

The Evolution of Theatre of Bengal From Gupta Dynasty's Conquest to Pre-Liberation War of Bangladesh of 1971

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the origins, changes, and overall development of theatre in Bengal prior to the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. It looks at the influences of Sanskrit and European drama on the beginnings of theatre in this region. In addition, the article examines the decline of theatre in West Bengal after the 1947 partition and explores the reasons behind it along with an analysis of its eventual convalescence. Besides that, the paper evaluates the efforts of women working in the theatre industry, fighting against oppression and eventually finding their identity amongst the important roles in the theatre world today. The study chronicles the works of all the visionaries who have worked against the grain to establish the theatre in a once conservative region. The findings of the study is based on the interviews of various theatre professionals who have seen and grown through the turmoil of the industry over the years

Keywords

Theatre, Sanskrit, European, West Bengal, East Bengal, Theatre Industry, Visionaries, Theatre Professionals

Introduction

Theatre, at its core, is simply the act of acting out something; it does not require a special building and stage, for it can take place on a threshing floor, in a street corner, or on anything one can place their feet on. The word 'theatre' also indicates the predominant collaborative, complex system of play production, i.e., acting out an imagined or past event in a building specially built for the purpose of theatrical presentation or on a stage equipped with different sets and sceneries. So, the meaning of the word 'theatre' can be anything between the two definitions mentioned above, and hence, in the wider sense, theatre had existed even before the writing of the play.

In the same way, theatre has existed in this region for as long as civilization has existed. Therefore, it seems unsurprising that, over the centuries, the Bengal Theatre has slowly evolved and progressed into a rich and magnificent medium of self-expression for the people. The aim of this research paper is to analyse the overall development of theatre in East Bengal and West Bengal respectively and show how it has developed into one of the most beloved art-forms which has shed light on matters previously remained undiscovered.

Origins of Theatre in Greater Bengal

While sketching the modern history of theatre in Bangladesh, it is observed that the tradition has existed for centuries and has slowly evolved to its contemporary state. The early practices of theatre took different forms in narrating the story, for instance in the narrative form, the addition of song and dance and the use of supra-personae, thus creating a ceremonial ambience. But the true origin of theatre in Bengal can be said to have begun in the 4th century AD in the form of Sanskrit drama. The Gupta

dynasty's conquest of Bengal led to the integration of Northern Indian Aryan culture into ancient Bengali culture, introducing the tradition of theatre in Bengal. The Sanskrit theatre practice was a 'reflection of Brahmanical thought'. Its targeted audience were the members of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia i.e the sahrdaya (intellectually advanced). A popular Sanskrit drama was, Shudraka's Mricchakatika (The Little Clay Cart) which dramatizes a revolt of a pretender (Mricchakatika) who usurps the throne and becomes the king and eventually wins the day. Another play, Vishakhadatta's Mudrarakshasa (The Minister's Seal), was a historical play in ancient India. Here Chanakya conspires to overthrow a king and to support an allied king of his choice. His character modelled on the prominent minister Chandragupta Maurya (322-298 B.C.) who wrote a political treatise "Arthashastra" for the reigning Emperor of his time. Akbar (A.D 1556-1605) and Shah Jahan (A.D 1627-1657) tried to encourage Sanskrit literature and pursued translations of works such as Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita in the Mughal era (1526-1761). However, Sanskrit drama tended to disappear by the time of the muslim invasion in the tenth century due to attitudes of muslims towards art and drama and Persian being the enforced court language. Only the folk drama like jatra survived the Mughal conquest. Early narratives of early jatra improvised around legendary stories of Krishna and myths of Gods staged in open courtyards. Jatra was to play an important role later as a form of resistance against the oppressive West. However, the Bengali community, culture, art, etc., have always been syncretic, fusing concepts that appear incompatible, while maintaining recognizable local characteristics in their aesthetic manifestations. Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and many other different religions and cultures have contributed to the distinct and diverse aesthetic heritage of this region.

