultural-linguistic milieus has to do with its symbolism, which is considerably less complex than the rest of Tagore’s symbolic plays. The symbolic framework of *Sarodotsav*, *Raja*, *Achalayatan*, or even Tagore’s later plays *Muktodhara*, *Phalguni*, *Rakto Karabi* are far more complex than that of *Dakghar*, containing more mythological, *Upanishadic*, or political allegories, which present a far greater challenge for the translator or actor as well as for the audience. In addition, *Dakghar* also is the only prose play written by Tagore not to include any songs in its Bengali original. Though we learn that the production

of the play at Jorasanko included a few songs, the original text does not include any. This also is a huge advantage to any translator or producer of the play. Including full-length songs in a production always presents a huge dramaturgical challenge particularly for those European performance traditions prioritizing realism.

Much more crucial to our analysis of the question of *Dakghar*'s popularity outside Bengal is the content of the play which has made it seem relevant in diverse geographical and historical contexts, and, more importantly, in situations of grave crisis such as the rise of fascism in World War II. It will be revealed in the course of our discussion of the productions described below how the play has managed to find intellectual and emotional resonance with each of its producers.

Kanhailal's *Dakghar*: Lyrical Dramaturgy in the Manipuri Context

Where Tagore and Kanhailal meet

In spite of Tagore's plays being translated into other Indian languages, theatre practitioners in India have mostly avoided producing his plays labelling them complicated and unstageable. Circumstances, however, have changed dramatically since the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium. In a country where theatre practitioners suffer from a perennial funds crunch, the availability of funding from the Ministry of Culture and other funding institution for staging Tagore's plays in the last decade has renewed interest in producing Tagore. The consequences of this sudden attention on Tagore have been, as we have already discussed, paradoxical. Directors now have felt obliged to think with Tagore and his plays. This has indeed led to a few bold experiments with Tagore's plays which have opened up possibilities of re-reading Tagore's plays in a contemporary context. On the other hand, however, one has witnessed a large number of formulaic productions lacking in thought, engagement or objective of any sort.

It was in the backdrop of this new upsurge in productions of Tagore's plays that Heisnam Kanhailal's *Dakghar* was produced. *Dakghar* premiered on 3 August 2006 at Rabindra Sadan, Calcutta, as the inaugural show of a theatre festival of Tagore's plays organised by Happenings, Calcutta. Since then the production has toured various cities across

India including New Delhi, Mysore, Guwahati, Lucknow and others, with more than thirty shows to its credit.

Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016) is widely regarded as one of the most sincere and revered directors around India. A career spanning close to forty years ranging from his first production *Tamna Lai (Haunting Spirit, 1972)* and extending to his last production *Uchek Langmeidong (Name of a Bird, 2008)*, has seen him explore an honest and relentless quest for theatre with his group Kalakshetra in Imphal, Manipur, in order to develop a political and aesthetic vision of a singular nature. The decaying and suffocating socio-political reality of Manipur is integral to Kanhailal's theatre. As Rustom Bharucha points out in his work *The Theatre of Kanhailal: Pebet & Memoirs of Africa (1992)*:

The pain of this reality and the larger economic malaise are intrinsically a part of Kanhailal's world. In his deceptively lyrical theatre there is an omnipresence of oppression. (Bharucha, 1992: 14)

Kanhailal's productions like *Pebet (1975)*, *Memoirs of Africa (1986)* and *Draupadi (2000)* have addressed both the historic religious indoctrination and contemporary systematic military repression of the land of Manipur and its people.

If the socio-political reality of Manipur is where Kanhailal has situated his theatre, his aesthetics is drawn from an intense focus on the actor's body inherited from traditional performance forms, honed through regular exercises in close proximity with nature, and a symbolic dramaturgy which attempts to bypass the logocentric universe of dramatic theatre with its excessive reliance on the conventions of the proscenium. Kanhailal himself clarifies in one of his essays *Clarifying a New Trajectory* how Kalakshetra attempts to confront logocentricity and the hegemony of the proscenium:

Our language as solidified by social experience and through the renewal of ancestral traditions and retelling of folk tales, is a highly physical and visceral response to bitter political conditions. Our language is shaped by a trusted body, the only human resource of the actor that resonates as the vital source of the performance text in opposition to the convention of the written text. The body lives in and out of the tale and its images and leaps towards creative freedom, capturing the ritual spirit in order to empower performer and audience alike. (Kanhailal, 2016: 10)

What comes through clearly in Kanhailal's words is his stake in the region of Manipur and also his thrust on the actor's body and in its creative freedom. We also notice him positing the performance text in opposition to the written text, as well as voicing his aspirations of capturing the ritual spirit in his performances.

As I have tried to present a brief and sketchy idea of the philosophical ambitions of Kanhailal's theatre, it become obvious that *Dakghar* does not exactly correspond to his aesthetic or dramaturgical affinities. Kanhailal had adapted texts by other writers, notably Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, before staging *Dakghar*. However, *Dakghar* posed a different set of challenges than Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. As Kanhailal explains in an interview regarding *Dakghar*:

[The purpose of my theatre] is not to recite the lines written by the playwright. It lies in the notion of destruction and reconstruction or de-structuring and restructuring. I destroy the original (literary) text and reconstruct a performance without hurting the spirit of the original. (Kanhailal, 2016: 225)

Thus he breaks down the action in the text and chooses what he needs to reconstruct in his performance text out of the dramatic text, a performance text which, as in the case of *Draupadi*, bypasses speech altogether. But *Dakghar* differs significantly from *Draupadi* as a text. First, it is a play in its own right with dialogue, unlike *Draupadi* which is a short story. Secondly, it is a Tagore play thereby making it all the more difficult to deconstruct the text because of the aura attached to Tagore's oeuvre. Tagore being a poet and his plays being known more for their poetic dialogue rather than action, it might be considered downright blasphemous to strip the performance of speech altogether. Moreover, as Kanhailal himself told me in an interview, *Dakghar* is a more complicated text to stage than *Draupadi* or any other folk narratives he had adapted. Finally, one of the huge challenges was how to situate *Dakghar* in the Manipuri context. *Dakghar*, unlike some of Tagore's other symbolic plays like *Prayeschitto*, *Muktodhara*, *Raktakarabi* or even *Bisarjan*, does not lend itself to a political interpretation in the statist sense of the term.

Then why choose to stage Tagore at all? Why specifically *Dakghar*? Kanhailal is candid enough to answer that though he identified with Tagore "blindly" since his younger days and though Tagore always seemed philosophically relevant to his theatre practice at Kalakshetra, it was only the invitation from the festival which actually made him seriously think of staging Tagore. But why *Dakghar*? He again acknowledges that the choice was

determined by practical factors: “As *Visarjan*, *Raja* and *Raktakarabi* were already chosen by Habib Tanvir, K.N.Panikkar and Suman Mukhopadhyay, respectively. I decided to do *Dakghar*” (Kanhailal, 2016: 219). Elsewhere he mentions that he would have preferred to do *Raktakarabi*. Thus, Kanhailal was neither well-acquainted with Tagore nor *Dakghar* when he decided upon or, more accurately, found himself directing *Dakghar*.

Did he try to get acquainted with Tagore, read more of his writings or the biographical and critical material surrounding his plays? Once again Kanhailal with his characteristic frankness says that though he initially began reading Tagore and critical studies about him, he had to leave this process mid-way because of the time-constraint. As he acknowledged to me in the interview, he also realized soon that because he did not even know a bit of Bengali - he was reading *Dakghar* in its English translation - it would be futile to try to understand what Tagore or *Dakghar* means to “Bengali sensibilities”. He understood that the deeper he delved into academic research, the further it was taking him away from his natural artistic instinct which he thrives on. So he decided to trust his instincts, and began focusing on how Tagore or rather how *Dakghar* affected his own sensibilities. As he brilliantly makes the crucial point, “Instead of trying to comprehend *Dakghar* through Tagore, I began trying to comprehend Tagore through *Dakghar*” (unpublished interview taken by me on 19/03/2016).

On the surface, Tagore’s world and Kanhailal’s world seem to have nothing in common. However, if one looks below the surface, there are a few philosophical and aesthetic tenets that both share. Much like Tagore, Kanhailal too criticises the urban mechanical way of living; he too preaches and practices the virtues of living in harmony with nature. His theatre too, much like Tagore’s in Santiniketan, moves away from the city theatre in its geographical location as well as in spirit, in search of a theatre which is “lyrical” and “naturalised”. Kanhailal explains “the basic tenets of naturalization focus on the recovery of the senses and the heart which have been exiled by the city theatre” (Kanhailal 2016: 222). What Kanhailal and Tagore also share in their ideas about theatre is a forsaking of the urban proscenium in favour of the empty stage and the actor’s body. We have previously discussed Tagore’s rejection of proscenium theatre because of its unnecessary superfluity. Kanhailal too embraces the intimate a language of ‘poor theatre’, stripped of its urban accessories as well as its strictly coded social norms or behaviour:

[My theatre] is opposed to the practice of city theatre - the theatre of critics, academics and intellectuals, which assess the conventional value of acting in relation to the routine behaviour of modelled reactions or stereotypes. (Kanhailal, 2016: 222)

While these similarities exist, they did not help Kanhailal in finding out how he could relate his theatre to the play *Dakghar*. What did help was his sharp intellect and artistic instinct which focused on a theme in *Dakghar* which has largely remained unrecognised or unexploited. The element of death has appeared as the key theme in *Dakghar* to producers in most cases. To Kanhailal, however, the theme in *Dakghar* which he could relate to was that of pedagogy. Right from the beginning of the play, when the physician's repeated citing of the scriptures is mocked, followed by Madhab Dutta voicing his eagerness to see Amal grow up to become a "pandit" (learned man), until the end of the play when the state physician summarily dismisses the diktats of the physician, there is an underlying condemnation of a structured and standardised, and therefore, myopic system of education. It is against this stifling notion of a scholastic, or, more simply put, even bookish education, that Amal's curious and naturally inquisitive mind as well as his easy, unwavering faith in humanity is juxtaposed: "I would rather go about and see everything that there is" (Tagore 1916: 19).

At this point what had merely seemed circumstantial to Kanhailal proved to be coincidental. Kanhailal discovered in *Dakghar* the potential to speak for Tagore's philosophy of education which in many ways reciprocated Kanhailal's own philosophy. Kanhailal explains:

At this stage of our practice, the choice of *Dakghar* was coincidental. Tagore transcended the colonial constrictions of mind and life, which led him to find a space where he could envision a new potential for man-in-life through natural and social relationships.... I regard *Dakghar* as the preamble of Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan -- Tagore's idea of a universal institution which would inspire and guide pupils towards the vision of man-in-life, located in an environment where nature and the tribal society of the Santhals exist in oneness. *Dakghar* in itself is biographical, a work of realisation which defies, well ahead of its time, the reductive tendencies of late-twentieth-century culture... It is the greatness of Tagore that he was, despite his times, conscious of the need to train the senses and limbs of the human body, and to make emotion a part of education. According to Tagore, the child's mind is greatly aware of his environment and receptive to sense impressions. He absorbs with his senses long before he learns through his brain. This is the true art of teaching... I was fascinated when I found how similar these ideas were to my approach of theatre. (Kanhailal, 2016: 223)

Tagore wrote *Dakghar* in 1910 when the school he set up at Santiniketan was still in its early, formative stage. Though he does not mention the issue of pedagogy in the short introduction to the play, it was quite predictably at the back of his mind while writing the play, making itself manifest in the form of a strong underlying motif in the play. It is indeed fascinating how the theme, otherwise overlooked or underplayed in *Dakghar* productions, presented itself with such acute relevance to Kanhailal, who did not have the benefit of a deep engagement with Tagore, his plays, or the archive of the original dramaturgy. It reveals how, at times, a producer, who has not been burdened with archival knowledge of a play's context and dramaturgy, can reveal its subtleties with refreshing clarity. While this might be the case for Kanhailal, what still remains to be explored is whether he was in a position to translate this understanding of the play text successfully into a performance text through a symbolic, physical and often non-verbal dramaturgy.

The most fundamental challenge faced by Kanhailal was the poetic and complex text of *Dakghar*. It would be beneficial for our purpose to examine the strategies through which Kanhailal looked to deconstruct the text and reconstruct it to fit his signature dramaturgical style. One of the key concepts that Kanhailal identifies is the "lyrical" nature of Tagore's play, a trait that his own theatre essentially shares, albeit in a distinctly different way. While *Dakghar* is a lyrical text in the literary sense of the term, Kanhailal stresses that in his theatre the lyrical nature of the form does not transpire from the textual or verbal dimensions of the text but from the bodies of the actors. He explains:

I preferred to explore the lyrical quality of the play through the body. By lyrical I understood a better self-perception of the actor - opening his heart. I did not want to go into psychological or discursive modes of acting or performance making. Rather, much like in singing, I wanted the actors to express themselves. It was like "sing your own songs, see your dreams while singing and moving your body on your own." Our rehearsal began in this manner. Even the casting was not done yet. I did casting once the actors had already started moving their bodies. (Kanhailal, unpublished interview taken by me on 19/03/2016)

We understand that by "lyrical" Kanhailal understands a romantic mode of creation where the artist creates spontaneously and depends on instinct. The idea to give the *Dakghar* performance a multicultural and multilingual treatment also emerged as a corollary to the concept of the lyrical. As Kanhailal explains:

I have actors in my group who belong to multiple tribal communities like Rabha, Boro and also from different states like Manipur, Tripura, Assam, West Bengal, so on and so forth. The North-East consists of many different languages and cultures. I wanted to find out if I could give them voice through the play. I for once did not want to impose on them, educate them. Inhibitions can be detrimental to creativity. I wanted them to express themselves freely. I wanted them to be at ease with themselves. It is only by doing so I thought I could bring forth a sense of physicality from them which they are habituated with. This is what I understand as lyrical. This is why I made the play multilingual, trying to keep these differences in view, trying to make them speak to each other. I wanted to place *Dakghar* and Tagore in the context of this multilingual, multicultural universe. I believe this idea is also related to the idea of freedom in Tagore. (ibid)

Dramaturgy for Dakghar



Figure 20 A moment from non-verbal sections in *Dakghar* performance, 2006

innerworld and another conventionally dramatic, representing his interactions with the

If one sees the performance of Kanhailal's *Dakghar*, however, one finds that this conceptualization manifests itself in troubling ways. The play seems to be a constant juggling for Kanhailal between two forms of theatre, two kinds of dramaturgy: the dramatic non-verbal dramaturgy with its thrust on the actor's body and the more conventional form of dramaturgy for dramatic theatre. The first is used to reveal Amal's subconscious- his intimate relationship with nature and emotional responses to his surroundings, while the second depicts Amal's interaction with real people and real objects around him. Thus we find two realities present alternately on stage with their two corresponding forms of dramaturgy: one non-verbal, bodily, registering the impressions on Amal's

outside. This to-and-fro motion impedes the natural flow of the production and produces a jarring effect. Unable to abandon either his own dramaturgy or the dramaturgy suggested by Tagore's text, Kanhailal gets stuck in a complacent and uneasy compromise.

If Kanhailal's inability to do away with the text altogether creates problems, his attempt at moulding them to suit his dramaturgy and politics proves to be equally unsettling. Firstly, in a bid to tone down the stark contrast between the said forms of dramaturgy, Kanhailal attempts to edit and simplify the text to suit his needs. But this not only robs the original play of its subtler nuances but often defies its logic. For instance, when in the production Madhab Dutta demands of Thakurda to make a scholar out of Amal, it goes against the logic of Thakurda's character, who is the very antithesis of any scholarly learning,



Figure 21 Madhab Dutta, Amal and Thakurda in a moment from *Dakghar* performance, 2006

a fact that Madhab Dutta also knows quite well. Thus it seems absurd for Madhab Dutta to even claim such a thing from Thakurda. Likewise, in a bid to shorten the role, Sudha's character too loses its subtler shades, even appearing cruel when she snatches the flower out of Amal's hands as he does not have any money to give her. In order to build on the theme of pedagogy, Kanhailal elaborates on Madhab Dutta's and the physician's characters adding more Sanskrit lines to their speech and developing it into a frenzy in one particular scene. When Amal is made to specifically speak of his desire to see the cities in Africa, America and other continents, Kanhailal robs Amal's vision of the world of its enigmatic quality by

mentioning particular geographic locations. In *Dakghar*, Amal's fantasies about unknown lands always have a rustic, fairy-tale-like flavour to it which is not just circumstantial. Tagore deliberately posits the mysterious land of legends, fairy-tales against a world of knowledge and scholarship to evoke the spirit of discovery through Amal's search for a wider world.

Kanhailal speaks of placing the play *Dakghar* in the backdrop of the multicultural universe of the North-East. Thus he lets the characters speak in their own regional dialects as well as sometimes dress in regional attires. He claims that the actors' liberty to speak in their own mother-tongue symbolises the very concept of freedom, expressivity and antipathy to the hegemonic project of education that Tagore attempted to critique. However, the biggest problem of Kanhaial's multicultural frame lies in the very fact that it is just a frame. The multicultural trope appears to be not an integral part of the production but an extraneous element forcefully thrust on it. The multiple dialects as well as the sartorial variations appear to be more exhibitionistic rather than purposeful.

