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## **Origin and Development 19<sup>th</sup> century's Bengali drama with reference to World theatre**

**Anasua Chakraborty**

*Guest faculty in Department of Bengali, Sukumar Sengupta Mahavidyalaya, Keshpur, West Bengal. India*

### **Abstract**

*The composition of drama and its stage representation got its first start in Bengal under the control of western ideas. Needless to say that most of the famous productions of 20th century in Bengal were adaptations of western plays Micheal Madhusudan dutta can be regarded as the first successful playwright in Bengal. Bengali literature we first notice a glimpse of patriotic light in the plays of Jyotirindranath, but afterwards this light of patriotism flooded the historical dramas of Girish Chandra.*

**Key words:** *19<sup>th</sup> century drama, 19<sup>th</sup> century western theatre, Micheal Madhusudan dutta, Jyotirindranath, Girish Chandra.*

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The sophisticated technology and machinery of the late 19th century stage produced a succession of 'sensation' dramas in which special effects became the major appeal. In the early years of the 19th century, restrictions of the Licensing Act permitted plays to be shown at only two theatres in London, at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The huge escalation in demand for theatrical activity in the early 19th century made the patent theatres' system not viable. In 19th century the Kemble family dominated the London stage. Actor John Philip Kemble was said to be the finest actor in England and his sister, Sarah Siddons, was as one of the greatest ever tragedians. Melodrama consisted of short scenes interspersed with musical complement and was characterized by simple morality, good and evil characters and overblown acting style. Melodrama became popular from the 1780s to 1790s and lasted until the early 20th century. Thomas Holcroft's A Tale of Mystery in 1802 was considered as the first melodrama in Britain. In the 1820s and 30s there was a craze for domestic melodrama and for real life horror stories. 'Maria Martin or Murder in the Red Barn' was based on a true story of the murder of a young girl. Popular novels were also turned into melodramas as well. 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' tells the story of the slave Uncle Tom, and the cruelties and severity of his life. From the middle of the 19th century the theatre began to take on a new morality and draw in more middle class audiences. They were fascinated by the historical precision and consideration to detail that was prominent in the stage design. Pictorial drama placed great emphasis on the use of properties, and cautiously studied

costume detail and reflected a fashionable interest in archaeology and history. 19th century theatre was conquered by actor-managers who ran the theatres and played the lead roles in productions. Henry Irving, Charles Kean and Beerbohm Tree all formed productions in which they were the star. In 1830 first woman actor-manager in London was Eliza Vestris who managed the Olympic Theatre. She was a singer and dancer of some repute and famous for her long legs. Henry Irving (1838-1905) was one of the famous actor-managers of Victorian theatre. His work helped to raise the position of theatre amongst the middle classes and he raised the theatrical profession to new heights of recognition. H.B. Tree was an outstanding character actor. One of his great roles was Svengali the hypnotist. He loved makeup and he would thickly plaster his somewhat plain face and bedeck himself with crepe hair and wigs. Marie Wilton introduced a new kind of play which became known as 'problem play' because it dealt critically and delicately with issues of the day.

On the other hand in 1795, the curtains were raised at the Calcutta's Bengali Theatre for a Bengali version of Richard Jodrell's comedy, *The Disguise*, produced by a Russian named Gerasim Lebedeff, and with an 'all-native' cast. Many historians judge this as the first instance of a Bengali play on a proscenium stage in Bengal – theatre in which the audience sits in front of the stage and actors face a single direction, rather than moving around the stage performing for a 360 degree audience. An important aspect of Gaudiya Vaisnavism – a religious movement initiated by Chaitanya Dev that received authority at that time – was the devotional worship of Radha and Krishna. These songs were initiated to the theatre of the time to reflect their devotional narratives. The tradition of songs in Bengali theatre continued, though the nature and content of them evolved over time. The pioneer poet who went far enough to initiate the new epoch in Bengali literature was the very gifted Michael Madhusudan Datta. *The Killing of Meghnād* (*Meghnādbadh kābbo*, 1861) the poet turns the characters and events upside down by depriving Rāma of any divine halo and turning the demon king Rāvana and his son Meghnād into heroes. Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta, for instance, experimented with European dramaturgy and started writing farces. Dutta was very much inspired by an English Romantic poet namely Lord Byron. The life of both Dutta and Byron very much similar in many respects. In 1860 he wrote *Ekei ki bale Sabhyata* (*Is this Civilisation?*) and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro* (*The Old Fool's Fads*), both of which became celebrated. Many critics examine Dutt's emulation of Milton, his blank-verse compositions, or his use of the Indian epic Ramayana as his source. Other critics focus on Dutt's influence on other writers, on the Bengal Renaissance, or on the modern period as a whole.