In 1757, the British conquered Bengal and brought with them Shakespeare plays which were signified discursive

power representations in a historical context. However, to be more specific this portrayed the colonial power functions via the legitimization of Shakespeare as the authoritative English text. Thus began the beginnings of 200 years of colonial rule. The British introduced theatre and entertainment to the elite Indians who looked for a new sense of identity as they mimicked the British in language and style. The British regime ironically, ended through protest instigated through drama productions. Utpal Dutt used postcolonial and anti-imperialist reading of armed resistance and rebellion in the history of colonial India as themes for his Jatra palas. He used the popular medium of the jatra for the propagation of certain political ideologies which finally led to the 1947 independence of India.

Theatre during the Colonial Period

A substantial turn in South-Asian theatre took place during the British colonial period. The British introduced what is called today the 'proscenium theatre', but it had mostly been centered in Kolkata. Nevertheless, like a ripple effect, the traditional format of theatre was being practiced in the remotest areas of today's Bangladesh. English colonizers from 1757 onwards took political and economic measures which eventually led to the Bengali renaissance in the early 19th century; and this affected all aspects of intellectual pursuits in what is now Bangladesh. The European theatre was diverse and dynamic because of the urban intelligentsia elite who responded to and supported the needs of the urban spectators. The inauguration of the European theatre in Bengal took place in 1856 with a performance of *Svarna Sharnkhal* (Golden Sharnkhal) by Durgadas Kar at Barisal in Bangladesh.

Stage theatre as 'proscenium' stage presentation began on November 27, 1795, with the staging of a Bengali translation of an English play, *The Disguise*, by a Russian called Herasam Stepanovitch Lebedeff at the Doomtollah theatre, built by Lebedeff himself in Kolkata. Another play was also translated but not staged in 1795 titled *Love is the Best Doctor*. The 'proscenium' stage was rekindled in the palaces and garden houses of the aristocrats living in Kolkata. First amongst these was the theatre built by Prasanna Tagore in his garden house in 1831, known as the Hindu Theatre. Many of the plays were intermittently performed at the initiative of some of the aristocrats based in Kolkata. Some names connected with such activities were Navin Chandra Basu, Nagebdranath Tagore, Ramjoy Basak, Kaliprasanna Singha, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. The Hindu National Theatre in Bengal began with the staging of the play *Nil Darpan* (Blue Mirror) in Dhaka, written by Dinabandhu Mitra. This was the first production to sell tickets for admission, with prices Tk 4, Tk 2, and Tk 1. Ardhendu Shekhar Mustofi, a celebrated actor, promoted the event, helping it gain the publicity it needed among the very conservative society. In 1870, a theatre group performed *Ekei Ki Bole Shobbhota* (This Is Called Civilization) by Michael Madhusudan Datta; and it was well-received by the Bengalis.

In March 1872, Ramabhishek (The Welcome of Ram) was staged at Purbobango Rangabhumi, the first theatre of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). However, Dhaka only represented what was a fraction of the mainstream theatre practice of Kolkata. Tantibazar Theatre was established in 1873; and, so troupes from Bengal National Theatre, Hindu National Theatre, and Classic Theatre of Kolkata frequently performed in Dhaka. These frequent trips by the Kolkata troupes generated a lot of interest amongst the elite of Dhaka. This inspired the founder of the local Jubilee High School, Kishorilal Roy Chowdhury to build a theatre by the name of Diamond Jubilee Theatre, commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the coronation of Queen Victoria. The ownership of the theatre was later transferred to another enthusiast of stage theatre in Dhaka, Mirza Abdul Quader, popularly known as Quader Sardar. Diamond Jubilee Theatre was later re-christened as Lion Theatre at Islampur and has since been converted into a cinema house. A few years after the foundation of the Diamond Jubilee Theatre, Rakhal Basak founded Crown Theatre in the vicinity of the Ahsan Manzil, the palace that housed the Nawabs of Dhaka. This encouraged the young people of Dhaka to form various drama clubs for irregular and amateur performances on different festive occasions; and, most of them gained huge popularity. Prominent amongst these were the Sabji Mahal Dramatic Club, Wari Dramatic Club, Gandaria Dramatic Club, and Farashganj Dramatic Club. Other theatres established in Dhaka towards the end of the nineteenth century included a theatre named Jagaddhatri Natyamancha. It was built in Munshiganj; and, it exists even to this day. Quite a few theatres were also established outside Dhaka during the first two decades of the twentieth century. These included the Edward Theatre, Khulna Theatre, and Coronation Dramatic Club. Also, in this period, the zamindars of Santosh, Elenga, Shibpur, Aloa, and Karatiatin Tangail established a number of theatres.