An extremely delicate moment of the play *Dakghar* is its final death scene where Amal dies.² Tagore's play provides ample indication that Amal's death is not merely literal but suggestive of a more spiritual and metaphorical experience symbolically representing the spirit of *chuti* or freedom. It represents Tagore's own way of looking at death. William Radice in his introduction to the translation of *Dakghar, The Post Office* (1993) would remind us of an instance illustrating Tagore's own view of death that William Pearson described in his reminiscences of Santiniketan recorded in his work *Shantiniketan: the Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (1917). Pearson presents a touching recollection of the death of one of the pupils there, Jadav, and paraphrases a talk given by Tagore at a condolence meeting presented to the pupils in the immediate aftermath:

He began by saying that when a year comes to its end we sometimes think only of the sadness of ending, but if we can realize that in this ending there is not emptiness but fullness, then even the thought of ending itself becomes full of joy. In this very process of ending we once again have the leisure to throw off the coverings and wrappings of habit and custom and thus emerge into a fuller and more spacious conception of life. Even the ending of life in death has this

² There has been debate regarding whether the last scene of *Dakghar* could be termed as the "death scene" as a number of critics have argued that Tagore has not explicitly mentioned Amal's death in the text. These critics have pointed out that it is "*mukti*" (freedom) and not "*mrityu*" (death) which happens at the end of *Dakghar*. Pabitra Sarkar, however, in his insightful article "*Dakghar: Nastiker Nibir Path*" (*Dakghar: A Close Analysis by an Atheist*, 2008) has illustrated how notwithstanding the allegory of freedom, throughout the play and even in the last scene, there is evidence that Amal indeed dies at the end of the play.

element of fullness in it when viewed from the right standpoint. Death really reveals life to us, and never hides or obscures it except where we ourselves are wilfully blind... (Quoted in Radice 1993:9)

Producers and directors who have realized this have always felt challenged to tone down the depiction of death in this scene in a manner that instead of being burdened by its gloom and despair, the audience can be elevated to a sense of profound and deep spiritual realisation. In Santiniketan, for instance, as Supriyo Thakur, member of the Tagore family and ex-student as well as ex-principal of the school under Visva-Bharati, told me in an interview, it was customary to have the death scene enacted in complete darkness on the stage - only voices are heard but Amal's dead body cannot be seen.



Figure 22 Death Scene with Amal and the Priest in *Dakghar* performance, 2016

In Kanhailal's production too, there is an attempt to interpret the death scene in a metaphorical sense. Kanhailal shows Amal's death on the stage. His death is marked symbolically by Sudha giving him a flower. But the performance does not end here but rather enters a ritualistic rite of passage. A priest-like figure wearing a white dress stands behind Amal chanting words for a while after which we see Amal alive again on stage. We learn from theatre scholar and my fellow researcher Usham Rojio Singh's essay *Kanhailal's Dakghar* (2014) that the particular ritual incantation performed by the priest or *Maiba* is a Meitei traditional ritual called *thawai mi koukhatpa*. He explains further in the essay:

The Meiteis believe in the 'multiplicity of souls'. Besides the five souls formed by the five basic elements (ether, wind water, earth, and fire), they have a sixth one in the form of *mi* (shadow/reflection). Among the Meiteis, *mi* is regarded as the most loyal companion of a person, because it does not leave the body's side until the moment of death. So the *maibas* perform *thawai mi koukhatpa* (to invoke the...soul not to leave the body) at various times ...on the spot of an accident, after bad dreams etc. (Singh 2016: 171)

However, in the final moments of the performance, we see a postman in the background walking by. Amal goes near him and then comes front stage saying the lines in the play “Rain or shine, rich or poor, from house to house, delivering letters”. The play ends there. Kanhailal, when asked the reason behind Amal’s rebirth in the performance says:

I think Amal does not die in the play. He has to live as has to live humanity. Thus I showed him dead but again made him alive. *Dakghar* is not your usual tragedy seen from a dramatic point of view. Amal represents something which does not die, something which human beings need as long as they survive in this planet. He represents the core of human existence, something which does not die but is only carried forward. Death is no longer a point for me, it is the living. Death is also a kind of regeneration, rebirth. (Kanhailal, unpublished interview by me on 19/03/2016)

There are, however, a number of problems which arise from the way the scene is handled. Tagore in the text of the play itself includes signs for the audience to pre-empt the imminent death of Amal. Amal’s desire to go in search of unknown worlds, his eager awaiting for the king’s letter to arrive and his utterances often bordering on philosophical abstraction prepare the audience mentally for ultimately witnessing Amal to leave the confines of the material world. For instance, the scene where Amal meets the guard and has a conversation with him about time, where it comes from and where it goes to, forebodes the imminence of death looming around the corner. Amal’s chanting of the sound of the watchman’s gong reminds the audience of the very passage of time, the passage of life, the beating of the heart coming to a halt, slowly but surely. Thus, when Amal dies at the end of the play, it does not come as shock to the audience but rather bears a sense of inevitability. Kanhailal’s production, however, stripped of crucial dialogues and aided by Savitri’s vivacious portrayal of the child, runs the risk of not registering the gravity of Amal’s illness and his approaching death in the audience’s subconscious.

To enhance the thrust on the aspect of pedagogy Kanhailal tones down the motif of the king’s letter and Amal waiting for it eagerly. While Tagore’s text at the moment of Amal’s death builds gradually with a steady lowering of the energies on stage, this is not the case in Kanhailal’s production. Thus when Amal dies in the production it comes as a shock to the audience who are not yet prepared for it. It is perhaps to compensate for this violent impact which actually makes the scene seem tragic that Kanhailal has to take recourse to perform a healing ritual showing the rebirth of Amal. Such suspicion is confirmed when

Kanhailal argues that he used it “for the healing power of the chant to heal both Amal and the spectators” (quoted in Singh, *Theatre of the Earth*, 2016: 171).

One of the strategies through which Kanhailal looks to reconstruct the play employing his own actor-centred dramaturgy is by keeping the character of Amal at the centre of the performance, both literally and metaphorically. The play *Dakghar* becomes for Kanhailal the story of Amal’s psychological journey. He even points out that he had planned the performance in four stages:

The action of the play is divided in four movements. *Amal in primordiality*: A montage of sounds and movements weaves the image of Amal’s perception of the universe, with the awakening of the senses...*Amal in exile*: Amal’s emotions and senses are confined to the rigid codifications of book-learning (*panditya*) of Madhab Dutt on the one hand, *kobiraj* (physician) on the other...*Amal in hope*: To Amal, these passing clouds are moments leading to an understanding of the *Dakghar* and the letter on his journey to freedom and the perception of man-in-life.... *Amal in dream*: Sudha gives Amal a flower symbolising the restoration of the emotion of the human heart... Amal’s action grows into a primordial ritual celebrating humanity in all its physicality, temperament and joy. (Kanhailal, 2016:227)

While it is one fact that these phases do not appear to the spectator with clarity and precision, another point is that such a conceptualisation seems to be imposed upon the performance, stultifying the characteristic unrestrained, lyrical, fable-like flow of Kanhailal’s style of direction. Such a reading of the play in fact remains to a great extent Kanhailal’s own interpretation and differs significantly from the essence of the original text, bringing us to the territory of politics of adaptation which we will discuss, briefly, in the conclusion where I talk about few other contemporary theatrical interpretations of Tagore’s plays.

Finally, an aspect of the production which otherwise created quite a stir among the audience as well as the reviewers is the casting of Amal, the eight-year old boy, who was played by Savitri, Kanhailal’s septugenarian wife and a powerful actress in her own right. To me, however, such a choice seemed quite acceptable. I completely agree with what Kanhailal has to say regarding his choice of Savitri in Amal’s role:

Well, first of all I do not think that it is possible for a child to play the character of Amal, at least the way I visualised it. It would be impossible to bring forth the subtle shades of the character. A child simply cannot satisfy the professional, artistic demands. It requires an experienced actor. Theatre is a kind of rebirth for the actor. The question is therefore not of the

character's age but rather of the quality of enactment. (Kanhailal, unpublished interview taken by me on 19/03/2016)

However, though there is logically nothing wrong with the choice, and in spite of Savitri being an experienced and committed actress, her rendering of Amal in the production appeared forced and overplayed.

What gets revealed in our investigation of Kanhailal's production *Dakghar* is the risk involved in adapting a play, even within India, to a different culture milieu and form of dramaturgy. The absence of deep engagement with the archive, textual interpretation and dramaturgy might enable a producer to read a play text afresh as is the case with Kanhailal. But, on the other hand, the obligation to be true to the text might impede the adaptation of the play to arrive at a fundamentally different kind of dramaturgy than what it was originally conceived for. To my mind, Kanhailal's fundamental problem in directing *Dakghar* does not lie in the fact that he alters Tagore's text; rather, it resides in the fact that he feels obliged to retain what he does. He is ultimately not bold enough to take as much freedom from the text as he desires. He could have crafted a completely new performance text inspired by *Dakghar*; instead, he chooses to do Tagore's *Dakghar*. In the end, one feels that his production neither remains *Dakghar*, nor does it become something completely new.

***Dakghar* at the Abbey: Cultural Stereotypes, Friendship, *Faux Pas* and Unequal Power Relations**

Irish nationalism and the Abbey Theatre

In this section I will reflect on a historic production of the *Post Office*, in fact the very first staging of the play which was not done in Santiniketan or Jorasanko but by the Abbey Theatre, Ireland, in 1913. Though geographically distant from each other, similarities can be perceived between how Bengali forms of cultural nationalism and Irish cultural nationalism took shape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the champions of cultural nationalism in Bengal were the English-speaking *babus* who had little knowledge of regional languages or cultures and often emulated European models to mobilize *jatiya sanskriti* (national culture). In Ireland as well, cultural nationalism was largely initiated by English-speaking artists and writers of Protestant or Anglo-Irish

background, sometimes having little impact in the Irish-speaking regions. Although unlike India, Ireland was officially a part of the United Kingdom from 1800 onwards with their representatives in British parliament, its relation to the British Empire remained one of exploitation and colonial imperialism inflicted upon them by the British. Irish cultural nationalism sought to mobilize in the face of economic and cultural repression, an Irish identity, separate and distinct from both the British identity and its caricature of Irish identity.

Akin to Bengali cultural nationalism or perhaps even more so, Irish nationalism mobilized theatre in a major way to promote an Irish identity. Among the nationalist theatrical endeavours in the late 19th and early 20th century Ireland, the role of the Abbey Theatre was once again quite similar to the role of the alternative theatre practice developed at Santiniketan. It seems relevant here to reflect briefly on the Abbey Theatre's role in the context of the Irish nationalist theatre movement in order to be able to make such a comparison.

As in Bengal, all nationalist theatrical endeavours in Ireland began with class specific or elitist forms of theatre. Theatre formed one of the more popular and spontaneous aspects of nationalist expression in the late 19th and early 20th century. Theatre practice was promoted at the Irish Literary Theatre (1899-1901) and later the Abbey Theatre was established in 1903 in an attempt to segregate itself from its more popular counterparts. Indeed, the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre occupy exclusive places in the Irish theatre history for these very reasons. Because of the sheer literary status of their key members like W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and J.M. Synge, they achieved a degree of intellectual credibility and respectability that cannot be attributed to mere amateurism. More importantly, the Abbey because of the presence of Yeats, Gregory and Synge boasts of a repertoire of plays, which in themselves have commanded the greatest attention and respect in any historical account of the Irish Dramatic Movement. With conventional modes of history writing always being dependent on textual sources for historical reconstruction, these plays have predictably enjoyed representational privilege over the more peripheral, amateurish, spontaneous, and often politically urgent modes of theatre activity in Ireland.

As Mary Trotter discusses in her work *Ireland's National Theaters: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement* (2001), the Abbey's presence in the Irish Theatre scene was authoritative in setting dominant aesthetic standards. The Abbey's decision to give aesthetics priority over politics also often created controversies in

contemporary Ireland, and W.B. Yeats invariably found himself at the centre of these controversies. In a rather polemical essay titled “The Irish National Theatre and Three Sorts of Ignorance” (1903), written in the wake of alleged criticism against Synge’s play *The Shadow of the Glen* being a morally degrading misrepresentation of Irish peasant life, Yeats listed the key “ignorances” that held back Irish theatre. His list included an insistence on country Gaelic dialect, which usually appeared as a tacky form of English; the “obscurantism of the more ignorant sort of priests”, and the “obscurantism” of politicians who want art to serve the immediate needs of political causes (Yeats quoted from Trotter, 2001: 113). Much in line with his prescriptions of literary aesthetic excellence was Yeats’ high-brow, dismissive attitude towards popular taste. The very day that the new Abbey opened on 27 December 1904 with the staging of Yeats’ play *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats addressed the



Figure 23 The old Abbey Theatre from the outside, 1904

audience at the curtain call and said that “[A.E.F. Horniman] has given us...the free use of this theatre, and as our salary list and our expenses are very small, we shall be able to ask ourselves when we put a play on, first, ‘Does it please us?’ and then, ‘Does it please you?’”(117). Yeats

evidently was quite bold to confront an audience on the very first show at a newly built theatre with the assertion that the company would not rely on popularity for their choice of plays. As history suggests, both Yeats and Gregory maintained this tough stance throughout, even in the face of controversy and dwindling audiences.

The Abbey’s insistence on aesthetic excellence, fervently propagated by Yeats, can generate two contrasting readings. On the one hand, it has to be admitted that the Abbey Theatre’s approach was to a large degree elitist, exclusivist and politically moderate. More importantly, as Trotter argues, its emphasis on the plays often meant considerable limitations

being exercised on the players. Thus, it is possible to surmise that the more embodied, corporeal and gestural nature of performance took a back seat at the Abbey. However, reading against the grain of this reading, the Abbey's intellectual theatre can also be realized as a bold and radical departure from the Victorian London stage which thrived on material opulence and acting stunts, catering to the sensual pleasures of the general public. Yeats' or the Abbey Theatre's insistence on a more "poetic" mode of theatre can be seen as a dogged refusal to participate in the colonial overindulgence of British theatre and the art-less, nationalist rhetoric of the more local amateur attempts.

An analogy, therefore, can be drawn between Tagore's role in Bengali theatre and that of the Abbey's in the case of Ireland. In their own ways, both tried to explore a new minimalist and poetic aesthetics of theatre resisting the prevalent metropolitan "realistic" and the more popular "nationalist" stereotypes. Both were charged with the criticism of being elitist. In charge of both the theatres were poet-playwrights promoting similar dramaturgical styles with the primary emphasis given to the spoken word. In spite of these similarities, however, there are also subtle shades of differences. Yeats's politics though moderate could still tolerate more extremist nationalist elements unlike Tagore's. It can also be argued that Tagore's idea of theatre perhaps had a little more autonomy for actors than Yeats'. A much more important difference rests in the professional and institutionalised set up at the Abbey and the informal and intimate atmosphere of an educational institute at Santiniketan. Finally, unlike the Abbey Theatre, which claimed centre stage in Irish nationalist endeavours, theatre practice at Santiniketan, although much celebrated among intellectuals, remained in the margins, detached from mainstream theatre practice in contemporary Bengal.

Tagore-Yeats friendship and the growing cult of Tagore

As I have already underlined the points of convergence and divergence between the two theatres, it would be interesting to elaborate on the context of the performance of *Dakghar* at the Abbey. At the heart of the series of events leading to the Abbey Theatre's production of *Dakghar*, the new and burgeoning friendship of Yeats and Tagore, resulting in Tagore receiving the Nobel Prize in 1913 on Yeats' initiative. It is relevant to mention here that the production took place in the month of May 1913 and Tagore received the Nobel Prize in November the same year; also, the negotiations for the selection of *The Post Office* in the Abbey repertoire had already begun the year before when Tagore had visited England. These negotiations affected *The Post Office* production as well, as I will discuss below.

After reaching London in June 1912, it was not Yeats whom Tagore first met but rather the British artist William Rothenstein who had already visited Tagore on a prior visit to Santiniketan. It was Rothenstein who was responsible for introducing Tagore and his writings to English literary circles. Once Tagore handed him the translations of his *Gitanjali*, Rothenstein made three typed copies of the same and sent them to Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Andrew Cecil Bradley (1851-1935), well-known writer Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832-1915) and Irish poet W.B. Yeats for their opinions. While all three of them in their responses expressed their approval of Tagore's work, it was Yeats who was moved to such an extent that he forged a friendship with Tagore, vigorously promoting his work in the following years. It was Yeats' endorsement which would count the most in establishing Tagore's reputation in English literary circles.

What did Yeats find so fascinating in Tagore's poems which were presented to him not in the most accomplished of translations? Yeats was not judgmental of the translations at all. But why was he not so? Is it because he could grasp the essence of the poems reaching beyond the façade of the translation? Or is it because the rawness of the translation contributed to Yeats' empathy for Tagore's work? We find a more elaborate response by Yeats to Tagore's poetry in his introduction to *Gitanjali*. Yeats wrote:

These lyrics - which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention - display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion... Rabindranath Tagore like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural or in need of defence. (Yeats, Tagore edited by Yeats, 1913:8-9)

It appears that what Yeats liked in Tagore's lyrics was a form of simplicity, lightness, spirituality, rustic earthiness of tone and a dream-like world of half-remembrances similar to the poetic features of the Romantics in general. To Yeats Tagore's lyrics appeared with a remarkable freshness as opposed to the ornate, over-designed character of Victorian realism. It is perhaps thus that Yeats did not have a problem with Tagore's uneven and amateurish translation because it added to the quality of unkempt freshness. Not only Yeats but the positive reception that Tagore's writings received in Europe relied mostly on the

element of their “freshness”. Academician Per Hallstrom (1866-1960), member of Nobel Committee who, following a nomination from British poet Thomas Sturge Moore, was entrusted with evaluating whether Tagore was eligible for the Nobel Prize. This is what he wrote in his report about Tagore’s poems:

The mode of expression is of classical simplicity, the image is only the spontaneous language of thought, and it does not need to be moulded into shape, it is even complete through the mere mention of the word. (Hallstrom, quoted from Pal 1992: 438)

As we see Hallstrom too singles out the same qualities emphasizing the lack of a stifling organisation of language. Thus, I believe, this can be assumed to represent the more general response to Tagore’s writing in translations in contemporary Europe.