In the same year, Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* (*The Mirror of Indigo Planting*) showed the brutal exploitation of peasants working on indigo plantations by their British employers. With the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th century, a sharp divide between the rural and urban cultures arose. The European-inspired theatre emerged in Calcutta, though rural cultures moved closer to the folk theatre-based Jatra, which even today is mostly staged in the open air with the audience seated on all sides. Jatras continued to thrive, reasonably, dwelling mostly on social themes concerning Hindu-Muslim affairs, as well as

historical and mythological stories. During the second half of the 19th century, religious revivalism rose in tandem with European liberalism. This was the context in which the first Bengali theatre star, Girish Chandra Ghosh, emerged. Ghosh soon became an institution unto himself – writing, directing and acting in plays, with people swarming the theatre to watch him. Many of Ghosh's plays were based on the lives of historical characters, such as Chaitanya Dev, or were stories based on mythology. The nature of the content of these plays re-introduced songs into Ghosh's theatre. For example, in plays like Chaitanyalila or Nimai Sanyas, which reside on the life and spiritual awakening of Chaitanya Dev, references to Vaishnavik Leela Kirtan became a subject on its own. To his credit, Ghosh chose special song forms for different genres – mythological plays would include Kirtan, for example. This dynamism is why Ghosh could cater to audiences with different tastes and still fulfill expectations. As this was taking place, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote a number of plays with profuse song-and-dance sequences (often referred to as Rabindra-Nritya, for their unique minimalist and non-classical form). Tagore infused a European form and structure into his plays, building climax and portraying psychological conflict between the characters. This changed dramatically once Sombhu Mitra's group 'Bohurupi' began performing Tagore's stories and plays. With the dawn of the 20th century, at the popular commercial theatre space called the 'Sadharon Rongaloy', content and form became increasingly naturalistic. A section of the educated Bengali elite entered the world of theatre, and along with them came the subtle nuances of European acting methods. Set design, lighting and acoustics were utilised more, and experimentation ensued. In the 1920s, actor Sisir Kumar Bhaduri emerged and swept the Bengali audience off their feet with some scintillating performances in Chandragupta (written by D L Roy) and Raghurib (written by Kshirod Prasad Vidyavinod). In 1931 he staged D L Roy's famous play Sita in the US, to rave reviews. As the Indian freedom struggle reached its zenith in the 1930s and '40s, a number of groups of artists evolved, whose main impetus was to voice an opposition to the politics of the state. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed in 1943, the same year in which Bengal was devastated by a famine that left five million rural Bengalis dead, and the streets of Calcutta thronging with millions of refugees. Bijan Bhattacharya's Nabanna (1944), about a family that moves to Calcutta during the famine, was influential far beyond the immediate attention it drew. For the first time, true political theatre was written and performed on the Bengali stage. The number of languages listed for India is 418. Of those, 407 are living languages and 11 are extinct. At present India has 18 officially recognized languages which are mentioned in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution.

This play is perhaps the most widely adapted tragedy around the country, especially in Bengal. The first ever Bengali adaptation of a Shakespearean play is believed to be Rudrapal, which is based on Macbeth and was written in 1874.

In the mid-19th century, the theme and content of plays in Bengal resembles the mid and late 18th century *nouve riche* drama culture of social comedies, with all its indulgences in satire, social portrayal of aristocracy, scandals, sentimentality and licentiousness. From the

twenties of 19th century, social satire on the hypocrisy and dubiousness of the riches was growing in stature, as a genre, through 'Samachar Darpon's' "Babu upakhyan", Bhabanicharan Banerjee's "Nabababubilas", "Nababibibilas", and "kolikata Kamalalay". This influence of contemporary clash of social status and ideologies in the second half of 19th century proved to be hugely instrumental in giving birth to unique Bengali natok. The soul and body of unique Bengali play was formed by this contemporary social conflict between tradition and modernism, extending to the dealing of objects like literacy to women, alcoholing, whoring and decadence of the male, destruction of the lives of high-born women due to the hypocritical dominance of the 'kulin protha'. In 1872, 'Sadharon Rongaloy" was established by Amritolal's "Bagbazar amateur Theatre" with the aim of reflecting contemporary life and society. And thus Bengali culture slowly but steadily rose above the mythical and epic world of 'Jatra' to feel the pulse of the present. Madhusadan Dutta's treatment of mythology was completely different, with humanized mythical heroes, whose conflicts and crisis occupied the central arguments of the plays instead of the idea of establishing morality. "Krisnokumari" and "Mayakanon" reminds us of "Oedipaus" and "Antigone". Through Girish Ghosh, Amritolal and Dijendrolal Roy, when Bengali theatre reached its modern era, then the greatest western influence was of existentialism and communism. William Shakespeare has been omnipresent in Bengal's culturescape for over 200 years, with luminaries like Dinabandhu Mitra, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Jyotirindranath Tagore and Girish Ghosh and Utpal Dutt bringing in the bard innovatively in their plays.