Theatrical activities in Dhaka (then Dacca) closely followed the trend of Kolkata and was exclusive to the affluent landlords, merchants, barristers, well-known doctors or businessmen, and a few distinguished families. This was until the establishment of the medium as a fully professional and commercially feasible form of art. However, Dhaka lagged far behind Kolkata. This is obvious because, despite the enthusiasm that it was received with, affluent people who came forward to exploit this medium as a commodity for trade had soon formed a nucleus in the industrialized part of Bengal. Also, Dhaka was not as rich or as culturally superior compared to Kolkata, and the theatre practices were quite scattered and infrequent here. Furthermore, when film, first in silent forms and then as motion pictures, invaded Dhaka, stage theatre could not withstand the competition offered by this modern and inexpensive medium of entertainment and began to lose its popularity among the people. Mainly with the music and dances, the whole priority of the audience was diverted from theatre to film as films were more exuberant.

Theatre in the Mid-40s

By the mid-40s, theatre in Kolkata had completely transcended the image of an art-medium and like film,

emerged as a capital generating merchandise. At this point, a cultural front by the name of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed in 1943. This association, an offshoot of the Anti-Fascist Artist' and Writers' Guild was successful in bringing within its fold almost all the talented young stage workers of India. Theatre workers, especially from the the younger generation, finally found a platform where they would be able to express their talents in art. In Kolkata, members of this association later founded various drama groups and started intermittent performances of plays. These groups were fighting a protracted battle against commodity theatre in Kolkata; and, they were slowly and steadily winning the hearts of the audiences.

Accordingly, in Dhaka, stage theatre was already on the wane by the mid-40s. Outside Dhaka, in district headquarters like Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogra, Kushtia, and Mymensingh, traditionally known for theatrical activities, theatre workers were desperately endeavoring to keep the medium alive. But despite their sincerity, theatre was reduced to an art-form of academic interest or irregular fanfare by then. The paucity of an audience, funds, and theatre workers was the main reason for its decline then. It was not possible to run stage theatre as commercially viable; and, there was not enough patronage to run it as a non-commercial medium of art. With the partition of Bengal in 1947, this staggering medium had almost come to a halt. This happened mainly because, after the partition, the people of Dhaka were more concerned about earning a proper living and settling down rather than indulging in entertainment. Until 1947, the theatre of the urban elite in Bengal was centered in Kolkata, the economic and political seat of power in 19th century India. So, with the creation of Pakistan, Dhaka gained importance as the urban cultural center of Eastern Bengal. However, most of the theatre workers of Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh had migrated to Kolkata with the partition of 1947. This included names like Nurul Momen, Sayeed Ahmed, Anis Chowdhury, and Munier Chowdhury who were inspired by the theatre activities of Kolkata and brought back and practiced after 1971 in newly formed Bangladesh.

Theatre after the Partition of 1947

Theatre was dominated by middle-class Bengali Hindus. Their exodus to India after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 created fresh avenues for the urban Muslims who had been, till then, placed in the political, economic, and social backwaters. This caused the theatre of the new country to slowly but decisively move towards the polarization of two opposition's camp, the religion-based nationalists and the language-based nationalists. And these religion-based trends were dominant in the urban areas outside Dhaka as people during that period sought to glorify Islamic History through historical plays on Muslim rules of the Arab countries, India, and Bengal, and the independence struggle of Pakistan. Important playwrights of this era were Akbaruddin, Ibrahim Khan, and Ibrahim Khalil.