This, however, does not explain it all. We need to contend with the startling fact that Tagore, who landed in London in the summer of 1912 as an unknown Indian, was by early next year already being hailed in the British press as “The Great Man from India”. Such a radical transformation of his image cannot be attributed only to the *Gitanjali* translation or to the available body of translation of his works. There was a more performative side to Tagore’s growing stature in contemporary Europe. From the very moment Tagore landed in England in 1912, his stately appearance with his long beard, flowing curly hair, his regal *jobba*, calm and composed demeanour, had mesmerised lay men and intellectuals alike. Yeats for one was smitten by the poet’s appearance and was primarily responsible for the growing image of Tagore as a “mystic” in the European literary and cultural community. In one of the first public commemorative events organised to felicitate Tagore by The India Society at the Trocadero restaurant in London on 10 July 1912, Yeats introduced Tagore to a group of renowned British public figures by comparing him with the Medieval Dutch saint and writer Thomas a Kempis. Yeats’s analogy triggered the imagination of the British press which began publishing reports on Tagore comparing him periodically to other medieval saints like Francis of Assisi. Yeats in his verbal introduction at Trocadero and his written introduction to *Gitanjali* emphasised the fact that Tagore provided tunes for his own poems which were then “sung by his people” and transmitted orally, thereby eliciting comparisons with itinerant minstrels and troubadours. More importantly, he highlighted in the *Gitanjali* introduction how in Tagore’s tradition “poetry and religion are the same thing”, which then made Tagore’s poems appear as psalms.

Not only Yeats, but most of those who met Tagore in person were enamoured by his dignified presence. After meeting Tagore at Rothenstein's place, Thomas Sturge Moore remarked how the poet "is a sweet creature beautiful to the eye in a silk Turban... speaks very little, but looks beneficent and intelligent" (Moore, quoted from Pal 1992: 315). Tagore's "saintly" looks often drew comparisons with even Christ. For instance, when he visited Cambridge, Charles Darwin's granddaughter Frances Darwin Cornford met him and wrote to Rothenstein of her experience in these words:

I must write and tell you what a wonderful thing it has been to see Tagore... He is like a saint,



and the beauty and dignity of his whole being is wonderful to remember... and made me feel that we in the West hardly know what real greatness and tenderness are... I can now imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I could never before. (320)

For those who did not have the opportunity to meet Tagore in person, the portrait of Rabindranath done by William Rothenstein must have fired their imagination. The sketch depicted Tagore in a contemplative mode wearing his characteristic *jobba*, sitting on the ground with his legs folded, arms clasped together resting on his lap and his eyes closed. The portrait published in

Figure 24 Tagore portrait by William Rothenstein accompanying the Gitanjali publication, 1913

Gitanjali became the most circulated and readily identifiable representation of the poet, often being re-printed along with short biographical reports on Tagore published in U.K. throughout the year 1913 (*The Daily Mail*, October 29, 1913). A report published in *T.P.'s Weekly* which included the portrait even commented on how "every morning at three o'clock

this Indian poet sits immovable for two hours in contemplation” (*T.P.’s Weekly*, 4 April 1913). Tagore in turn aided the construction of this image by underplaying the more modern and political aspects of his personality and writings. He lectured around England on themes of ethical concern like “The Problem of Evil”, “Realisation in Love” and “The Problem of the Self”. He chose to remain silent on the oppressions of the British on the Indian people back home.

Thus Tagore’s poetry and persona worked in tandem feeding each other into making him a well-known figure in Europe within the short span of a year. Tagore was regarded as a moral voice from the East with his saintly bearing and soothsaying. At that time Europe was already standing at the brink of a World War and bearing the guilt of colonialism, resulting in a spiritual void that Tagore can be said to have filled. As a reviewer of Tagore’s translation in *Sadhana* a bit brazenly commented:

Perhaps the most popular philosophic thing in Europe today is a vague restoration of God and soul in terms of biology or of mysticism. Mr Tagore, interpreting Upanishads of the East, has hit a happy hour for filling the aching void of Europe, and he has met a correspondingly happy reward. (*The Saturday Review*, 27 December, 1913)

Cultural stereotypes: a spiritual interpretation of Dakghar

Tagore’s play *Dakghar* had elements which had the potential to enhance his already growing image of the Eastern mystic poet with his spirituality, lyricism and unadulterated rusticity. Formally speaking, as we have already discussed, the play had a lyrical quality about it, and thematically, the pathos of Amal’s approaching death evoked spiritual overtones. Amal’s incessant fantasizing about faraway, half-known lands, as if seen in a dream, was almost tailor-made for the purpose. It is thus that Yeats almost as soon as he read the manuscript of the translation decided to produce the play at the Abbey.

We have already indicated how *Dakghar* was translated. Tagore met Yeats on 17 October 1912, two days before he was set to leave London for America. The very next day he wrote to Jagadananda Ray in a letter about the meeting:

I met Yeats yesterday night. He has liked the *Dakghar* translation a lot; he has expressed his desire to have it staged at their Irish Theatre. A boy here has translated my play *Raja*. That too, I have given Yeats yesterday. (Tagore, Quoted in Pal, Vol 6, 1982-2003: 343)

Yeats stuck to his choice of *Dakghar* even after reading *Raja*.

One can also understand that Yeats' choice to stage *The Post Office*, although quite appropriate for the emergent persona of Tagore as an Oriental mystic, was not quite appropriate to suit public taste in the context of theatre. Though having the potential for creating an oriental fantasy loaded with spirituality, the play was much more subtle than what the London audience was accustomed to at that time. It could be argued that the Irish audience was somewhat better prepared to view *The Post Office* because the play's aesthetics corresponded to the larger aesthetic project at the Abbey Theatre. At the Abbey, audiences had become used to seeing plays by foreign playwrights like Maeterlink and Strindberg, as opposed to the Victorian melodrama of Wilde or the continental realism of the likes of Ibsen. In the same year that the Abbey Theatre staged *The Post Office*, it also staged two continental Symbolist plays, Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and Gerard Hauptmans' *Hannele*. Thus it was obvious that Yeats would respond to Tagore's play and recommend its staging.

Not only did Yeats like Tagore's play but he edited it himself for the production, although this fact is not formally mentioned in the text. The original script of the play with the editing is carefully preserved in the archive section at the National Library of Ireland. The corrections done with a blue pen in the typed script are mostly syntactical in nature, often involving minor edits in a bid to make the text more accurate, articulate, compact and perhaps, more congenial to the actors. In a letter dated 25 April 1913, Yeats complained to Tagore regarding his translations:

The poems (also 'Post Office') have reached me...I found some words to be changed. It is again the old difficulty 'the words that have not got their souls yet and the words that have lost their souls'. (Yeats, Quoted in Aronson, 2000: 26)

In the unedited translation, we find grammatical lapses and words which do not resonate. For instance, in the very second page of the script, we find Madhav Dutta telling the physician, "What will your 'in this and in that' do for me know?" It is the odd nature of the expression which is of course a literal translation of the original Bengali text that has forced the editor to cross the lines out.

What comes to our attention in the edited script are a few instances where either a major chunk of the lines has been deleted or a few crucial ones have been cut. The first major cut appears in the third page, where a conversation between Madhab and Gaffer occurs.

Madhab is confessing his earlier apprehension of adopting a child as he thought the child would waste his hard-earned money. He says he is presently enjoying earning money after having adopted Amal thinking that Amal would inherit all of it. We find this context of money being edited altogether. Why did Yeats edit these lines? Did he think that the context of money brought back the play from the realm of romantic dreamland to the more material world?

The next edit appears on page seventeen where Amal is meeting Sudha for the first time. When Sudha compares Amal to the evening star, she offers to close the window but Amal refuses and when she speaks of her playing with dolls, these lines are cut as well. Sudha comparing Amal to the evening star may sound a bit affected even to even Bengali ears and the doll-playing reference might be lost in the Irish context, but why is the window closing part edited?

We see a similar sort of editing on pages twenty nine and thirty where the physician and Madhab are having a conversation about the dangers that the outside air poses for Amal and thus the need for keeping the doors and windows shut. We should keep in mind that the doors and windows, especially the window motif, is repeatedly used throughout the original text of the play, being a metaphor central to the play's philosophy. As I have pointed out, the window in the play *Post Office* is not merely a realistic window but it has an allegorical sense in so far as it connotes the window of the mind which needs to be kept open for Amal and for human beings in general to see and experience life to the fullest. Why was this metaphor lost on Yeats? One can only wonder.

However, the final and the most glaring omission of the script becomes evident in the last page of the death scene when Amal is already dead and Sudha appears on the stage. The script is made to end where Sudha asks when Amal will wake up and the Royal physician replies, "When the king comes and calls him." Tagore's final lines are cut where Sudha requests the physician to whisper in Amal's ears the words "Sudha has not forgotten him". Did these lines as well sound too affected or melodramatic to Yeats? It is interesting to note here that when the Abbey Theatre performed the play at the Royal Court Theatre, London, some reviews alleged that a crucial fault with the play is that it ends abruptly almost before its ending. Was it because Sudha's lines were edited? While it might seem that her lines apparently present the audience with no new information or that it alters the reality of the play, a careful and sensitive reading could reveal its crucial function in the play. The

lines, it could be argued, have less of a denotative value than a connotative one which plays at a subtle level on the audience's subconscious. It works as a soothing balm, creating a sense of peace and calm helping the audience to cope with Amal's death.

In my reading, I would suggest that Yeats cut these lines in order to deliberately end the play with a specific reference to the king. In *Dakghar* the figure of the king or *raja* brings forth a spiritual connotation; it does not merely signify a king in a temporal or political sense; rather, it evokes a divine figure, a king of the world. Yeats was aware of this fact and it is possible that he wanted to end the play by underlying the spiritual associations of kingship. In a lecture titled "The Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore" which Yeats presented two months before *The Post Office* production at the Central Hall, Dublin, he introduced Tagore the playwright saying that "he wrote plays for the boys which were unlike any other plays that any of them could have seen, for they treated of man's relations with God..." (*Irish Times*, 24



Figure 25 One of the two only existing photographs of the old Abbey inside, 1904

March 1913). Yeats in his preface to *The Post Office* when published as a book also called attention vaguely to the spiritual nature of the play saying that the objective of the play is to invoke the "moment when the 'I' seeking no longer for gains that cannot be

'assimilated with its spirit, is able to say, 'all my work is

thine'" (Yeats 1914: 3). It is perhaps because of the spiritual thrust of the play that even though the play seemed unusual to reviewers that they still liked it.

How was the production staged? And, more specifically, how did the director Lennox Robinson think of conceptualizing the spiritual angle of the play through its staging? Unfortunately, we do not get to know much about the details relating to the staging of the

play. Yeats has not commented at all on the rehearsals or the performance itself, and more astonishingly, there is an absolute silence on the production by the director Robinson in his work *Ireland's Abbey Theatre* (1951), which was also the first historical account of the Abbey's early years. We do not have any existing photographs of the production, as indeed there are no photographs available of the Abbey's early productions, because the old Abbey Theatre had burned down in a fire in 1951. The reviews of the Abbey Theatre performance and the later performances at Court Theatre, London, only provide us with a few fragments of information. The reviews too, it must be mentioned, are far too preoccupied with the persona of Tagore and the dramatic quality of his play rather than the details of the production. Some of the reviews do not even include the name of the director. From those reviews, which still



Figure 26 A virtual reconstruction of the interior of the old Abbey done by the Trinity College, Dublin, 2011

feed us with some information, we learn that for the stage décor, impressive screens were made by the legendary stage-designer Gordon Craig, who used two screens to represent the outer world of Madhab Dutta's house and

its innerworld (*Irish Times*, 19 May 1913). We learn a few more details from a review of the London production:

As regards the setting... it consisted of a screen or framework, with backing of contrasting hue. Thus the exterior of Madhab's house was shown as white, with jetblack background, and the interior as a crimson colour, with deep green to represent the opening beyond. (*The Stage*, July 17, 1913)

It can be deduced from this description that the stage setting was minimalist for the performance. We also learn that Lillian Jagoe in the role of the Amal was "delicately fanciful

and wistful” (ibid). A review published in *Irish Times* mocked the accent of one of the actors who played Gaffer:

Mr. Connife was good as the Gaffer, but occasionally made that gentleman too much of a Kiltartan (a region in Ireland) Indian fackir [sic], with the result that the contrast in the accents of the various members of the company aroused some members of the pit to unseemly , but on this occasion pardonable, laughter. (*Irish Times*, 19 May 1913)

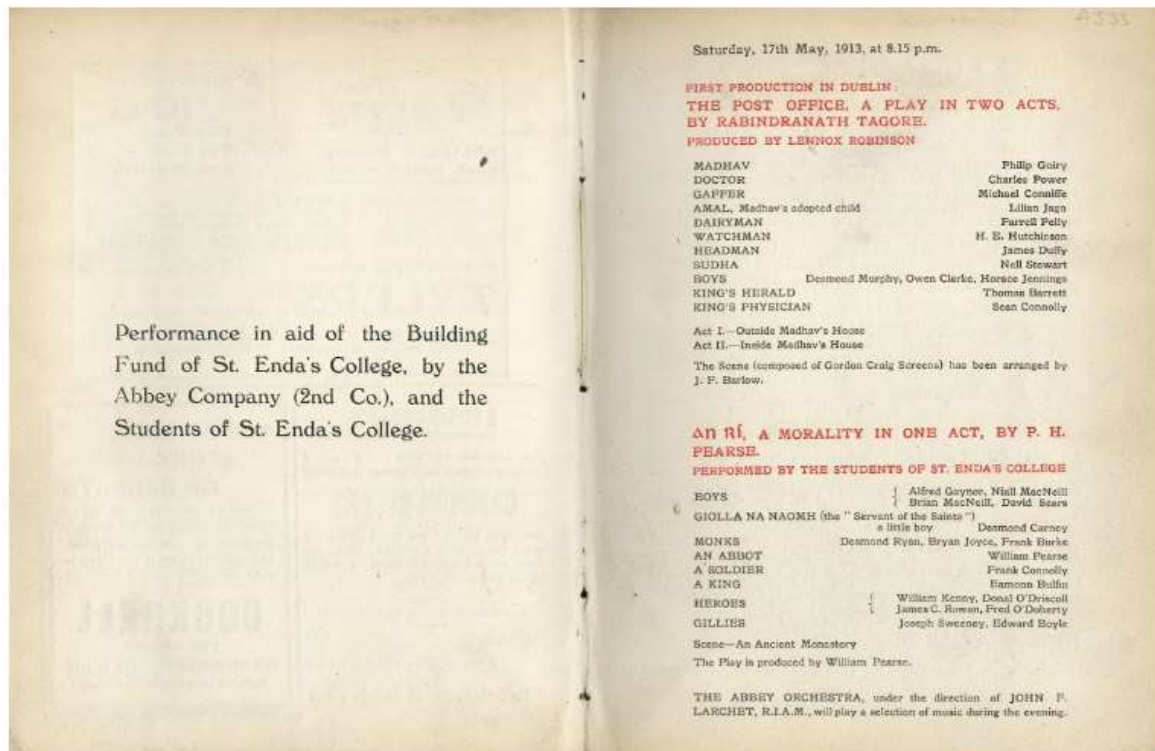


Figure 27 The programme for the Abbey Theatre *The Post Office* performance, 1913

From the above comment we can presume that the general mood of the performance was rather serious, if not sombre, as the laughter of some members of the pit seemed unseemly to the reviewer. Conversely, the audience in the pit, which might be assumed to consist of the common folk, might have felt relieved to find something to laugh at in a production which was otherwise serious. A more important thing to notice is the actor who played Gaffer being mocked for his colloquial Irish accent in Dublin. When *The Post Office* would later be performed by the Abbey Theatre in London, the same actor would play the role and would be mocked for his “brogue”. While it is not surprising that a British audience would ridicule Irish accents, the fact that the Irish audience and that too those sitting in the pit also found it amusing validates the fact that the Dublin cultural scene and the Abbey Theatre itself bore a condescending attitude towards more marginal Irish cultures.

Significantly, we find two contradictory reports on the audience for the first show. While the review in *Evening Telegraph* published on 19 May 1913 notes the presence of a large audience, the reviews in *The Irish Times* complain of the scanty audience which turned up for the show: “There was one drawback to the whole night’s enjoyment, that was the sparseness of the attendance” (*Irish Times*, May 19, 1913). We learn from the same review that the performance was “realistic to a marked degree”, the garb “unusual” indicating that there was an attempt to make the costumes appear Indian and that the “death scene was especially good”, without any elaboration on the same.

Thus, we see how any play when it travels to a foreign cultural and linguistic milieu brings with it degrees of intercultural misunderstanding. In the case of the Abbey’s *Post Office*, we witness how Yeats’ interpretation of the play and consequently the staging of it tend to emphasize its spiritual dimensions. Only a particular feature of Tagore’s multifaceted personality and work is highlighted with the author function determining the interpretation of the work. We find subtler aspects of Tagore’s text being lost in translation from one language and culture to another. An attainment of a much broader intercultural understanding is impeded by the blindness of socially constructed stereotypes - in this case the Orientalist stereotype of the “Eastern Mystic Saint”. Tagore himself too may have contributed towards such an imperfect understanding. Before leaving London in 1913 when Tagore was asked in an interview to be published under the title “West Through Eastern Eyes”, to differentiate between the East and the West, he re-affirmed the Orientalist stereotype by pointing out that the West unlike the East lacked a “a central faith and a unifying conception of life” (Tagore, *The Daily Mail*, 29 October 1913). Finally, it is perhaps because the Yeats-Tagore friendship was established on the basis of such flawed visions that it could not sustain the ravages of time.

The faux pas: facile resemblances

In any intercultural exchange, there is often an attempt to make sense of elements belonging to a foreign culture through analogy and comparison. Our understanding attains a sense of completeness if such comparative analysis takes into account both points of concurrence and difference. But, in the absence of such a complicated and demanding process, if we are satisfied to merely savour the pleasure of finding facile resemblances, our understanding of the intercultural phenomenon can be regarded as limited. It is something on these lines that we see happening in the context of the Abbey Theatre’s production of *The Post Office*.