Girishchandra Ghosh (1844–1913) was a renowned dramatist, theatrical producer also an actor. His life was packed with hectic theatrical activity; he produced scores of dramas of different genera —mythological, devotional, historical, social, farcical and operatic. [Some important plays of Ghosh: Nala-Damayanti (Nala and Damayanti, 1883), Nimai sannyas (Nimai's renunciation of home, 1883), Kamale kamini (The Goddess on the lotus-bed, 1883), Bilwamangal (1885), Jana (1899), Maya kanan (The Magic forest, 1897), Prafulla (1889), Balidan (The sacrifice, 1905). The influence of Shakespeare's "Julius Ceaser" is felt to some extent in Chandragupta, the first successful historical play of Girish Chandra.

Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925) was a Bengali play writer, composer and translator. Fifth son of Debendranath Tagore, he cherished the latent dramatic talents in his younger brother Rabindranath Tagore. A vibrant personality, he was a prime organiser of the patriotic National or Hindu Mela and Sanjivani Sabha on the one hand, and cultural bodies like the Jorasanko Theatre within the household, Vidvajjan Samagam and Bharat Sangit. His dramatic creativity found expression mainly in these streams: farces or satires and historical plays. The majority of his plays, however, were translations from Sanskrit, English and French (he also translated many books, such as Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, novels, and books on plays, history, philosophy, from English and French into Bengali); Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shakespeare and Molière, contributed the bulk of this genre. [Some important plays of Tagore: Kinchit jalajog ('Light Refreshment', 1872), Puru-bikram ('Puru's Valour', 1874), Alik Babu (1900), Hite biparit ('Expectations

Reversed', 1896). Sarojini is a tragedy about the suicides (known as jauhar) committed by the Rajput women when defeated by invaders in order to avoid indignities. Sarojini was daughter of Rana Lahshman Singh of Mewar in Rajasthan. She committed suicide when the Rana was defeated by Alauddin Khilji. Ashrumati is a legendary-imaginary play about the love affair of a Hindu girl with a Muslim boy, and the girl is torn between her love and her loyalty to her father. He picked up the French and Marathi languages. He translated books from different languages into Bengali, the focus being on plays. He translated Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Apart from Pierre Loti and Théophile Gautier, he translated many books on history, philosophy and travels, novels and short stories from French.

Amritalal Basu was a Bengali actor born in the year of 1853. This Bengali actor, playwright, and producer were intimately associated with Girish Ghosh and Binodini Dasi. Amritalal Basu attained fame primarily as a comedian and writer of farces. Bengali theatre circles knew him as Rasaraj. Basu's recollections can be described as some compiled as Smriti o atasmriti i.e. 'Memoirs and Autobiography' in 1982. Amritalal Basu died in the year 1929.

Dinabandhu Mitra born in the year 1830 was an eminent theatre personality from West Bengal and revolutionary Indian dramatist. He published his first and most famous play, Nildarpan i.e. "Indigo Mirror" in 1860. Nabin Tapanvini i.e. "Young Hermitess" in 1863 alias Bijay-Kamini i.e. "Bijay and Kamini" modelled after Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor did not make a mark.

Biyepagla bum i.e. "Marriage-mad Old Man" in 1866, Sadhabar Ekadashi i.e. "Wife's Widowhood Fast" in 1866, and Jamai bank i.e. "Barracks of Sons-in-law" in 1872 were all popular. Girish Ghosh's Baghbazar Amateur Theatre had premiered Sadhabar Ekadashi in 1868 and, in 1872. Ghosh's acting in the lead at the National became a cherished moment in history of Bengali theatre

The first millennium was also characterized by the great harvest of Sanskrit drama by pre-eminent play-wrights like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakadatta, Bhavabhuti and Harsha. This body of works compares in its range and power with the dramatic output of other rich theatre traditions of the world ancient Greek theatre and Elizabethan theatre. The glory of ancient Sanskrit drama ended with the first millennium. The medieval period witnessed the emergence of regional language literatures in which did not produce dramatic works comparable to ancient classics. However, folk and ritualistic theatres flourished throughout this period. Some innovations happened in religious drama, thanks to socio-religious reform Bhakti Movements, which engulfed the subcontinent during the medieval era. Indian drama was reborn during British colonial interregnum in 18th and 19th centuries. The Impetus came from two sources: the rich heritage of Indian drama and the exposure to Western dramatic classics through English. Translations started appearing simultaneously of Sanskrit classics and Western classics, particularly Shakespeare. Till now drama had not developed as a major literary genre in Indian languages. Drama now began to flourish as a

cherished literary genre alongside the modern genre of fiction, also a response to Western influence.

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