The following historical activities were predominant in Dhaka city and concerned with playwrights associated with Dhaka University-based play productions which epitomized the growing spirit of nationalism and represented the voice

of the people using the theatre as a platform for social changes. Dhaka University's inception on July 1, 1921, began with three residences, Jagannath Hall, Dhaka Hall, and Muslim Hall. The students led the rest of the country with their progressive outlook; and, almost all the plays produced at the University were written or adapted from the novels of Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Nurul Momen, Askar Ibne Shaikh, and Munier Chowdhury and had social contents mostly performed by amateur groups. Other prominent figures amongst them were Showkat Osman and Jasimuddin. After the partition of India in 1947, the Mahbub Ali Institute in Dhaka, a permanent theatrical hall established in 1950 in Old Dhaka, began work in 1951 by staging Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Vijaya (Victory). The Central Student Union of Dhaka University staged Bijan Bhattacharyay's play Jabanbandi (Testimony) and in 1952, staged Sikander Abu Zafar's historical play Sirajuddaula (Sirajuddaula). The Doctor's Club of Dhaka Medical College, Manmayi Girls School and the College's student union performed Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's Dwipantar (1945) (Another Island). Bidhayak Bhattacharya's Matir Ghar (1939) (The Clay House) was also staged by Agradoot Natyasangha.

In the pre-1947 era, Bengali Hindus played a dominant role in theatre and cultural practices in East Bengal. After Pakistan was established in 1947, communal riots broke out and many Hindus left Bangladesh and settled in West Bengal. As a result, the cultural arena of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was left desolate. After 1947, there was political turmoil when the artists and the intellectuals of East Pakistan became strident on various issues including their mother language and nationalism, all of which were instigated by state oppression. This initiated a new torch of protest. In 1968, the agitated people of East Pakistan united and campaigned against severe political suspension to join the "six points of Bengal nationalist movement" under the leadership of Awami League. This resulted in the mass uprising of 1968 and the election of 1970 which eventually led to the liberation war in 1971. So, one could assume that culture was one of the main reasons that ignited the revolutionary act.

The language movement of 1952 worked as a catalyst for further intensifying the political polarization of the language-based and the religious-based camps. The upheaval that started in 1952 continued to agitate East Pakistan and drama became the medium of protest, either subtly or boldly, against West Pakistan's suppressive rule. It was observed that at the theatre scene, there occurred a rise in social awareness and political commitment in the language-based nationalist camp. 21st February 1953 marked the year when Munier Chowdhury wrote his debut play Kabar (The Grave) as a political prisoner in Dhaka central jail where it was performed by other political prisoners. Although the play reveals a strong influence of Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead, it has remained one of the most important theatre pieces for its simplicity and social relevance. The play was performed at night by the prison inmates who improvised their set on a shoestring budget and were compelled to use hurricanes, lanterns, lamps, and match sticks as their lighting source. The essential appeal of

the play lies in its central political issue, the inalienable right of a people to its cultural heritage, and theatre acts as the stimulus created through the cries of independence in liberated Bangladesh after 1971. Innumerable theatre groups stepped forward with theatre performances in unforgettable spontaneity. Among these worth mentioning are Theatre, Nagarik Natya Sampraday, Natya Chakra, Aranyak Natyadal, Dhaka Theatre. In Chittagong, groups like Theatre and Arindam also came into existence. Others included Dhaka Padatik, Bangladesh Udichi Shilpigoshthi, Bibartan Sanskritik Kendra, Lokanatyada, Dhaka Little Theatre, and Sarak Sahitya Sanskritik Sangathan.

The central government, based in the then West Pakistan, was totally ignorant of the cultural tradition of East Bengal; and, they showed complete apathy to all that was inherited from the pre-partition days. This became evident by the sudden lull that pervaded the cultural scene immediately after the partition and also the retrograde attitude initiated by the authority. They wanted to sabotage the Bengali culture and declare Urdu as the state language of Pakistan in 1948 as evident by the banning of Rabindra Sangeet and the Pahela Bayshakhi festival in Dhaka.