Though Yeats had decided to stage *The Post Office* as soon as he read it and communicated his desire to do so a number of times in his letters to Tagore, even apologising for the delay in the staging of the production, the strange reality is that when the play was finally staged on 17 May 1913, he almost forgot to invite Tagore or intimate him about the performance before his manager reminded just in the nick of time. Tagore was at that time staying in London. Yeats in a letter dated 11 May 1913 writes apologetically of his slipup, while mentioning the circumstances of the production:

Dear Mr. Tagore,

I am afraid that I never told [you] that we give our first performance, 'Post Office' in Dublin on Saturday next May 17. I hope we shall often revive it. It slipped out my mind that the date was so near....I hope you will forgive me. We have been compelled to decide on this new date because our Manager Mr. Lennox Robinson takes our no. 1 company on tour the week after. We are giving this first performance for the benefit of an Irish school, which is a little like your own school in that the vehicle of instruction is the native language (Irish in this case) and in the interests of friends and relations of masters and boys. In Ireland it is difficult to get [a] good audience once May begins and this benefit performance was our best chance on giving the play a good start. (Yeats, Quoted in Aronson, 2000: 27)

In Yeats's letter, we see him quite keen to make the production a success and also not making it a one-time effort but looking forward to reviving the play in the future. However, more importantly, we find Yeats mentioning a crucial piece of information about the production. The first performance of *The Post Office* at the Abbey Theatre was a charitable performance for funding St. Edna's School. What Yeats does not mention in his letter to Tagore is the fact that St. Edna's was founded by the Irish nationalist revolutionary and playwright Padraic Pearse (1879-1916). Nor does he mention that a group of boys from the school were to perform a play by Pearse titled *The King* on the same evening at the Abbey Theatre that the *The Post Office* was staged. The itinerary for the evening included back-to-back performances of the *Dakghar* followed by *The King*. Coincidentally, much like in Tagore's play, a child also dies at the end of *The King*. *The King*, however, was not to be the first performance by the group at the Abbey. They had previously hired The Abbey to perform a *Passion Play* on 7 April 1911. We see how Yeats in the letter draws a comparison between the two schools - Tagore's school at Santiniketan and St. Edna's. In fact, in the context of the Abbey performance of *Post Office* we find an attempt on behalf of the Dublin

public sphere to understand Tagore and his play by comparing him with Pearse and his school.

We learn from a newspaper report titled “The Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore: Lecture by Mr. W. B. Yeats” that days before *The Post Office* production Yeats presented a lecture on Rabindranath Tagore at the Abbey Theatre on 22 March 1913, where he described Tagore’s school at Saniniketan as the “Indian St. Edna’s” (Yeats, quoted in *Irish Times*, 24 March 1913). Triggered by Yeats’ lecture, we find Pearse himself as well as the reviews of *The King* published in *Irish Times* on 19 May 1913 promoting such an analogy. This bringing together of Pearse and Tagore, both as curatorial strategy on behalf of Yeats and as a contextualising and meaning-making strategy, was, however, marked by striking coincidences and discomfiting incongruences. Both Padraic Pearse and Rabindranath Tagore had founded schools to further interests of their own nations but their attitudes to nationalism, and consequently, the philosophies of their schools differed considerably in practice.

As Trotter argues, Pearse’s idea of Irish nationalism was essentially religious in character and closely associated with the Irish Catholic Church. But while Pearse’s deeply religious background often made him draw his rhetoric and symbols from Irish Catholicism, he also “held the church hierarchy in some contempt” (Trotter, 2001: 144). The Irish Catholic Church, it must be said here, was not always unequivocally supportive of the nationalist movement in Ireland for its primary prerogative was to uphold its moral supremacy over Irish society. However, in many ways, Pearse “secularized” religious rhetoric using it often to energize masses and even to incite violence. A fundamental belief that was central to his notion of Catholic nationalism was “sacrifice”. Sean Morran in his brilliant psycholinguistic analysis of Pearse’ life titled *Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption* (1994) has discussed Pearse’s belief in suicidal insurrection as ultimately a life-affirming act. More simply put, Pearse believed that it is only from sacrifice that new life springs and that one would need to sacrifice one’s life in order to gain independence for Ireland. Pearse’s own life which ended in execution in the immediate aftermath of Easter Uprising (1916) can be argued to follow and perform this belief quite closely.

Pearse, an Irish language teacher, was “fascinated by the possibilities of politicizing the Irish people through cultural study, and in 1908 he got the chance to pursue this dream when he opened St. Edna’s school for boys” (146). The school was funded by his family and

friends and became a potential training ground for Irish nationalist youth. Though promoting nationalism was the primary ideological objective of the school, St. Edna's according to its prospectus for 1911-12 was dedicated to providing "Irish boys a secondary education distinctly modern in complexion, bilingual in method, and of a high modern type generally" (Pearse, quoted in Trotter 2001: 147). More importantly, the boys were "taught to prize bodily vigour, grace, and cleanliness, and the advantage of an active life constantly [was] insisted upon" (148). One of the key elements of extracurricular school activity at Edna's was theatre, which was valued for both its cultural and ideological implications. Pearse wrote plays which the boys used to perform mostly in the school compound.

What remains significant about theatre activity at Edna's was the professional quality they used to achieve, which was almost always appreciated by the audience which often included the "who's who" of Irish intellectual community. For instance, their first performance of a play not by Pearse but by Douglas Hyde and Standish O' Grady called *The Coming of the Fionn* was attended by Yeats and other Irish luminaries who were appreciative of the performance, which was quite well covered in the Irish media as well. Edna's Abbey performance of *The King* in 1913 also received univocal appreciation from its audience for being touching and effective at the same time as being simple and elegant. St. Edna's was suffering from a funds crunch for the year and when Pearse approached Yeats for help, Yeats gladly agreed to have *The King* staged with *The Post Office*, with two-thirds of the profit for the day going to Edna's.

There are a number of apparent similarities to be identified between Tagore's educational institute at Santiniketan and St. Edna's. Both undertook the project of promoting education in the vernacular language and both celebrated the indigenous culture. More importantly, both embraced theatre as an important aspect of education and cultural expression. Theatre at both the institutions was not merely amateurish but claimed a degree of serious professionalism. Above all both the institutions were in the centre of public attention and were both directed by well-known public figures who were playwrights. Beyond these similarities, however, Pearse and Tagore had fundamental differences in their ideological beliefs. Unlike Pearse, Tagore took pains to ensure that his institution remained outside the influence of any form of political or strict religious ideology and also distanced himself from nationalist politics following a brief whirlwind involvement in the early 20th century *Banga Bhangra Andolon*. Another major ideological difference was that Tagore did

not share with Pearse his penchant for violence and sacrifice. In fact, Tagore repeatedly shunned violent forms of nationalism in his fiction, plays, as well as public addresses.

What made Yeats as a theatre manager decide on the curatorial strategy of clubbing the performances of the two plays together? Was it just because Yeats thought Tagore and Pearse shared certain common beliefs and thus it would be easier for the audience to understand or relate to Tagore's play by placing it in Pearse's context? Or was Yeats somewhat apprehensive that the audience would not be able to relate to Tagore's play and thus kept Edna's as a cushion in case the audience rejected Tagore's play? Or, as a third possibility, did he sincerely think the two personalities and their plays were inherently similar and thus it was meaningful to club them together?

Padric Pearse definitely thought that his and Tagore's play had much in common. Interestingly, Pearse in his essays in *An Macaomh* (The Young Boy or the Youth), the St. Edna's official journal, notes that it is only after hearing Yeats' lecture on Tagore where he referred to Tagore's school as "the Indian St. Edna's" that he approached Yeats for help regarding his school. Pearse acknowledges that he knew nothing about Tagore but as he read *The Post Office* he saw it had much in common with his own play:

Of Mr. Tagore's play I knew nothing except what I had heard from Mr. Yeats, but I saw that both of us had had in our minds the same image of a humble boy and of the pomp of death, and that my play would be as it were antiphonal to his. Since I have seen Mr. Tagore's manuscript I have realised that the two plays are more similar in theme than I had suspected, and that mine will be to his in nature of an "amen"; for in our respective languages, he speaking in terms of Indian village life and I in terms of an Irish saga, we have both expressed the same truth, that the highest thing anyone can do is to serve. (From St. Enda's School E-Collections)

It would be relevant for us to take a quick look here at the play *The King*, its thematic concerns. As Trotter notes, Pearse's political ideals from 1910 onwards became increasingly reliant on violence, harping on the theme of sacrifice. His 1912 play *The King* also explored this philosophy. Trotter explains how closely Pearse's play followed his ideology:

In the play, a young boy, Giolla na Naomh ("the Servants of the saints"), sacrifices himself to absolve his country of its evil king and free the people. Ruth Dudley Edwards has summed up just how closely the play aligns with Pearse's thought: "First it showed his growing preoccupation with the sacrifice of Cavalry, for Giolla is the embodiment of the Christ-child who must die to save his people. Second, it was a reaffirmation of his belief in the essential

purity of childhood. Third, it stated the necessity of sacrificing the young and sinless to save a decadent nation. (Trotter 2001: 157)

Even without going into the details, it could be pointed out how Pearse's political philosophy was integral to his play. Much like the fact that the corrupt king is unable to expel his enemy, Pearse believed that the corrupt, Anglicized Irish elders were far too compromised themselves to uphold the nation. Thus, much like the child in the play, it was only the innocent youth such as the ones studying at St. Edna's who would be able to do so. Secondly, the belief in a Christian sense of sacrificial death and rejuvenation signified that only the blood of the youth could revive the country.

Though, coincidentally, both Pearse and Tagore's plays are allegorical and depict the untimely death of a child, there is nothing similar in the circumstances of the child's death or the way in which the theme of death is handled. While in *The Post Office* Amal dies unwillingly because of illness, in Pearse's play, the child-king willingly sacrifices his life for his country. Though in both the plays death is shown to be not a mere end to human life but a life-affirming force, this idea evoked in both the plays has significantly different manifestations. While Tagore depicts Amal's death metaphorically, toning down its visceral and pathological quality, in order to evoke a more spiritually and philosophically charged sense of freedom of the soul, in Pearse's play, death is "pompously" celebrated as noble sacrifice and hailed as a pre-condition for the freedom of the country. While the first play leaves the audience in a calm and peaceful mood, the second one tends to incite the audience with a sense of duty and eagerness for self-sacrifice. Pearse, in his reflections on *The Post Office*, is unable to see the difference or deliberately chooses to dwell only on the similarities and the spiritual charged atmosphere of both plays.

Yeats, however, was not insensitive to Tagore's intentions in *Dakghar*. In a letter to Tagore dated 9 January 1913 Yeats mentions that he had sent his copy of Tagore's play "to an old friend, a very beautiful woman who is dying of cancer" hoping that the "book will mean much to her" (Yeats, *Dear Mr. Tagore*, 2001: 24), which shows that the spirit of Tagore's play was not beyond his grasp. Thus, it seems strange that Yeats overlooked the incongruence of clubbing Tagore's and Pearse's play together. It seems even more surprising for Yeats, knowing his rejection of the more extremist factions of Irish nationalism, to let *The King* be performed at the Abbey in the first place. Maybe Yeats' concern was more for the sustenance of the school and its children than any endorsement of the aesthetic or political

affinities between Pearse and Tagore. Perhaps, this interpretation can be sustained if one keeps in mind that when Yeats writes to Tagore that he shares much of St. Edna's as a school but does not even mention the name of Pearse, or the fact that his play would also be staged on the same day along with Tagore's. One suspects that Tagore would not have approved of this bracketing of the two plays had he been alerted to Pearse's nationalist politics.

Unequal power relations

Any attempt to understand Tagore through a comparative analogy via Yeats or the aesthetics of the Abbey Theatre, has to be seen in the context of the contemporary European and especially British hegemonic practices of Orientalist "othering". In fact, as Edward Said has pointed out in his work *Orientalism* (1978), late 19th and early 20th century European empires derived their identity, supremacy and justification for colonial rule through this act of "othering" non-Western cultures. Intercultural transactions are often irrevocably affected by the existing power equations that exist, both implicitly and explicitly, between cultures. While in contemporary cultural transactions such power dynamics remain mostly implicit, in the late 19th and early 20th century, cultural exchanges between England and India were inevitably framed within the larger social, political and economic realities of colonialism. While for the British Empire the colonised Orient was the Other against which it asserted its own identity, for the colonised, cultural agency was inevitably mediated by colonial models of emulation or resistance to these models in the forging of a national culture. In the critical reception of Abbey Theatre's productions of *The Post Office* in London following the performances in Dublin, we find such cultural power dynamics at work.

In July 1913, a month after *Post Office* was staged at Dublin, the Abbey Theatre troupe travelled to London and staged the play there at the Royal Court Theatre. There were three shows altogether on July 10, 11 and 12, 1913. In Dublin, reviews of the performance had been reasonably appreciative and Tagore's play too had found a general degree of acceptance perhaps owing much to Yeats' promotional strategies. That, however, was not the case in London. In London the Orientalist lens in viewing and judging the production was dominant and almost all the reviewers of the London production commented critically on the "peculiarity" of Tagore's play. The Orientalist lens in this case was a double lens because *The Post Office*, was an Irish production of an Indian play; thus being doubly "othered". One particular review written by "J.W." for *The Westminster Gazetteer* was outright dismissive and vitriolic in its polemic:

It seemed very strange to find the Irish Company producing “The Post Office: a play in two acts, by Rabindranath Tagore”. As the name of the author suggests it is an Indian play, and it is one of those elaborate attempts to be simple and elemental which are favoured by those who by non-commercial drama mean drama that nobody pays to see... To the eye of faith the little piece may have its beauties, and no doubt a creditable attempt by an Indian gentleman to write a play. But it was all on one note and never moved one inch; and, looking back on it, I cannot remember anything said by anybody to cause it to go on even for the short time that it lasted. And what induced these Irish players to take it up I cannot guess. There were very sweet tones in the voice of Miss Lilian Jagoe, who played the boy; but beyond that nothing (*The Westminster Gazetteer*, July 11, 1913).

One cannot but fail to note the condescension in the reviewer’s attitude. It is quite clear that the reviewer found Tagore’s play monotonous and utterly lacking in the capacity to create an impact or provide entertainment of any sort. One must remember, however, that *Dakghar* as a play and the Abbey production’s use of “unusual” costumes had the potential to exhibit the exotic land of the Orient by invoking the sense of Oriental spirituality. It appears that was not enough for the London audiences to be satisfied.

A possible explanation behind the *Dakghar* seeming a monotonous play to the London reviewer might well be the fact, as I have already discussed, that the theatrical interpretation based on Yeats’ edited script, directed by Robinson and acted by the Abbey players, missed the subtler facets of Tagore’s text, notably its humorous quality and allegorical nuances. However, it is equally probable that the English reviewer was just responding to the fact that Abbey’s *Dakghar* production did not fit into the contemporary normative idea of an Indian play or a staging of “Indianness”. It would be pertinent to discuss here briefly the existing practices of performing Indian plays or “Indianness” in London, here, to elucidate the later probability.

If one word has to be used to describe the Victorian London stage, it would have to be ‘big’. The theatres were all grand architectural structures with a capacity to accommodate huge audiences. The only way to bring in the public to fill these big theatres was to feed them with genuinely popular entertainment. The thrust, therefore, in acting was on the melodramatic, and the stage décor bordered on the sensational. In these ostentatious endeavours, there was little or not room available for subtlety in any form. Pantomimes, extravaganzas, burlesques, equestrian dramas and aquatic dramas were some of the most popular genres of Victorian English Theatre. Irish playwright and actor-manager Dion

Boucicault, one of the most prolific exponents of the melodrama form, would say about Victorian audiences that “sensation is what the public wants, and [one] can’t give them too much of it” (quoted from Tanitch, 2010: x). The representation of the Orient formed a key aspect of constructing sensation on the Victorian stage. Even on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare’s plays like *Tempest*, *Antonio Cleopatra* and *Othello* had exploited Oriental tropes to mesmerize audiences. However, as Edward Ziter cogently argues in his work *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (2003), representations of the Orient received new functions and impetus in Victorian England. Echoing Stephen Bann’s work on 19th century historical consciousness, Zitter argues how popular culture in 19th century England generated European identity and power through performing representations and examinations of the Oriental Other, which were both geographically and historically distant to them.

Obsession with the Orient, however, was not limited to the popular. The Orient was an object of a scientific, academic, historical, archaeological, geographical, ethnographic examination in the 19th century. Entertainments tapped into this rich resource to their advantage. Panoramas, dioramas and other optical entertainments depicted the Orient in such excruciating detail that “reviews compared them to actual journeys East” (Zitter, 2003: 10). Theatre aided by new technical inventions in lighting and design played an important role in the project of identity formation by giving three-dimensional forms to the Oriental world making them come alive for Western audiences.

At the end of the 19th century, “India” or “Indians” began to play a key role in these mass reproductions of the Orient. While in the early such representations, the white-skinned actors played Asian, African or Middle-Eastern characters, claims for authenticity meant that the English stage managers soon began thinking of importing actors representing diverse nationalities. As a product of such thinking, the Parsee Victoria Dramatic Company from Bombay appeared in London in 1885 performing “an evening of magical derring-do, a minstrel turn, a version of a then popular English play, and a brief extract from the Sanskrit classic *Sakuntala*” (Chambers in Nasta 2001: 149). This was, however, just the beginning. Colin Chambers in his essay ‘*A Flute of Praise*’: *Indian Theatre in Britain in the Early Twentieth Century* traces some of the early productions of Indian plays as well as performances by Indian troupes. Chambers notes in his essay:

In keeping with general trends in contemporary culture and fashion at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, a broad and ill-defined Orientalism was rife in British

theatre... Mixing the menacing and the mysterious, fantasy collations of China, the Middle East and South Asia proved particularly appealing... India, the so-called jewel in the imperial crown, which had been ruled directly by Britain since the late 1850s, exerted an especial fascination. A flavour of this can be gleaned from a selection of now forgotten titles: *The Nautch Girl*, *My Friend from India*, *Indian Prince*, *The Prince of India*, *The Great Mogul*, *The Nabob's Fortune*, *The Saucy Nabob*, *Carylon Sahib*, *Carnac Sahib*, *The Mahatma*, *The Star of India*. (Chambers, ed. Nasta, 2013: 149)

Thus we see that Indian plays were performed in the Victorian English stage in the 1850s. They in fact formed an important part of the exoticism and the sensationalism on which the contemporary English theatre thrived.