Representation of Women in Theatre

It is ironic that in Dhaka, amidst the stage theatre of varying dimensions, philosophy, and character, and where theatre has been a near-regular medium since the beginning of the 20th century, plays with mixed cast could not be staged until three years after the partition of 1947. Shiren Chowdhury was the first female cast to perform in a female role since 1947. The play was Udaynala, (Rising Creek) brought on stage in 1950. Some other artists to break the barrier of this sudden imposition of conservatism were Bilquis Bari, Ayesha Akhter, Hosne Ara Biju, Sabitri Chattopadhyay, Sitara Sattar, Marium Khandakar, Halima Haque, Ferdousi Majumdar, Suriya Begum, Toly Roy, Purnima Sengupta, and several other courageous females. In 1958, the government imposed a law that prevented women from acting in theatre as a profession. This caused a problem for Jasimuddin's play Beder Meye (The Snake Charmer's Daughter), staged by Minerva Theatre. However, women had been active in theatre from the mid-eighteenth century: baiji (professional dancers and singers) and professional sex workers were encouraged to act in the theatres of Kolkata. Kamini Sundari Debi was the pioneering Bengali playwright who wrote two plays, Urbashi (1866) (Beautiful Woman) and Usha (1871) (Dawn). Later, women of Thakur Bari (Tagore's family) started acting and producing home performances which initiated a trend for other middle class as well as elite family girls to act in the theatres. But in a Muslim fundamentalist country like the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), it was a taboo for women to participate in folk-theatre or cinema. Despite the impediments for women's active role in theatre in the 1970s, women still pursued theatre as a passion and today have achieved to change attitudes of the past and have integrated themselves successfully in the world of theatre performance. Notable female playwrights who influenced Bengali theatre between 1947 to 1971 include Layla Samad, Kundaprabha Sen, Nilima Ibrahim, Shahida Khatun, Rajia Khan, Maliha

Haque, Zobeda Khanam, and Daulatunnesa Khatun, Nilufar Matin (who directed Unmachan [Unveil] in 1972), and Saieda Morsheda Khanam.

The Decline and the Recovery of Theatre in East Bengal after the Partition

From 1947 to 1971, stage theatre in Dhaka and elsewhere in East Bengal could never match the exuberance of the early 20th century. Apart from total apathy and negative attitude of the establishment towards an unhindered growth of cultural activities, various other factors worked against the natural unfurling of stage theatre in East Bengal. To start with, a proper stage for the purpose was required. Hence, Lion Theatre, situated in Old Dhaka, was born. It emerged as an established cinema house drawing crowds and generating revenue. However, this auditorium, like many auditoria built after the partition, was designed to present so-called cultural functions, tailor-made to propagate the cause of the established order. At the same time, in the neighboring city of Kolkata, the groups involved in stage theatre carried the medium to a considerable height as the authorities interfered less with the productions and the people were more welcoming towards cultural appropriation.

Since stage theatre began shifting out of East Bengal to Kolkata just before the partition, for reasons mentioned earlier, there occurred a tremendous dearth of dedicated stage workers with the partition of 1947. This also brought in its wake a vacuum at the receiving end, i.e., the audience who would pay for a theatre ticket. For example, in the late fifties, Dhaka University endeavored hard to stage plays at regular intervals; and, in their performances, they used to place a box at the main entrance to the auditorium with an appeal to the audience to donate whatever they could.

There was also a sociological reason behind this decline. In the pre-partition days, by and large, the aristocracy that encouraged, fostered, financed and controlled stage theatre belonged to the Hindu community. The Muslim aristocracy, with some exceptions, looked down upon the performing arts as heathenish and hence their patronage in the field was lacking. With the partition, the Hindu aristocracy was absent and the financial backing of the aristocracy was severely reduced. The support of stage theatre was left in the hands of the middle-class people who were not able to recuperate the lack of finance.

However, between 1917 and 1971, occasional attempts were made to save the theater industry. Some of these attempts were to introduce stage theatre as an entertainment medium and make it commercially viable while others were to establish the medium as an art form. Minerva Theatre, founded in the late fifties, played a pivotal role in reinforcing the activities of theatre. They gathered popular artists from the film industry and organized a professional group. Popular plays written in both East and West Bengal were chosen; and, performances were held at Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh. However, Minerva Theatre presented itself on stage on two or three consecutive evenings and that was all. The group broke off, as reported by some workers associated with it, because of a feud over finance. Also, with the expansion of the film industry, the actors became more occupied with Dhallywood.

Almost about the same time as when Minerva was active as a commercial group, some young and ambitious theatre lovers, mostly belonging to Dhaka University, organized Drama Circle. The formation of Drama Circle in 1956 was a very significant event as it was the first theatre group of Bangladesh; and, judging by its significant effect on theatre culture, this event can be described as a milestone. Drama Circle contributed to the application of modern Western techniques to local theatre. Some famous dramatists of that time were Syed Waliullah, Saeed Ahmed, Alauddin Al Azad, Azimuddin Ahmed, Anis Chowdhury, Bazlur Rashid, Sikandar Abu Zafar, Razia Khan, and Laila Samad. In 1956, the group Bahurupi of Kolkata performed Rakta Karobi (Red Oleander) and Cheratar. (Broken strings) in Dhaka. Drama Circle performed Anis Chowdhury's Manchitra (The Map) in Kolkata. For the first time in this part of the world, an organized effort was launched to introduce stage plays by prominent personalities as Tagore's Red Oleander, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (translated by Syed Ali Ahsan) and Shaw's Arms and the Man (translated by Bazlul Karim) with impeccable devotion to professionalism. Between 1956 and 1971, they brought on stage twelve plays, performing each play three to four evenings on an average. In the core of this dedicated group of actors was a drive to constantly experiment with lights, sets, costumes, and make-up, all on their own as amateurs but with a commendable professional attitude. Unfortunately, Drama Circle, working against the odds, could not maintain the vigor with which it was launched for long to see stage theatre established as a regular medium. After a long gap of nearly five years, they showed some signs of activities again in 1973.

In 1961, the Tagore Centenary was observed in Dhaka and Chittagong inspite of the martial law and the government's restrictions. Tagore's Raja o Rani (King and Queen), Mukta dhara (Liberal), Shesh Raksha (Final Defense), Rakto Karobi (Red Oleander), Tasher Desh (Country of Poker) were staged on the occasion. In 1963 saw the establishment of the Dhaka University Teacher-Student Drama Group (the group's productions during 1963-65 were Showkat Osman's Kritodasher Bashi (The Slave's Flute), Munier Chowdhury's Dand o Dandodhar (Punishment and the Punisher), Vidyasagar's Bhranti Bilash (Illusion of Illusion) (adaptation of Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors) and Madhusudan's Krishnakumari (Krishnakumari). Krishnakumari was dropped from the Bengali Department Syllabus of Dhaka University as desired by the East Pakistan Governor Abdul Monem Khan.

In 1964, on the 11th and 12th of January, Bangla Academy organized Michael Madhusudan Datta's play Krishnakumari (Krishnakumari) which was presented by the Dhaka University Student-Teacher Drama Group to celebrate Michael Madhusudan's birthday. Professor Rafiqul Islam directed the play. Renowned performers such as Professor Munier Chowdhury, Abdullah Al Mamun, Ramendu Mazumdar, Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury, Badaruddin Ahmed, Lily Chowdhury, Professor Razia Khan, Raziul Hasan, Enamul Haque, Mahabuba Akhter, Badiuzzaman Reza Chowdhury, Aminuddin, and Rozi Majid.

Amateur Theatre before the Liberation War

From the early fifties till 1971, Dhaka University also saw brisk theatrical activities within its campus. Despite these activities of college theatre not being equal to the theatre conducted outside the campus, as Dhaka was for all practical purposes a university town in those days, what happened within the campus had great significance. And although university theatre was amateur in character, it produced playwrights, actors, producers, and plays of a standard that stood way above theatre outside the campus.