In the late 19th century, however, there developed another form of Orientalism, which while continuing to be exhibitionistic, looked eastwards for inspiration, aestheticism and spirituality in response to the vulgarity and alienation of western capitalist society. Without abandoning either western superiority or the spectacle, this new strand saw in the Orient and especially the Indian past a possible source of transcendental- a moral and timeless counterpoint to the fast evolving modernity of Europe. The most significant theatre practitioner of this kind was William Poel, the pioneering director and manager in Britain, founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society (1895). Indian Art Dramatic and Friendly Society's (IADFS) work in London followed in the direction set by Poel and began to collaborate with him.

IADFS' entry into the London theatre scene happened through the production *Buddha*, directed by Poel at the Royal Court. *Buddha* was an adaptation of Edwin Arnold's narrative poem, *The Light of Asia*. The ensemble for the production was led by a Bengali called Kedar Nath Das Gupta, who was credited as presenter of, and business manager for *Buddha*, and who most probably functioned as co-director. Das Gupta who established IADFS in 1912 was born on 2 October 1877 in East Bengal. He moved to Calcutta where he attended university and became involved in nationalist campaigns. His activities soon brought him to the attention of the police, and his older brother sent him to England to study law. Das Gupta instead taking of law as a career was dedicated to increasing cultural understanding between India and Britain, and, to further these concerns, he formed the Union of East and West. There was already an appetite and strong tradition in Britain of groups and organizations that explored 'East-West' understanding, ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites, the Theosophists and the Indian section of the Society of Arts to the Royal Asiatic Society, the

India Society and the Oriental Circle of the Lyceum Club. Das Gupta took recourse to theatre as a means for attaining his objective.

Interestingly, Tagore in his visit to England in the summer of 1913 became associated with IADFS. Tagore had left for America from England in the autumn of 1912. He returned to London after his stay in America on 19 April 1913. On 9 May 1913 Tagore gave a reading of his play *Chitra* at the Northbrook Society Hall at the initiative of the Indian Art Dramatic and Friendly Society (IADFS). Though this was the first time Tagore would be working with them in person, this was not the first association between them. IADFS had already arranged a staging of an adaptation of Tagore's short story *Dalia* on 20 July 1912 at the Royal Albert Hall Theatre, when Tagore last visited London. The performance titled *The Maharani of Arakan* directed by Douglas Gordon was based on a dramatization of the translated short story by British writer George Clædron. The cast included Sybil Thorndike and Ronald Colman who made his debut in this performance. Thus we should note that the Abbey's *Post Office* production was not the first time Tagore's writings were being staged in U.K.

It is indeed revealing that among the Tagore's translated plays, it is *Chitra* which IADFS selected for the reading-performance. It might be the case that *Chitra*, a play based on a mythological subject, would have suited the idea of Indian theatre that IADFS wanted to promote in London. One can assume that the very name *Post Office* referring to an institution of modernity was modern enough for Dasgupta to primarily avoid staging it. Placed in the context of this history and in the light of Dasgupta's choice, it is understandable why the London reviewer could not place Abbey's *Dakghar* production within the forms of Indian-ness the London audiences were used to see. Placed in a broader context, as the reviews of Abbey's other London performances indicate, it was not only *Dakghar* but the Abbey's performances in general were not well received there. Yeats' or the Abbey's project of developing an Irish National Theatre by devising an alternate aesthetics might be better realised under the light of these facts. Interestingly, the London reviewer though not fed by the standard doses of "peculiarity" still found reasons to label the play "peculiar" thus maintaining the contemporary status quo of power equations in this particular instance of intercultural exchange.

Jill Parvin's *The Post Office*: Re-Connecting through Re-Enactment

In this section we will discuss the production of *The Post Office* commissioned by the Nehru Centre and directed by the late, British freelance director Jill Parvin in the summer of 1993. The production was based on a new translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Dakghar* titled *The*

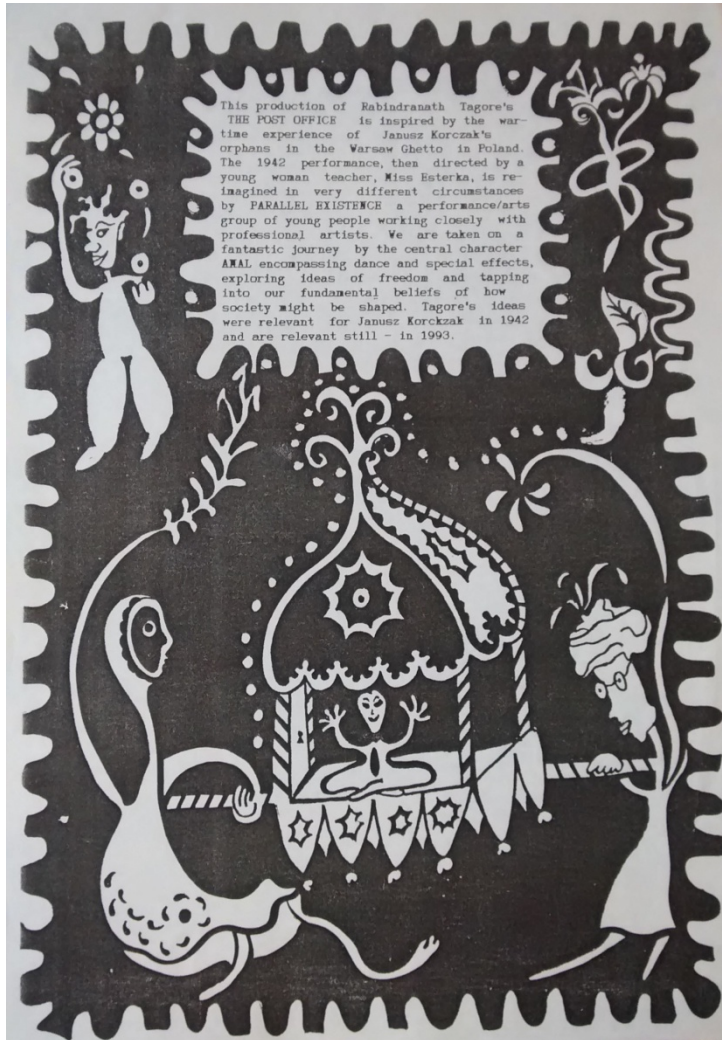


Figure 28 The cover page of the programme for Parvin's *The Post Office*, 1993

Post Office by British Tagore scholar William Radice. The production was designed as a multimedia performance arts project for young people in collaboration with working artists. Auditions, spread over several months from March 1993, drew together young people aged 15-27 from various locations. Rehearsals began in mid-August at the Pegasus Theatre in Oxford, with the opening night being held on 1 September 1993 in London. Radice's translation of the play was published the same year by The Tagore Centre, London with permission from the Visva-Bharati Music Board.

As Radice himself rightly points out in his introduction, his translation belongs to a larger contemporary drive of re-claiming

and re-comprehending Tagore in Europe through fresh translations:

The old image of Tagore, however, was not complete or accurate, and over the last ten years a new process of discovery has begun, through fresh translations done from the Bengali. This new translation of *The Post Office* is a step in this process. (Radice, 1993: 8)

Around the same time in Europe, a new set of translators of Tagore's works like Martin Kämpchen are found to be emerging with the ambition of transcending the oddities of

Tagore's own translations which were primarily responsible for the poor reception received of Tagore's works. If this is one of the reasons behind Jill Parvin's production being significant in the history of the European reception to Tagore, another key aspect of its claim to distinction lies in Parvin's conception of the production as a re-enactment of the legendary *The Post Office* production arranged by writer, educator, doctor and children's rights activist Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) with the children of an orphanage in Warsaw, Poland on 15 July 1942. Parvin's production was the first attempt to understand and re-contextualize the staging of *Dakghar* through re-visiting the earlier historical moment and re-enacting the production at a theatrical level. Following Parvin's attempt, a number of Indian productions in recent times have aspired to do the same.³

We learn from Parvin's recollections regarding the preparations for the production that she, predictably enough, felt intimidated by the task of producing *The Post Office* when first faced with the prospect of staging the play. The play seemed obscure and completely unfamiliar to her understanding of theatre and thus impossible to meaningfully translate onto the stage. Questions regarding its form and content began crowding her mind for which she did not have adequate answers. In a bid to attain a deeper understanding of the play, she began engaging with the Bengali language and culture in ways that were available to her. She, however, still remained in the dark. In an article she later wrote on her experience of producing the play titled *How Tagore Met Korczak*, she expresses the sense of despair which seized her during this time:

In November 1992 I was truly in a quandary. At the end of a performance of dance and poetry by Bisakha Sarker and William Radice at The Nehru Centre in London, I was drawn into a conversation in which I gradually realized that I was being asked to direct Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*... I had only in recent years become involved in deliberately cross-cultural work. Three short visits to India, in particular Bengal, a stab at learning Bengali which had failed, and a treasured handful of Bengali friends, these weren't what people might call proper qualifications. How could I have the temerity to create a production of a play beloved of Bengalis everywhere... It was impossible for me to do it. I wallowed in differing states of discomfort. I read and re-read Radice's new translation of the play. I couldn't get to grips with the apparently episodic nature of it. Why did this character seem full-blooded? Even did Amal die? Then it seemed that there was hardly anyone in the play. It was as if all the characters had

³ Sunil Shanbag's *Walking to the Sun* (2012) and Bohurupee's *Rajar Chithi* (2012) being two instances.

a go at being someone else. A lot of dressing up. (Parvin, *The Statesman*, Saturday, February 26, 1994)

As we see, Parvin faced considerable difficulty in arriving at an appropriate dramaturgy for the play. While it seemed that the only way forward was by getting to know more about the Bengali language and culture, she also realized that she could perhaps never be sure that she knows enough. She had almost given into her apprehensions as she acknowledges- “As a last resort I purposely abandoned thoughts of *The Post Office*” (ibid). However, the fact that she had already started the ball rolling by engaging other artists in the process did not allow her to do so and the fact that she did not stop digging into the archive served her with the necessary pointers.

There were actually not one but three different archival sources which combined to help her forge the dramaturgy for the play. The first was an essay published in the eminent Bengali magazine *Desh* about the 1917 production of *Dakghar* at Jorasanko where Tagore himself had performed. Another was Rabindranath Tagore’s own reminiscences of his childhood in *Jibansmriti*. But, most important of all, was the Korczak production of *The Post Office*. It was the Korzack connection which led Parvin into discovering the core of the play and also to confront herself as the director to find out exactly how she related to the play or why she wanted to stage it. More importantly, it is through the Korczak production of *The Post Office* that Parvin could for the first time relate to the play as a European. What had seemed an alien text so long suddenly appeared to be a momentous and integral part of European cultural history, and by extension, what she considered as her own history. Parvin says:

[I] began to read through more carefully a photocopied version of a potted history of the life of an educationalist, Janusz Korczak... What did I believe in? Why was I drawn towards Tagore? Toward the core of his work. Of course. This time it’s as much about education as it is about drama. It means that if the ideas in this play come very close to what I have been trying to do all my life, then I can do this play... Tagore in India, Korczak in Poland, Elmhirst in Dartington, England - they know what inspired young people. And, following in their footsteps, it’s what I believe in too. (ibid)

Parvin, too, much like Tagore or Korczak, was interested in working with young people, inspiring and motivating them to discover their own creativity. In fact *The Post Office* production was conceived specifically as a means to involve teenagers. It is, however,

reading about the Korczak production which made Parvin realize this resemblance and the similar beliefs on education that she shared with Tagore and Korczak. From this point onwards, Parvin could relate to the play ontologically. Impelled by this discovery, she instinctively decided to visit Poland and attempt to unearth whatever information she could about Korczak and his production. In Poland, with the assistance of Tagore scholar and translator Elizabieta Walter, she made some contacts through which she could learn more about Korczak's enigmatic personality, his orphanage, and why and how he staged *The Post Office*. What fascinated her most was to discover the striking similarities in the way that Tagore and Korczak thought about life and education. She recollects in her article:

Fired with renewed enthusiasm, I met Professor Lewin the next day and, with one of Elizabieta's students, Joanna, translating this time... slowly drew out...relevant passages of Korczak's writing which ran parallel in ideology with those of Tagore. One of them, an essay entitled "The Open Window", told of an experiment of Korczak's in which the writer allowed his young people to come to his study, even during periods when he would have preferred to be alone, as long as the student kept to his own side of the room. This was always as far from the window as possible, somewhat tucked into a corner. In addition, the student was required not to speak. Gradually, Korczak would notice that the young person would edge his or her way towards the light and opportunities to glance outside. Once there, they stayed without seeking anything more. I could feel Amal. (ibid)

Encountering these elements in Korczak's writings strengthened Parvin's conviction that if she had to stage *The Post Office*, she would have to approach it through Korczak. But how would she bring this piece of history into her production? Through what dramaturgical strategies would she make her production cite Korczak production?

Before we go on to answer this question, we need to stray a bit from our discussion to address an equally crucial and relevant question. How does the Warsaw production of the *Dakghar* done in a completely alien geographical, linguistic and cultural condition becomes so integrally attached to the play's memory, history and meaning-making? What makes such a performance momentous enough, that a director like Parvin producing the play fifty years later feels obliged to not only revisit the history of the production but even to visit Poland personally to unearth the details? What lies in the nature of that history which prompts her to do so? We need to take a short detour to be able to understand these dimensions of intercultural research.

Korczak's Post Office

Who was Janusz Korczak? In actuality there was officially nobody by that name who actually existed. Janusz Korczak was the pen name of Henryk Goldzmit. Goldzmit was born in Warsaw in 1878 or 1879 (his father delayed registering his birth) into an assimilated family. In his early years as a writer, Goldzmit took his pen name from the title of the book *The Story of Janasz Korczak and the Swordbearer's Daughter*, written by Poland's most prolific historical novelist, Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski. Though it is not known for sure, Goldzmit probably looked up to Kraszewski as a model. In addition, the noble character and courage of the fictional Janasz Korczak, a poor orphan, must have appealed to Henryk. It is perhaps a matter of dramatic irony, as Betty Jean Lifton in her biography of Korczak titled *King of Children: Biography of Janusz Korczak* emphasizes, that his life too would entail a series of moral and courageous decisions. However, Korczak was already famous by his pen name for his autobiographical novels at the turn of the century, and, as an educator, he had given up his medical practice to set up the first progressive orphanages in Warsaw for destitute children. He founded the first children's newspaper, *The Little Review*, and had a radio program as the Old Doctor. Korczak much like Tagore loved children and fought for their rights all his life. When he set up for the first time an orphanage at Warsaw named *The Children's Republic*, the underlying philosophy was:

[C]hildren are not the people of tomorrow, but people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated by adults with tenderness and respect, as equals, not as masters and slaves. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be: the "unknown person" inside each of them is hope for the future (Lifton, 1988: 31).

His children's book *King Matt the First* is about a child king who yearns to make reforms that will improve the lives of children.

As early as 1910, Korczak had decided to abandon his medical career to work on a permanent basis with children. For the next three decades he tirelessly pursued his dream to do so. It was in 1939 that Korczak's city Warsaw was captured by the Germans. Korczak heading an orphanage with Polish Jewish children sensed dark days ahead and perhaps this prompted him to begin writing a memoir which was to later develop into the now legendary *Ghetto Diaries*, which would bear testimony to the impending doom that loomed on him and

his orphanage. Beginning from that very year, the German army slowly but surely began the tyrannical process of obliterating the orphanage and the children it housed. As the general situation of Jews in Warsaw deteriorated, so did that of the children in the orphanage. There was an abject scarcity of resources. Food and clothing became hard to afford and avail of. The Germany military also barged in on the territory of the orphanage and gradually began taking hold of portions of the property for their use on one pretext or the other. The whole area was walled off making it a stifling life for the children inside. Korczak was only too aware of these developments, and, as unbearable as they were, he never allowed these circumstances to destroy his or his children's desire to live life to the fullest.

But how did Korczak come upon Tagore's plays and decide to produce *The Post Office* at the orphanage? This history is no less striking. Before 1939, Tagore's writings were already available in Polish translation and of course Korczak must have read him. With the coming of the Germans, however, Tagore's writings were banned in Poland as in Germany. From Parvin's research it appears that Korczak had seen Tagore in his dreams, where the Poet is said to have instructed him to produce his play *The Post Office* at the orphanage. Parvin says in her article:

Korczak, while asleep in the ghetto, had two dreams of Rabindranath Tgaore. Dreams in which the two men met. He wryly expressed his disappointment as one of the dreams ended and the marvellous village meal offered to him by the Bengali poet never reached his lips. In the second dream he was given a copy of *The Post Office* and though he expressed doubts that he would ever be able to produce it, Tagore told him that he must give the book to Miss Esterka, a young teacher, and assured him that he, Tagore, would be there to help (Parvin, *The Statesman*, Saturday, February 26, 1994).

We find the two dreams noted in detail among Parvin's papers regarding the production carefully preserved at The Tagore Centre, London. The dreams more than anything else represent a flight to an Oriental utopia where Tagore leads a simple, yet peaceful and fulfilling life, devoid of any political turmoil. One assumes that Korczak shared these dreams in his own acute yearning for such a place - if not for himself, then for his children. Following the demand put forth by the dream, Korczak entrusted Miss Esterka with the production of the play, and it was she who prepared the students for the performance.

How was the performance staged? Though we do not have any pictures or any detailed accounts, we are fortunate that there exist certain archival fragments through which we might sense what transpired on the evening of the performance. We know from Korczak's diaries that the night before the play, disaster struck in the form of mass food poisoning that spread through the orphanage. Lifton tells us that

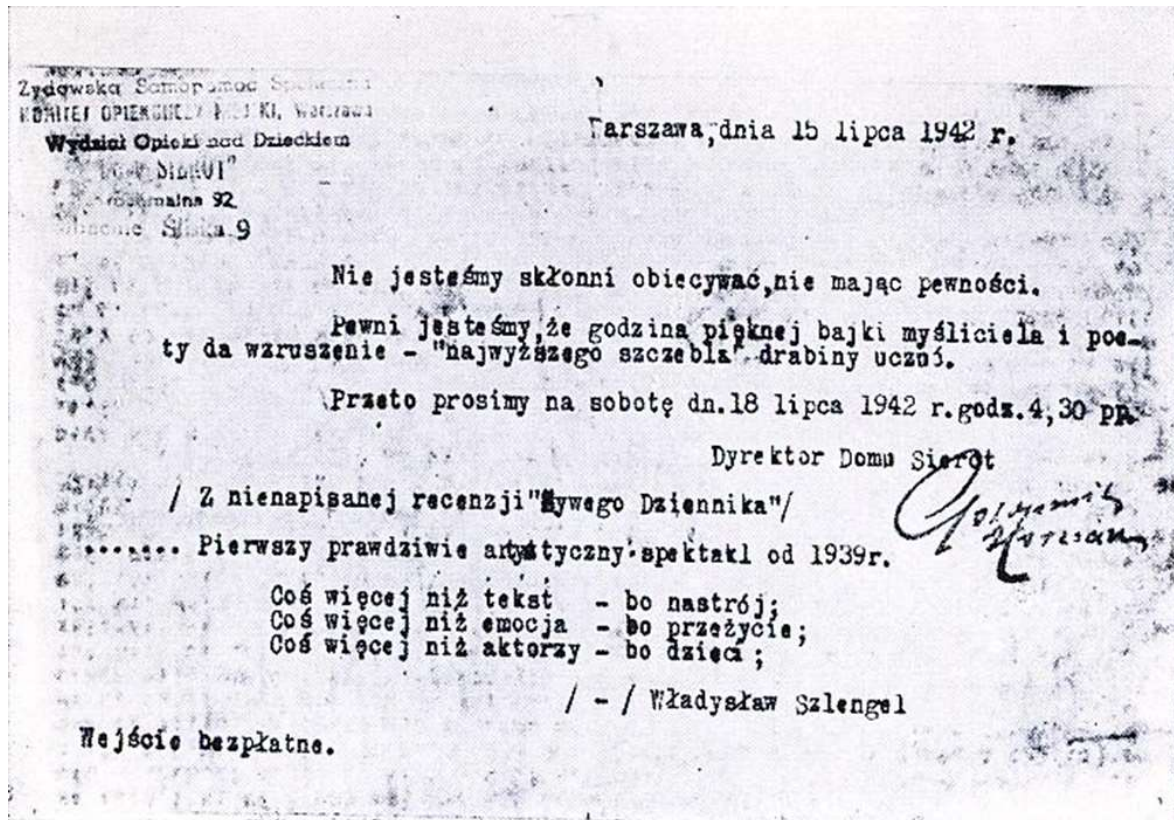


Figure 29 The invitation for Korczak's *The Post Office*, 1942

Korczak and Stefa stumbled about in near darkness with medicine for headaches and jugs of limewater for those who were vomiting and moaning with pain. The staff members were offered morphine “sparingly”... Somehow the children were able to recover and pull themselves together in time for the performance at 4:30 the next afternoon. The large room on the first floor of the orphanage was filled with friends and colleagues intrigued by the invitations written in Korczak's unique style. (Lifton, 1988:188)

On an invitation to the performance that survives, sent to Cywii Lubeckin, who was a leading person in the resistance movement in the ghetto, the following words were written by Korczak:

We do not make promises unless we are certain. We are certain that this beautiful story by a thinker and poet will move you profoundly. We are therefore inviting you for Saturday 18 July 1942 at 4:30 p.m. (ibid)

Under Korczak's text there are words by the popular ghetto poet Wladyslaw Szlengla:

It transcends the text - being a mirror of the soul.

It transcends emotion - being an experience.

It transcends mere acting - being the work of children. (ibid)

We see how even those who were to be present among the audience were made aware by Szlengla's poignant words of the significance of *The Post Office* production. As Szlengla says, it was not just another foreign play, and the production was not just a regular one. He makes it clear that the performance is also in itself a piece of reality: it mirrors the very truth of every Polish soul under the contemporary German Occupation and a truth which is presented by the purest of souls - children.

Regarding the performance, we also have a few responses recorded in the memoirs of some of those who were witnesses on the evening of the performance. Korczak himself has noted down a few words in his diary. He says:

Yesterday the show *The Post Office* by Tagore - the appreciation of the audience, hand-shakes, smiles, attempts to chat in a friendly manner. The Secretary's wife visited the house after the show and said: 'Though there was hardly any room Korczak proved that even in such a limited space he can perform miracles. Other people need palaces for that... (Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*: 66)

Korczak noted, perhaps with a hint of irony, how, even if for a little while, people who were present in the performance could overcome their anxieties of an unbearable present and their fear for an uncertain future and socialise among themselves. The performing children would seem to urge people by their enthusiasm to shift their attention and relax their persistent watch on themselves forgetting that they are being watched constantly. We find that Korczak was a bit proud of himself too, especially in the way he could overcome the spatial limitation at the orphanage. Tagore himself, of course would surely have approved of Korczak's success on this front.

From another existing recollection by Miss Esterka's friend Izabella Brodzka, we also learn about the transformation in the audience's bearing on the evening:

Saturday 18 July 1942. The atmosphere in the ghetto was very heavy. There was awareness of impending disaster. Today I went with my small sister to Korczak's orphanage to see the performance of *The Post Office*. When we got there we at once found ourselves in a different world. The atmosphere was festive and full of excitement. There were many guests. The children's excited faces showed their eagerness to see the show. It was beautifully done by Ester Winogronowna, a dear friend of mine. The performance was very touching, full of colour and movement. It was well received by everyone with loud applause, and by the adults with gratitude for the way it enabled them to forget the terrible realities of life. As I left, I felt a huge contrast between the loving humanism inside the orphanage and [the] inhuman world all around it (Brodzka, Parvin Files, *The Tagore Centre*).

From this memorable observation, we note the gradual shifting of the mood from sombre to a more joyous affirmation of energy and conviviality. It comes across beautifully through



Figure 30 Korczak with the music team for *The Post Office* production, 1942

Brodzka's words how on that particular evening the orphanage became a lone island of hope and love in a sea of inhuman oppression that was drowning Poland. This transformation in the audience or, for that matter, in the children whose transformation

prompted the former, was not lost on Korczak. Perhaps, that is why he noted in his diary after the performance about the importance of "illusion in life". The children had seemed so natural in their parts that he wondered:

...what would happen if they were to continue in their roles the next day: If Jerzyk were to imagine he really was a fakir, Chaimek a real doctor, and Adek the lord Mayor? "Perhaps

illusion would be a good subject for Wednesday's dormitory talk," he wrote. "Illusions, their role in the life of mankind" (Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*: 78).

In yet another evocative and touching recollection, we have Zofia Szymanska commenting on the performance:

In the large hall of the orphanage many guests were assembled to see Tagore's play *The Post Office*. A sick little boy is confined to bed by the order of the doctor. Young Amal yearns for freedom. He wants to run far away into the world but the pointless order of the doctor confines him to a dark room. Gazing at Amal as if at a rainbow the children of the orphanage absorbed his words. How they were suffocating within the confines of the ghetto! Holding their breath, they were waiting with Amal for the King's letter which would bring him freedom. 'The old doctor' [Korczak] was sitting bundled up in a dark corner, his eyes full of fathomless sadness (ibid).

We can almost visualise here the very progression of the play as Amal is confined to his room and his yearning for life beyond it reminds Korczak of the plight of his own children. He is sitting dejected and lost. He is in immense pain realizing the fact of the impending death of his beloved children and feeling helpless because he cannot save them.

It is crucial to state here, against the grain of this image of utter despair that Korczak reveals himself not as a person who would easily give in to fate but one who would try to live with dignity even with the threat of death looming in front of him. It is important to note that as a way of resistance to the Nazis, Korczak kept the same structure and routine in his ghetto orphanage as in his pre-war children's republic. While he was aware of the overwhelming oppression and surveillance of the Occupation, he was determined not to let it affect the development of the children or to dampen their spirit. He refused to let the Nazis gain control over how they should live their life. It was not physical death that he feared but rather the death of the spirit, the death of self-determination of life. It is thus that more than once "during the dark hours", Korczak pondered the killing (putting to sleep) of infants and old people in the ghetto. Suicide and euthanasia are subjects to which he keeps returning in his diary. Korczak kept pills in his possession so that suicide could be an option: "the pills [gave] him a feeling of control over his fate, so that he could choose "freely" when to exit" (Lifton, 1988: 8).

The decision to stage *The Post Office* at his orphanage on 15 June 1942 through children also reflects such an affirmation for the spirit of life and a claim to its self-

determination. Korczak had already realized that death was imminent for his children and he wanted his children to be prepared to accept it nobly when it comes. When after the play someone asked Korczak why he had selected this particular play, he said that, finally, it is necessary to accept serenely the angel of death (Korczak, 1958:77). As Shlomi Doron affirms in his essay "Learning to Accept the Angel of Death with Equanimity: Korczak and Tagore in Warsaw Ghetto" (2011), if Korczak could not make his children live, he could at least teach them how to die and *The Post Office* was his means of attempting to do so. Much like Tagore's conception of death in *Dakghar*, Korczak's idea of death too transcended its purely physical manifestation. It was the death of the human spirit which he abhorred. Thus, when his children were deported to Treblinka on the fateful day of 6 August 1942, exactly eighteen days after the performance, and he was given an option to stay back and live alone if he wanted to, he promptly chose to march with the children to death without thinking twice. Doing otherwise would have definitely meant more of a death to him.

This is exactly how those who were with Korczak knew him to be and thus his last decision did not appear to them as anything which needs to over-hyped the way it has been usually done in the representations of the event. When Korczak biographer Betty Jean Lifton visited the "Korczakians", the survivors from Korczak's orphanage as they love to call themselves, in Jerusalem, to find out how they remembered him, they would often begin by saying, "I don't want to talk about the dead Korczak, but the living one." They would be disturbed at his being remembered for the way he died rather than for the way he had lived. It was not the martyr, whom they had known and revered, but the vital, fallible father and teacher, whom they wished to recall. One of the teachers Michal (Misha) Wroblew, who was the last among the survivors to have seen Korczak alive, would say:

You know, everyone makes so much of Korczak's last decision to go with the children to the train. But his whole life was made up of moral decisions... As for the last decision to go with the children to Treblinka, it was part of his nature. It was who he was. He wouldn't understand why we are making so much of it today. (Lifton 1988:5)

This aspect of Korczak's personality finds a match in Tagore, who in a letter nearing the end of his life chided those readers who believed that Amal had died at the end of *Dakghar*. Tagore termed them "*Abishahsi*" (non-believer), the same term that the Royal physician too uses in the play, in the final scene to silence the crowd around Amal's bed. Seen in this light,

it is only fitting that Korczak and his children will go on to become an inseparable part of the play's history and reception.

Dramaturgical Strategies of Citation

Now, we come to the final phase of this section, where I discuss the strategies through which Parvin brought the Korczak production into her own production. While we do not have an existing video of the production, what helps us is a detailed report of the rehearsals and the performance done by Sheila McKenzie at the invitation of Parvin. McKenzie's report was published in the *Arts Education* magazine in December 1993. What we also have is the published script of the play, some photographs, a few reviews published in dailies at London, and a number of other documents consisting of Parvin's research, carefully archived at The Tagore Centre. One of the things that we learn from these sources is that Parvin took recourse to the most time-tested theatrical device of a play-within-a-play to cite the Korczak production in her own production.

Parvin wrote an introductory scene which sets the play firmly in the Polish ghetto. In this scene through a longish solo narration by the character of Miss Esterka, we learn briefly about the conditions in Warsaw and about Korczak, following which she promises to show the audience the production of *The Post Office* as she had conceived it in her mind. Parvin's choice to begin the play with Esterka and not Korczak himself is indeed a beautiful gesture towards acknowledging the voices which often get muffled in history, overshadowed by more prominent ones. However, the introductory scene situated in the Warsaw orphanage, also transfers the action of the play to a Bengali village, teeming with life and activity.

The stage design for the play to begin with is minimalist keeping in mind the limited resources present at the orphanage. There is a trunk on stage and

...besides the trunk, the only other large prop is the bed which Amal has been forbidden to leave by his uncle. The stage is bounded by banners, black on white, which represent the enclosed space at the play's beginning. By the simple expedient of rolling up the black cloth as if it were a blind, a feeling of letting in the light transforms the mood. The cast, under the guidance of Miss. Esterka, delineates the confined space of Amal's room with its doors leading to the courtyard on the one hand and to the street on the other, and its windows which Amal's family, under the instructions from the Kabiraj, wish to keep closed. (McKenzie, *Arts Education*, December 1993, from Jill Parvin Files, Tagore Centre)

The play, however, does not linger in the ghetto for long and quickly shifts to the main part where the children of the orphanage act out *The Post Office*. The very moment where this transition happens is a charming scene as. It is amusing to see the ghetto children choose the costumes for the parts they are going to play from a large trunk on stage. The plain white *kurtas* and *salwars* are revealed when the orphans remove their ghetto clothes and become the characters in the Tagore's play. Not only that, but there are many more such moments. They argue over a turban here, a sash there, or a sari to cover the anonymous *kurta* and *salwar*, which transforms the wearer into a young village girl. The children work on the making of turbans, paper garlands and flowers, on sashes, gourd pots and a kite; and under the supervision of the design team, all these elements result in a riot of colours on the stage



Figure 31 Thakurda telling Amal stories in Parvin's *The Post Office* production, 1993

enacting *The Post Office*. She did not want the citational quality of the performance to vanish after the introductory scene. In this matter, what came to her rescue was the history of yet another *Dakghar* production, the Jorasanko production of 1917. Parvin in her article speaks about her discovery:

The day before, I discussed, with Karabi Mittal, a Bengali article about the first productions in Bengal, which had been photocopied for Carolyn Mather, the visual artist who would do the set for *The Post Office*. I was in a desultory mood when inspiration would not come. Karabi was

(McKenzie). The mood which was sombre to begin suddenly becomes joyful filled with gaiety and laughter. One is reminded of the transformation achieved in the Warsaw performance and Korczak's reflections on 'illusion'.

A challenge for Parvin was to create strategies by which she could sustain the Korczak citation in the main body of the performance while the children are in the process of

translating carefully, though with some difficulty... when suddenly I heard her talking about the way in which the original actors, including Tagore, had doubled up, playing more than one part. And the way in which they had done this was significant. It was what I was looking for. (Jill Parvin, *The Statesman*, Saturday, February 26, 1994)

The particular article that Parvin is referring to is an article by Tagore scholar Rudraparasad Chakraborty published in *Desh* magazine titled “*Dakgharer Katha*” in the year 1991. Charaborty’s essay was published alongside and a discussion on a short recollection of the performance by Ashamukul Das, who had enacted Amal in the 1917 production. Ashamukul in his recollection mentioned how Tagore himself played multiple roles as Thakurda, Prohori (watchman) and Raj Baidya (physician). This bit of information gave Parvin the idea that one actor could be made to do multiple roles in the play. She decided to make the actor playing multiple characters change his costumes on stage helped by Miss. Esterka. This became a pattern through the play and a device through which Parvin could keep reminding the audience of the Warsaw context.

The music for the play also added to the Warsaw reference. It was arranged by Peter McPhail, an Oxford musician and composer who is a rhythm coach. The score bore an ominous drone in certain sections to preserve the atmosphere of the ghetto, including in one place an arrangement of a Tagore song from *Chandalika*.

The final challenge once again for Parvin was the customary one. How to compose the final scene of the play and how to build the play to that moment? Of course the approach had to be non-naturalistic, but the poetic manner in which Parvin was able to depict it, connecting it at the same time to Tagore himself, is indeed noteworthy. Much like Kanhailal, Parvin too pictured Amal in his dreams as he nears the moment of attaining death, or alternately, freedom. She uses multi-media art forms brilliantly to set the scene. We find a description of how exactly she did it in McKenzie’s report:

In discussing with Carolyn Mather the gradual deteriorating in Amal’s condition towards the end of the play, Jill decided that she wanted a sequence in which his imagination takes over from his illness. The result was collaboration between the design team and Dan Fedorowicz, a multi-media performer who juggles, mimes and clowns and who is especially known for his spectacular fire-juggling. The stage is blacked out and an ultra-violet spot illuminates long, narrow, disembodied, swirling lengths of cloth in golds and blues, greens and reds, manipulated by invisible hands. The climax of this scene comes in the form of a giant creature which appears up-stage, opens out, twirling at the speed of a Catherine-wheel, scattering brightly

coloured confetti over the stage as Amal comes out of his dream. It is in fact a large umbrella, decorated with luminous material which, when picked out by the ultra-violet spots, creates the illusion of the magic place where Amal's fantasy has taken him. (McKenzie, *Arts Education*, December 1993, from Jill Parvin Files, Tagore Centre)

Finally, at the end of the play, we see a magnificent palanquin of wood decked out with its magnificent drapes and trimmings. Amal is put on the palanquin, lifted by four members of the cast and carried into the wings at the climax of the play. The palanquin and its disappearance into the wings symbolises Amal's flight into his dream world, where he belongs now. Interestingly, through this visual metaphor of the palanquin, Parvin also



Figure 32 The palanquin used in the last scene of Parvin's *The Post Office*, 1993

embeds a citation to Tagore and his childhood. It is a passage from Tagore's reminiscences of his childhood in *My Boyhood Days* where the poet recollects his own childhood flights of imagination which actually provided Parvin with the clue to this scene:

The use of a beautiful palanquin at the end of the 1993 production was inspired by the following passage in *My Boyhood Days*. "The palanquin belonged to the days of my grandmother. It was of ample proportions and lordly appearance... I was not yet, therefore, of an age to put my hand to any serious work in the world, and the old palanquin on its part had been dismissed from all useful service. Perhaps it was this fellow feeling that so much attracted me towards it. It was fellow feeling that so much attracted me towards it. It was to me

an island in the midst of the ocean, and I on my holidays became Robinson Crusoe... At midday on holiday those in charge of me have their meal and go to sleep. I sit on alone. My Palanquin, outwardly at rest, travels on its imaginary journeys. My bearers, spring from 'airy nothing' at my bidding, eating the salt of my imagination, carry me wherever my fancy leads.