One of these stalwarts was Munier Chowdhury who combined in himself the rare genius of a playwright-adaptor, producer, and actor of impeccable talent. His translation of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew is one of the finest pieces of translation of Shakespeare accomplished in the Bengali language. Munier Chowdhury's Kabar (The Grave), set against the backdrop of the killing of students during the language movement of 1952, is a time-tested piece of work that appeared contemporary evens in the late seventies. Around this dynamic personality grew a group of stage actors, mostly university students, who later played a pivotal role in introducing stage theatre as a regular medium in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Munier Chowdhury, who could have been a guiding force to the contemporary theatrical scene of Bangladesh, was murdered by the occupation army in 1971. Nurul Momen and Ashkar Ibn Shaikh, two other teachers of the Dhaka University, were also actively associated with the university theatre as playwrights and producers and were instrumental in the production of several very successful plays. Some of their younger co-workers also later became active in the post-independence theatre in Bangladesh. Bangla Academy, an autonomous organization founded by the government of Pakistan for the development of Bengali language and literature, also played an important role in sponsoring amateur performances of Bengali plays occasionally in their mini auditorium.

Despite the fact that stage theatre did not transcend the character of an irregular amateur medium before the independence of Bangladesh, some playwrights and theatre workers were exposed to the international drama scene. This communication had a definite impact on the theatre workers of our country in those days. This resulted in the writing of modern plays, some near-absurd in nature, and an ever-increasing reflection of the spirit of modernism in the works of our playwrights. And it can be safely said that this development took its course in the wake of the all-around invasion of the modern that took our art and literature scenes by a storm. Words like expressionism, surrealism, and neo-romanticism flurried from intellectual discourses. Plays were materially based on our society but had their philosophical undertones reflect the influence of such European playwrights as Beckett or Ionesco. These sporadically staged plays generated academic interest amongst a small audience but definitely contributed towards understanding the modern and international approach to theatre. Playwrights were renowned for their innovative and modern approaches, like Nurul Momen for his one-character one-act play called Nemesis (1948) (Inexorable fate). The three outstanding plays written at the time were Kalbela (1962) (Inauspicious), Milepost, and Trisnay (1965) (Thirst)

by Sayeed Ahmed. Syed Waliullah, primarily a novelist, wrote time-tested plays such as Taranga Bhanga (1964) (Broken Waves), and Bohipeer (1960) (Artificial Brevity). Syed Waliullah's works had an admixture of absurdity and neo-romanticism in such close conformity with our social traits that it justified the opening up of a very powerful and all-pervading play.

Between 1947 and 1971, despite the condition of stage theatre being what it was, a considerable amount of academic pursuit was noticeable in East Bengal. Plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Shaw, Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekov, O'Neil, and Tennessee Williams were translated and printed by Bangla Academy alongside original plays written by East Bengali authors. Besides this, outside Dhaka, the trend of playwrights followed the trend of the local films and plays styled as "social drama" were written by indigenous authors. The latter plays were also staged on various occasions by various clubs and associations both within and outside Dhaka. This was mainly the prevalent situation of theatre when East Bengal plunged into the war of liberation on March 26, 1971. On December 16 of the same year, the country (named "Bangladesh") successfully became liberated at the cost of many lives. Open-air performances of plays propagating Bengali nationalism and the independence of Bangladesh began being performed in Dhaka and Chittagong. And with that, the sector of theatre in Bangladesh started to gain a new horizon.

Conclusion

Bengalis have the desire to work hard. And this same urge has allowed them to cultivate a strong theatre culture in their country even after facing innumerable difficulties and obstacles along the way. With a wide range of influences from Sanskrit drama to European theatre, the theatre workers in this part of the world have managed to nurture a unique theatre environment not to be found anywhere in the world. The British colonialists introduced plays from the likes of Shakespeare, Brecht, and Ibsen etc. to the people; and, this in turn introduced the theatre workers to modern theatre practices from around the world which they successfully implemented into their own works. Besides that, amateur theatre workers did their best to stage plays of the highest quality with minimal resources and professional education. After the partition, women fought against gender discrimination to consolidate their place in the industry. Perhaps, all this also served as an inspiration for the others to work against the oppressive Pakistani establishment, fighting against any force who dared to take away their Bengali heritage. So, even after the sudden decline of the popularity of theatre after the 1947 partition, the workers managed to revive the theatre industry back to its original glory, paving the way for more success after the liberation of the country in 1971.

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