We pass through far, strange lands, and I give each country a name from the books I have read". (From Jill Parvin Files, Tagore Centre)

What appears remarkable in *The Post Office* production directed by Parvin is the way she draws instinctively from the archival elements which provide the key to her dramaturgy for the play. Her approach to the archive of *Dakaghar* breaks through the usually witnessed binary in the case of directors trying to stage Tagore's plays, who are either found trying to replicate the archive as it is or being totally dismissive of it. Parvin's more creative approach is refreshing because she engages with the archive, searching for moments which can stimulate ideas and not ready-made solutions.

Another interesting thing to notice in the production is how multiple times interact and amalgamate with each other to produce meaning as Rebecca Schneider indicates happening in any re-enactment in her work *Performing Remains*. The time of the original play, the time of Tagore's childhood, the time of the Warsaw production and the present time of Parvin's multimedia performance with young people working together – all these times combined collectively to make the staging creative and resonant for the audience. The fact, however, that the "truth" of Tagore's play *Dakghar* was realised in its most sublime form in an alien context by people belonging to a completely different language, culture and place at Warsaw owes itself only to chance. Such chance-encounters cannot be produced at will but rather emerge only out of contingent circumstances. But once they materialize, they bring out a paradigm shift in the way a play and even an entire culture is received and perceived, opening up new avenues for intercultural exchange and understanding.

Thus we see how any intercultural transaction is primarily about imperfect visions and occasional moments of clarity. When a play like *Dakghar* travels outside its own linguistic and cultural points of origin, it is accompanied by images of a nation, a community, a language, a culture, an author, a tradition of an alien theatre, among other things. It becomes virtually impossible for any director to successfully master all of the above in order to interpret and stage the play. What he or she does is to search for moments of inspiration and accidental concurrence in the archive available to him or her, which facilitates the translation of the play into another language of theatre. While in such instances the director must be ready to try to see beyond himself or herself, there is no guarantee of success at any point.

Conclusion

Tagore Our Contemporary

The Tagore Revolution

The word “contemporary” accommodates a paradox within itself. It can denote at the same time a form of temporal reciprocity as well as a temporal disconnection. Derived from Medieval Latin *contemporarius* (*con*, coming together + *tempor*, time), contemporary means being one in time, possibly of elements, otherwise belonging to separate spheres of existence. However, the time which unites true contemporaries is not necessarily historical but rather qualitative in nature. Thus, one can also be contemporaries across times. It is in this sense that I believe it can be said that Tagore as a playwright or his ideas on theatre are perhaps more contemporary to us than to those belonging to his own era.

Tagore’s plays were indeed popular and well-read in his own time and even sometimes staged outside Jorasanko or Santiniketan. But then a contemporary is not someone who merely coincides with his time irrevocably, but someone who also exhibits a form of disjointedness to it. As contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben explains in his evocative essay “What is the Contemporary” (2009), contemporariness is a “relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism” (Agamben, 2009: 41). Speaking plainly, therefore, contemporaries do not revel in the accomplishments of their times but are able to reflect on the “darker” aspects of their times critically. Directors during Tagore’s life time and even after him have maintained an attitude of reverence or awe to Tagore and his plays. The play texts have often been treated as sacrosanct entities to be kept unadulterated in performance. Such dogged loyalty has not been limited to matters of the text itself but has been extended to the realms of dramaturgy as well. Notions as to which plays are more stageable than others and which modes of staging more proper have been prescribed and practiced. Visva-Bharati, the stake holders to the copyright of Tagore’s work till 2001, with its disciplinary caveats, has played a major role to play in propagating such views.

If this has been one part of the narrative, a large number of directors, for their own part, have refused to engage with Tagore’s texts labelling them obscure and unstageable owing to their non-conformity to standard modes of playwriting. Thus, barring exceptional instances like Sombhu Mitra or the Bohurupee amateur theatre group, or one off productions

like Bibhash Chakraborty's *Bisarjan* (1991), or a few rare attempts by foreign directors like British director Jill Parvin's or German director Wolfram Mehring's productions of *Post Office*¹, a lot of what Tagore tried to say or do in his plays or their performances has eluded theatre practitioners of the twentieth century. They have either tried to replicate him or avoid him. A critical response characteristic to a contemporary has been found wanting.

But was Tagore himself a contemporary to his time? First of all, any attempt to answer such a question would remain only partial at this moment due to the absence of critical light being shed on many aspects of his work, ideas and personality. Secondly, it would perhaps also lead to an irreconcilable difference of opinions. On the one hand, it could be acknowledged that Tagore was ahead of his times in his views on various aspects of society, culture and politics. But, if considered in relation to the immediate contexts of British colonial oppression and its direct implications on the late 19th and early 20th century Indian society, Tagore, in certain cases, might be accused of not being urgent or socially relevant enough. In this regard, it should be pointed out that many of Tagore's views regarding gender, caste, religion, culture, state, society and governance reveal perceptible inconsistencies and limitations across time and space. Born in the most prominent and elite of families, being a prime member of an elite Hindu-reformist sect like the Brahmo Samaj, being a public figure since very young and later the head of an institution – all these affiliations came with their own obligations. The phenomenon, however, which makes him seem to me singularly a contemporary to his own times, is the constant process of his evolving through which continued until the very end of his life. He never shied away from re-visiting, questioning and, if necessary, altering his opinions and perspectives. Not only in the realm of ideas but in his work too, we never find him feeling too secure and complacent; on the contrary, he was almost always finding pretexts for not only altering but discarding old viewpoints and habits and creating new modes of exploration. How else can we explain him saying in his late sixties say that words did not interest him anymore and that it was in a completely new mode of expression like painting that he could find his freedom. In this sense, as a ceaseless experimenter, Tagore had a truly modern psyche and was not only a contemporary to his times but even to his own self, as long as he lived.

¹ For a detailed list of productions of Tagore's plays in Kolkata during the period see Ananda Lal's essay "Kolkata Theater-e Rabindra Natya: 1986-2010" in *Paschimbanga Natya Akademi Patrika* Volume XV, August 2012.

But do his ideas regarding multiple aspects of society and the world get adequately reflected in his plays and theatre practice? Three major factors here have worked in tandem to form a prevalent misconception that they do not. The site and context for the majority of Tagore's mature body of work relating to theatre were developed at Santiniketan. Thus, the immediate function of pedagogy is often thought to inhibit Tagore's plays and his ideas regarding theatre. Such conceptions have been augmented by Tagore's own stern reminders of keeping Visva-Bharati free from "political propaganda" of any sort. Secondly, the symbolic nature of Tagore's plays like *Sarodotsav*, *Dakghar*, *Raja*, *Phalguni*, *Raktakarabi*, *Muktadhara*, and his adoption of a *pouranik* or quasi-mythological world make them appear as period pieces or art objects disconnected with contemporary reality. Thirdly, the appropriation of Tagore's persona to facilitate the construction of a cultural icon, serving statist, institutional and commercial interests, makes generally invisible, the more political aspects of his personality and work. Largely, owing to these factors, his plays have either been stereotyped as idealistic and non-political, or performed as costume drama epitomizing only a specific mode of poetic aesthetics.

But, in actuality, while the immediate context of pedagogy or community formation at Santiniketan does affect and shape Tagore's plays as well as his theatre practice, they do not necessarily define their possibilities. It is also that, as we have already discussed, Tagore's plays or his theatre do not take these frames or functions for granted; rather, he engages with their underlying politics critically. Additionally, as I have demonstrated previously while discussing Tagore's experiments with theatre at Santiniketan, the world of *pouranikota* becomes for Tagore a strategic disguise through which he addresses imminent political questions. Tagore in spite of wilfully and categorically projecting himself as a "poet" and not a "politician" or a "philosopher" could not avoid registering his reactions to all major political events, by addressing political issues directly or indirectly in his works. Coming back to his plays, however, it is this disjointedness with his own time that Tagore generates in his plays through the façade of *pouranikota* which would seem to transcend the time-period of the plays themselves in favour of a direct relationship with contemporary reality. Even running the risk of sounding clichéd, I would like to say that it is from such disjointedness that plays by the likes of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen or Tagore derive their potential to generate affects across time and space.

Coming back to the present, since the beginning of the 21st Century we have witnessed a revolution of sorts in the staging of Tagore's plays. The termination of the copy-

right in 2001 and the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary celebrations of Tagore in 2011, have opened the doors to innovation and new productions. More than the sheer number of productions, which in itself is unforeseen in the context of Tagore's plays, it is the nature of the engagement with his texts which has particularly arrested our attention. Predictably enough, in a country where theatre practitioners suffer from a perennial crisis of funds, there have been the usual productions which have been staged for the simple reason that performing Tagore's plays is both fundable and fashionable. But a few directors have been bold enough to be able to look beyond the cult of Tagore to de-construct his plays and their existing code of dramaturgy in order to find new and fascinating ways by which they can relate to the reality of our times.

This process had been initiated by the emergence of a few theatre festivals, organised by various groups, dedicated exclusively to the staging of Tagore's plays, in the aftermath of the termination of the copyright. One of the first of such theatre festivals was organised in January 2002 by Dakshinee, a well-known school for teaching and promoting Rabindra Sangeet. Founded in 1948 by Shri Suvo Guha Thakurta with the blessings of Tagore himself, Dakshinee has involved legendary Rabindra Sangeet exponents like Subinoy Roy and Suchitra Mitra, among the first batch of teachers. However, coming back to the festival organised by Dakshinee, it at least included one production of the prelude to Tagore's play *Phalguni* titled *Falguni : Suchana* (Falguni: The Prelude) directed by the then young but now renowned director Suman Mukhopadhyay, which would redefine the way Tagore's plays could be approached. Mukhopadhyay himself would go on to produce three of Tagore's plays- *Falguni: Suchana* (2002), *Raktakarabi* (2006) and *Bisarjan* (2010). We will discuss his *Falguni: Suchana* a little later in a more specific context.

However, following Dakshinee's efforts, in 2006 there was an even more significant breakthrough. A group of concerned art lovers got together in 2005 under the name Happenings with the "quixotic task of preparing and presenting a different perception of Bengal" (Happenings Programme Book, 2012) through the curation of a "Mahotsav" (Durga Puja), whose task was to try and simulate traditional cultural expressions. In 2006, upon the urging of and mentorship of the late theatre stalwart Habib Tanvir, and under the guidance of renowned theatre, film and art critic Samik Bandyopadhyay, they decided take on the ambitious project of organising a theatre festival dedicated exclusively to Tagore's work. In an effort to bring together not only Bengali but multiple regional theatrical perspectives on Tagore, they invited established theatre practitioners from around India to participate in the

festival. While certain sections of the Calcutta intelligentsia (Lal, *Paschim Banga Natya Akademi Patrika, Tagore Anniversary Number*, 2012: 46) have claimed that they too were infected by the epidemic of the Tagore cult, at least the productions that they put together for the first year of the festival did not seem to be affected by it. Among the productions were Habib Tanvir's adaptation of *Bisarjan* titled *Raj-Rakt*, Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Raktakarabi*, Ratan Thiyam's *King of the Dark Chamber* and Heisnam Kanhailal's *Dakghar*. In the coming years, Happenings would continue to present courageous and intriguing adaptations of Tagore's works tuned to contemporary aesthetics and sensibility. Its curatorial creativity proves to be the crucial path-breaker for more stagings of Tagore's work around the country, in the wake of the anniversary celebration in 2011. The most prominent theatre festival in the country, Bharath Rang Mahotsav or The National Theatre Festival, organised annually by National School Drama in their 2012 edition hosted as many as fourteen productions of Tagore's plays.

Modes of the Contemporary

How did the directors, who staged Tagore's plays post-2001, approach his plays differently? How did they interpret Tagore's plays in the context of our times and what strategies did they undertake to situate the plays in the contemporary? Did these interpretations succeed in subverting the existing status quo of staging Tagore's plays? As directors from all around India came forward in producing Tagore's plays, there were innumerable variations that could be witnessed in strategies, techniques, dramaturgy of the plays being produced making a list of which is not my intention here. Rather, I would like to discuss briefly with the help of one case-study each, what I believe to be the two major modes through which directors have attempted to incorporate the present time into Tagore's plays.

One of these approaches has been to keep the original text intact, possibly edited in various degrees or with minimal changes but without any radical alterations; in this approach, the contemporary is made visible in the performance through the costumes, scenography or acting style. Another approach has been to completely re-write the text or to write a new text altogether inspired by Tagore's original play or its perceived essence. In most cases, such an approach has seen directors adopt the time-tested format of a play-within- a play. As an example of the first approach, I will discuss Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Falguni: Suchana*, and, as an example of the second, I will discuss an adaptation of Tagore's play *Muktodhara* titled

Tamasha Na Hua (2011) directed by Bhanu Bharti. It deserves to be mentioned at the outset that these two approaches I identify are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive, but can overlap in differing degrees in diverse productions. The two performances I choose here as instances of the two approaches are not the only ones of their nature, nor should they be considered as the best exemplars of the two approaches. Having made these qualifications, I focus on these productions representing two approaches because they raise crucial issues related to the staging of Tagore's plays in our times.

Suman Mukhopadhyay's Falguni: Suchana

Suman Mukhopadhyay in an essay titled "Rabindra Natya: Nirmaner Abhigyata" (Staging Tagore's Plays: Experiences of the Creative Process) published in the Tagore anniversary number of the amateur theatre group Bohurupee's magazine lays bare the stakes involved in his own engagement with Tagore's plays.; and while doing so, also astutely marks the way forward for any director thinking of staging Tagore's plays:

I was wary of one thing from the start- to distance my work from the kind of collective socio-cultural demands which burden the cult of Tagore. I have tried to alienate myself from the sickening practice of projecting divinity upon his figure or straitjacketing him to be able to showcase him at exhibitions, in museums. I don't think anybody doubts the fact that Tagore's creations would be considered by posterity among the timeless masterpieces ever created in the history of mankind. In my own everyday life, his presence is constant. But if the relation between the playwright and the director remains one of devotion, one can only end up eulogizing and not actually doing the play. The relation between the director and the playwright must be one of mutual respect and camaraderie. There must be scope for conversing face-to-face, arguing and disagreeing... it is only on the stage, in practice, that we can reach out to the playwright and sense the essence of the play. Thus Shakespeare or Tagore, whatever his public stature might be, the playwright is our colleague in work. We have to pursue him outside the framed perceptions of "classics", or for that matter beyond the codes that signify Tagore, the cultural icon. There are two possibilities which would then face the director- either the director or the actors would fail to grasp the essence of the play or aided by creative imagination, its multiple layers of truth would get unveiled upon the stage. Thus the primary requirement is to form an ambience and perception conducive to exchange, exercise and experimentation. (Mukhopadhyay, *Bohurupee* 116, 2011: 60)

Mukhopadhyay here openly criticises not only the practice of projecting divinity into the persona of Tagore but also the existing protocols of producing Tagore's plays. He calls for

the complete overhauling of an approach which has no space for experimentation, dialogue, criticism or differences. More importantly, he emphasizes the need for any director while producing plays considered publicly as classics not to be unduly awed by the text but to be able to meet it on equal terms. He rightly points out that to the director a play text is no longer a literary work but a rather a workable script which can be edited, altered and moulded according to the demands of the production. Consequently, Tagore's plays too, he believes, should not be treated as sanctimonious objects but elements with which a director has to work with. The director for his own requirements needs to be able to break the play down and probe its layers and dynamics through experimentation.



Figure 33 Scene from Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Bisarjan* with Raghupati and Jaisingha, 2010

But how does Mukhopadhyay himself relate to all these elements in his own practice? A vital element of his productions involves a careful crafting of the *mis-en-scene*. The *mis-en-scene* does not exist in his production for embellishment or decorating a particular point of view, or even for forming a background or ambience for the action, as is commonly perceived in realistic-naturalistic modes of staging. But, in his productions, the *mis-en-scene* becomes a character in itself. Remaining within the ambit of dramatic theatre, the modern and minimalist *mis-en-scene* of his productions not only frame the play, it participates in and interacts with the action on stage in ingenious ways, generating new

interpretations of the play. In the prelude to Tagore's *Phalguni*, for instance, we find a King looking very upset as he sits in his royal-garden having noticed two grey hairs on his side locks. He interprets it as a call of death and withdraws from all his duties. In the meanwhile, we learn there is famine in the kingdom and people are dying. The king, however, chooses to remain oblivious to their suffering. He invites the court-scholar Shrutibhusan to recite scriptures and keep him occupied in esoteric philosophical discourse. It is Kabisekhar, the court poet, however, who is finally able to convince the king of the need to embrace life and its problems and not try to escape them.

Mukhopadhyay by his ingenuous use of the *mis-en-scene* turns this prelude into a brilliant satire of the modern nation-state and its political leaders. First of all, he converts what is described in the play as royal gardens into a playground on stage, where there is a see-saw, a slide and a solitary swing upon which the king is seen seated. The idea is obviously to make the actions of the king seem childish to the audience. The king's seat on the swing is also raised at a considerable height from the stage (7feet) to indicate the king's absolute indifference towards the starker aspects of reality around him. Mukhopadhyay here obviously tries to draw a parallel between the king and the modern political heads who exhibit a similar apathy towards the people they represent and their problems. His master stroke in the production, however, happens through the presence of a group of famine-affected, destitute subjects asking for the king's attention. Though comprising of actors, not participating directly in the action centre stage, this group works as a part of the *mise-en-scene* framing the production. Instead of contributing to the performance on stage, they seem to be working against it. As the play progresses, these subjects gradually try to move to the foreground creating a commotion. They threaten to sabotage the action of the play, finally ending up doing so by the end of it. The soundscape of the performance too resonates such a disruptive element. While for the better part of the performance we hear the characters delivering the poetic lines in the play and even singing the songs, towards the end of the play, the loud cacophony of a helicopter hovering above, supposed to distribute relief to the famine-affected subjects, drowns the voices of the actors.

In Tagore's text we learn about the famine-affected subjects but we never see them present upon the stage. Mukhopadhyay, on the other hand, by his directorial insertion of the strategic presence of the unsightly, emaciated bodies and the cacophony of the helicopter tries to destabilize the aesthetics of the play and its conventional modes of staging, in addition to disrupting the action on stage. He ultimately strives to present through all his innovations a

critique of both cultural and statist politics. Both art, in this case theatre, or the state, disowns and tries to render invisible these marginal, exploited and deformed subjects or the vexatious reality they represent. Seen in a more specific context, the said presence of famine-affected victims is a deliberate subversion too of a Tagorean representative regime of art which often attempts to avoid direct representations of the more disagreeable aspects the society and human life, designating them as un-aesthetic. In spite of the fact that Tagore was self-critical of this limitation in his final days², such an aesthetics has been unfailingly associated with Tagore and has got reflected in the stagings of his plays, especially at Santiniketan. In his staging of *Phalguni*, Suman critiques such an aesthetic regime through the presence of the famine-affected subjects on stage and the sound of the helicopter. Thus we see how by juxtaposing Tagore's text against the *mis-en-scene* set by him, by making them interact with other in his production, Suman attempts to create his own interpretation of a play. In his other two productions of Tagore's plays as well of *Raktakarabi* and *Bisarjan*, Suman adopts a similar strategy.³

I feel it is important here to contextualize Mukhopadhyay's choice of the text as well as his political interpretation of it. The prelude to Tagore's play was not originally in the text. It was a later interpolation which was introduced when the play when was being performed in Calcutta as a charity performance intending to generate funds for famine-affected subjects of Natore province in Bengal. Interestingly, in the prelude, although there is a strong argument made by Tagore soliciting the concerns of the famine victims, which seen in the context of its time must be admitted as a politically bold strategy; visibly, the famine victims still remain as a sort of footnote - we hear their voices coming from the background but never get to see them on the stage. Moreover, as the member of the Tagore family and the ex-principal of Pathabhabavana, one of the two schools administered by Visva-Bharati, Supriya Tagore has clarified for me in an interview that the prelude was conventionally never included in the performances of *Phalguni* at Santiniketan. Thus, Mukhopadhyay's very decision to include the prelude is political because it breaks the boundaries of what can be staged. This also

² A poem titled "Rup-Birup" (Facing away from Beauty) written 1940 for instance expresses such sentiments.

³ In *Raktakarabi*, Mukhopadhyay places a fencing of barbed wire in front of the stage, between the actors and the audience, to invoke the idea of the ghetto, as well as to refer to the alienation of modern life. In *Bisarjan* too, he attempts to bring the *mise-en-scene* into play through a tilted platform on which the action takes place in the production, indicating a state and a society in turmoil and imbalance. There are other details too in *Bisarjan* in the form of projections and properties to indicate that he is drawing a parallel between the world of the play and the contemporary reality of Bengal afflicted by political violence.

implies that even in performances which apparently keep Tagore's text intact the very choice of the text or the way it is edited can mean a re-writing or re-performing of the original text and thus present to us a new interpretation of the play.

Bhanu Bharti's Tamasha Na Hua

The director Bhanu Bharti specializing in modern Hindi theatre, in his *Tamasha Na Hua* done in 2012, in the context of the anniversary celebrations of Tagore, adapts and re-writes Tagore's play *Muktadhara*. In the production he addresses the very crucial question of whether Tagore's plays remain relevant to the crisis of our times and whether it is worthwhile to attempt contemporary stagings of his plays. To deconstruct Tagore's text and read the contemporary into it, Bharti adopted the strategy of devising a play-within-a-play: In his production, Bhanu Bharti shows us a theatre group rehearsing Tagore's play *Muktadhara*. A discussion ensues among the actors in the course of the rehearsal on the relevance of the play as they appear to be unconvinced of the play's worth or significance. The discussion henceforth replaces the promised staging of the play to take centre stage. It leads to a serious debate about the freedom of men in the present political, technological and cultural context. The debate in the end remains inconclusive and the play remains unperformed. It would appear that *Tamasha Na Hua* represents neither a conventional adaptation of Tagore's play,



Figure 34 Scene from the beginning of Bhanu Bharti's *Tamasha Na Hua*, 2012

nor an innovative reading of it: it is nothing short of a 'rewrite' of *Muktodhara*, where the contemporaneity within the original text is replaced by a bold questioning of the contemporary relevance of the play in India today.

Incidentally, this is not the only or even the first occasion where Bharti has written, adapted and reworked a piece of dramatic writing. But, in *Tamasha Na Hua*, his intervention is much more deliberately political than previous such attempts. Bharti wanted to break the hegemony of the linear plot-centric narrative structure of conventional Hindi theatre to devise a new form of theatre which is argumentative in nature. As he explains in an interview titled "Staging Tagore's Thoughts" published in *The Hindu*:

The traditional concept of a well-made play has lost its relevance. Tradition demands that a play should have a moral and the action should lead to a resolution or conclusion of the conflict. In the present time I find resolution impossible. It seems to me any resolution will take us to some kind of simplistic view of a complex situation. (Bharti, *The Hindu*, 16 June 2011)

The action of Tagore's play *Muktodhara* takes place in fictional Uttarkut, ruled by an autocratic king. The waterfall flows from a highland in Uttarkut downstream to Shiv Terai - a valley which relies on the water for sustenance. The king decides to subjugate the people of Shiv Terai by damming the waterfall to deny them water. The royal engineer, Vibhuti, has worked relentlessly for twenty-five years on a monstrous engineering contraption that looms high over a shrine of Lord Shiva to dam the waterfall at its heights. The heir to the throne, the tyrannical king's adopted son, who was found abandoned by the waterfall, frees the cascade from the confines of the dam by demolishing the machine. The torrent from the waterfall sweeps everything in its stride, including the prince, who becomes a martyr for the cause of freedom.

Tamasha Na Hua begins in a self-critical mode by critiquing the very context and process of the creation of production itself which then becomes the key theme throughout the performance. The conversation between the rehearsing group of actors starts by underlying the superficiality of staging Tagore's *Muktodhara* only because there are funds available for doing so. What follows are a number of crucial questions relating to the staging of Tagore's plays, and specifically *Muktodhara*, being put forth and fiercely debated upon. Whether the complicated symbolism of the play plays makes it un-relatable, whether the dominant theme of the play focusing on the critique of the machine, bears any significance to a technology-dependent generation like ours, so on and so forth. It is aptly argued that Tagore's very

visible aesthetic rejection of the machine must not be interpreted literally, but rather must be read as a metaphorical critique of the larger mechanised, utilitarian modes of thinking and acting which runs the risk of discrediting human freedom and humanitarian values.

The argument, however, does not remain confined to *Muktodhara* or Tagore's plays but extends to include Tagore's views on science and technology, modernity and the nation-state. Tagore's universalist views are pitted against Gandhi's more nationalist ones, which then places the argument in the context of India's freedom struggle and post-independence governmental policies leading to the present times. In a brilliant political manoeuvre, Bharti relates the play to more recent attempts by nation-states to regulate and restrict human resources within their territory, using it as a tool of political negotiation with other nation states, causing much pain and suffering to people. In India's case, we hear about the Farakka Barrage and its effect on Bangladesh's agriculture and fisheries and also how the Baglihar dam on the Chenab in Jammu and Kashmir has caused water scarcity in Pakistan. Through these instances, one perhaps gets to understand Tagore's objectives in *Muktodhara* anew and realise the aptness of the title, which places emphasis on the fact that human resources should be available for the greater good of humanity and not to feed into petty territorial interests.



Figure 35 Arguments in progression in Bhanu Bharti's *Tamasha Na Hua*, 2012

This reveals to us the relevance of Tagore's insistence on a universal humanist principle in our times, and consequently also shows how his plays have the potentiality to situate themselves within contemporary political discourse. The production ends by posing

the question: what does freedom mean today to the citizens of a globalised world and what we must do to claim and maintain that freedom.

Thus, it is through a self-reflective, argumentative form woven through the dramaturgical strategy of a play-within-a-play, which is primarily vocal and dialogic in its impact that Bharti in his production attempts to bring his reading of the contemporary in India in dialogue with Tagore's text. To ensure that the argumentative or the conversational mode does not seem monotonous, verbose or pedantic, Bharti adopts a number of strategies. First, he plays with the audience's expectations by beginning with a very conventionally staged first sequence of *Muktodhara* following which the disruption in the action happens in form of an argument. Secondly, Bharti intelligently undercuts the seriousness and politically charged nature of the conversation by the use of humour, which is often even physical, slapstick in nature. However, in spite of these innovations, one feels that once the play enters the argumentative or conversational mode, Bharti no longer engages enough with the space or the bodies present on stage. This might result in the particularly sensitive spectator finding the conversational mode slightly monotonous. One feels, the dominant mode of the conversation needed to be subverted more strategically through other theatrical interventions.

As an interesting postscript, we learn that following one of its shows at Anrang Hall organised by Aaj Theatre Company under the Rangmandal series of Bharat Bhavan at Bhopal in August 2012, the performance was allegedly criticized as being "anti-national." We learn from a report titled "Cultural Policing Over Tamasha Na Hua" published in an online news portal that "the BJP cultural unit of Bhopal and the party muscle men" raised a hue and cry regarding the alleged "anti-national" (*Boloji.com*, 20 August, 2012) character of the performance. The report, however, does not specify the very nature of its anti-national charges, and the director has also not made himself available to me for comment through an interview. But the very fact that the performance managed to create such furore bears testimony to the political efficacy of Bharti's play. Significantly, this also brings out the possibilities latent in Tagore's plays to be performed under the contingent political crisis in the Indian context, and also globally where the territorial boundaries of the nation are being marked with renewed vigour. Loyalty to the nation is being seen as the ultimate criterion for judgement of character and patriotism, and violence of both a legally sanctioned and unsanctioned nature is being unleashed under the pretext of honouring the nation. As Partha Chatterjee rightly points out in his essay *Tagore's Non-Nation* that Tagore's "aesthetically grounded critique of the nation certainly resonates with many of the recent invocations of

universal humanity” (Chatterjee, 2011: 126). Tagore’s plays, like *Muktadhara* (1922), *Achalayatan*, *Tasher Desh*, *Rather Rashi* and others, I believe, contain such concerns, awaiting to be brought forth through perceptive theatrical interpretations.

What becomes clear thus from both the instances, Suman’s *Falguni: Suchana* and Bharti’s *Tamasha Na Hua* is that Tagore’s plays still have the potentiality to be able to respond to our times and in various political registers. Contrary to popular belief, Tagore’s plays do have the capacity to lend themselves to more political modes of thinking or staging. They only need creative and out-of-the-box thinking on behalf of directors in order to displace them from their falsely elevated high cultural seats, or from the apparently distant world of *pouranikota*, in order to enable their contemporaneity to be released through new interpretations.

It needs to be stated here that apart from the phenomenon of strait jacketing Tagore’s plays as “apolitical”, there has also been considerable social and institutional resistance towards any attempt at creative adaption of Tagore’s plays or for that matter any alteration or reworking of his texts in general. Very similar to the ways in which Shakespeare’s plays have been sites of asserting authority in the West as W.B. Worthen brilliantly points out in his work *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (1997), Tagore’s plays in the Indian context have been pretexts for “discipline and punish” mechanisms. Changing, rewriting or adapting them have been often perceived as acts of sacrilege. Bertolt Brecht, in one of his characteristically insightful pieces in *Messingkauf Dialogues*, written between 1939 and 1942, and planned as a series of interactions between the figures of the Actor, the Dramaturg the Philosopher and the Stage Hand, explains why Shakespeares’s plays need to be experimented with:

The Actor: From your description it sounds like Shakespeare was adding a new scene pretty much every day.

The Dramaturg: Exactly. I think they were experimenting. They were experimenting, just like Galileo in Florence at that time and Bacon in London. And that is why it’s right to produce the plays experimentally.

The Actor: That will be seen as sacrilege.

The Dramaturg: The plays owe their existence to sacrilege.

The Actor: But as soon as you alter them in a way, you lay yourself open to change of treating them as less than perfect.

The Dramaturg: That's just a mistaken idea of perfection, nothing more. (Brecht, 2015: 90)

The debate on whether Tagore's plays should be experimented with can be clinched through the same logic that Brecht applies in the case of Shakespeare. Much like Shakespeare's plays, Tagore's texts too owe their "existence to sacrilege" if we keep in mind the innumerable number of versions that almost each of them went through in Tagore's own hands.

The Politics of Adaptation

While there is no denying the fact that Tagore's plays need to be experimented with in performance, what also needs to be discussed here is an ontological question which could certainly be posed to any production which tries to do so. Did the director impose his interpretation too much over Tagore's own intentions in the production? Should it no longer be considered as a theatrical interpretation of Tagore's play but rather as an "adaptation"? In the light of such questions, one might wonder what are the constituents generally identified to form the so-called 'essence' of a Tagore text, the alteration of which makes the production seem 'un-Tagorean'. To be more specific, repeating a similar question that has been posed by Margaret Jane Kidnie in the context of performing *Hamlet* - "Where is *Hamlet*?" – one can ask, for instance – "Where is *Raktakarabi*"? Based on what criteria can one decide whether a particular production is *Raktakarabi*? Should the performance retain the original name of the play or should the director think of re-naming his production, thereby calling attention to the fact that it is an adaptation?

In many instances, a prime criterion based upon which such debates are clinched and judgements proclaimed is the printed text of the play. A relevant case study here could be the work of the group Blind Opera, now known as Anya Desh. This group comprising of blind actors has worked extensively and brilliantly with Tagore's plays since the early 1990s, reading the themes of light and darkness and ways of seeing, through a close and intimate questioning of Tagore's plays. Their repertoire, however, reveals a self-imposed censorship based on their treatment of the text. As Subhashish Ganguly, the director of the earlier group Blind Opera explains, the actors retain the title of the play when they keep the play largely unchanged, as in the case of *Raja*; however, they change the title when the group decides to

write a new script inspired by the original play, as in the case of their adaptation of Tagore's play *Chandalika*, titled *Andha Prakriti Chandalika*.

However, even in a production where the text is claimed to be unaltered, there are inevitably subtle forms of alteration, repetition and re-arrangement of the text, as we have already seen with Mitra's *Raktakarabi*. Ganguly fails to clarify the exact quantity or the nature of the change which calls for a production being considered as adaptation, thereby requiring the play to be re-named. Therefore, when in an interview with me, he criticises the Bengali director Kaushik Sen for altering the text of Tagore's *Dakghar* for his production of the play by introducing new characters and yet deciding to call his production *Dakghar*, we cannot agree with him. Is it not possible that Blind Opera's *Raja* might also seem not *Raja* enough to certain sections of the audience, or conversely, that Sen's *Dakghar* might seem more *Dakghar* to others? More importantly, is it only the text which must be the sole deciding factor in determining multiple claims of interpretation, adaptation and authenticity?

As Margaret Jane Kidnie rightly argues in her earlier mentioned essay, such judgements as Ganguly's are ultimately guided by an "ideology of the text" which is often found to haunt theatre practice:

At what point does a performance take so many liberties with the text that it gets down-graded to the status of adaptation? Isn't every performance... an adaptation? Such questions, sometimes framed so as to seem to free performance from the tyranny of text, in practice perpetuate an anti-theatrical bias. They implicitly affirm that there is always something – something – anterior to performance, against which performance can be measured on a sliding scale of (il)legitimate interpretation. So marginalized, performance is relegated to a second-order status, at least in academic discourse, by acculturated reading strategies founded on an idea of text as literary object. (Kidnie, 2005: 104)

Apart from the fact that views like Ganguly's overlook that answers to the above ontological question are always likely to remain relative, such views are ultimately informed, as Kidnie points out, by hegemonic understandings of the text. It could be argued that Ganguly's view does not take into consideration the fact that *Raktakarabi* is not only a play text, but a cultural construct which is permeated by diverse and complex understandings of aesthetics, politics, and dramaturgy. Similarly, it also fails to understand that Tagore does not reside in the text as a fixed entity but is rather re-discovered and re-claimed through ever-changing readings, performances and discourses.

Ultimately, to extend the argument a little further, questions of authenticity and authorship in theatre try to locate and limit texts, authors, events and ideas to the archival “thing”. That “archival thing” might be a text or an image or even a specific element of dramaturgy – for example, a certain way of designing the costumes. It is against such a literal notion of the archive that performances are often placed and measured. Such perceptions, however, fail to realize that the archive cannot exist in stasis, on its own, but manifests itself, makes itself decipherable only through various modes of performance - performance which might represent the archive but can never claim to be the archive. More importantly, performance, if it represents the archive, also at the same time reorients or even re-produces the archive. Thus, there are only never-ending re-appearances and re-configurations, which represent, re-orient, re-produce the archive, but never exactly, never entirely; always concealing within itself silences, absences, and shortcomings to be rendered visible by future performances. It is thus that we look forward to new performances to present us with new answers to questions like, “Where is Tagore? Or where is *Raktakarabi*?” While some of the performances are bound to appear un-Tagorean, it is a risk well worth taking as Martin Kämpchen asserts in a short essay titled “After Tagore 150, Where to go from here?” (2013):

Why not experiment more and more with the conventions of performing his (Tagore’s) plays and dance dramas... The results may, in many cases, become unconvincing; they may end up a failure and not be “Rabindranath” anymore. But in some successful productions, the mind and art of the Indian poet will reveal with a sparkle and impact that is capable of shaking and moving us more deeply than perhaps the original play did. (Kämpchen, *Happenings Programme Book*, 2013, from private collection of Indrani Roy Mishra)

While producing Tagore’s plays will undeniably continue to be a challenging task, as we have already discussed in the course of this dissertation, directors who are creative enough and care to look beyond the cult of Tagore are also likely to gain enormous insights from their artistic labour.

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