



Bengali Theater Reimagined: Insights from Shambhu Mitra

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Abstract

From the beginning to present, the path of the theater works has been created for acting, stag performance etc. Shambhu Mitra (1915–1997), one of the greatest pioneers of modern Bengali theater, brought a revolutionary transformation in both the content and form of stagecraft in Bengal. His views on Bengali theater reflect a deep commitment to realism, social responsibility, and the aesthetic refinement of performance. He believed that theater should not merely entertain but awaken. He emphasized its potential to reflect and reform society. He wanted the stage to speak about real human struggles, social injustice, and existential dilemmas rather than just mythological or romantic themes. A major aspect of Mitra's philosophy was his rejection of melodrama. He introduced a more subtle, realistic style of acting, breaking away from the loud, declamatory style of traditional Bengali theater. Mitra viewed theater as a collaborative art, not dominated by stars. He founded "Bohurupee" in 1948 to create a space where drama could evolve as an intellectual and artistic movement. He emphasized the director's role as an interpreter of text, crafting every element from set design to gestures to convey deeper meaning. Mitra's theater was serious art, requiring the same dedication as music or painting. He instilled professionalism in Bengali theater, insisting on consistency, coherence, and clarity in every performance.

Keywords: Bengali Theater, Realism, Reform, Stage, Drama etc.

Introduction

Until recently, what we understood by theater was the performance of a play on a proscenium stage. Now 'Arena Theater' or 'Theater in the Round' means a stage for acting, where there can be fringe, curtains and props, but not everything can be used in every performance and many of the plays performed at 'Jatras' or similar events are called 'Folk theater' in our educated terminology. This creates a comical situation. In our country, the theater has been performed in the middle of the audience for a long time. However, the author says that until recently, it was called 'Folk drama'. According to the information provided by the author, it is a very old and crude form. We, the modern and wise people, have come a long way. But suddenly, when the English people adopted it as 'Theater in the round, we suddenly welcomed this as the most modern and revolutionary method with melting eyes'. (Theater in the round, naam diye grohon koren takhon amra hathath bigolito chokhee eai abar sobcheye aadhunik o boiplobik riti bole swagato janai) {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-58} But Shambhu Mitra's clear statement is "We try to understand our theater within the context of our country, without being confused by any terminology imported from the west." (Amra amader desher potobhumikatei amader theater ke bojhbhar chesta kori, kono poschim theke amdani kora poribhasay bibroto na hoye) {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-58}. Acting in drama has been participated in Bengal since ancient times. How the form of that play was, although not much is known about it. Acting is also mentioned in Bharat's

'Natyasastra'. In places like Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Nepal, special rules of drama have been followed in the performance. Drama originated during various festivals, events or celebrations. With the changing times, the style of acting has also changed. The oldest example of our Bengali literature is 'Charyapada', which contains mentions of dance, singing and acting. Jayadeva's poem 'Gita Govindama', written in the 12th century, mentions the performance of dance and songs. Jai Dev's wife Padmavati was a skilled singer and dancer. After Charyapada and Geet Govindama, Manasamangal, Chandimangal, Kalikamangal etc. were composed. Mangal poems were also sung accompanied by dance. However, in the Chaitanya era, there was drama along with music. During this time Krishna yatra was composed based on the various pastimes of Krishna. It is known that the birth of Krishna, the suppression of Kaliya, the killing of kamsa etc. gained particular popularity there. Besides Ram Yatra, Sheetal Yatra during the pandemic or Olabibi Yatra, these were. Just as the liberal religion of love was preached during the time of Chaitanya dev, similarly in the post-Chaitanya period, narrow-mindedness, bigotry and prejudice are seen.

After that, the arrival of the British in the country. In 1690, Job Charnok founded the city of Calcutta. Battle of Plassey in 1757, The Great Famine of 1770 and along with all this in 1774 the capital of East India Company was shifted to Calcutta. During this time, the theater began to spread in regions, such as Birbhum, Bishnupur, Burdwan, Jessore, Nadia etc. At that time the theater groups of Paramananda

Adhikari, Sishuram Adhikai, Lochan Adhikari were particularly noteworthy. The owner of the theater group was called 'Adhikari'. They were simultaneously the director, the scriptwriter, the music director and sometimes the actor in the most important role. They handled all business and administrative tasks. The subjects of these episodes were Krishna Yatra or Kalio Daman or Bharat Chandra's great literary creations 'Vidyasundara'. With the development of the city of Calcutta, a class of aristocrats emerged. These rich people would occasionally host theater parties in their homes. Apart from this, the first evidence of acting in Bengali play was found in 1795. According to records in 1795, the young Russian native Gerasim Lebedef, the young man staged a Bengali translation of the play 'In Disguise' called 'Kalponik Sambadal'. This is the first example of acting in a Bengali drama. The female characters in the play were played by women, and the entrance fee was only Rs-4/- and Rs-8/-. The play's performance was very successful. Encouraged by that success, Lebedef considered acting for a second time. He advertised this performance. A ticket worth a lot of money was sold. Lebedef later thanked the audience in the magazine 'Kolkata Gazette' for their help. Lebedef also started that the reason behind his success in this play was the help of a teacher named Sri Goloknath Das. He built the stage for the play, drew the scenery, recruited the actors and actresses and taught the actors the appropriate language for the performance. He performed his duties with skill and competence. Then in 1835, a theater was discovered in the house of Navin Chandra Basu. Between these two theaters, there is no theater, or no proscenium stage was found. Lebedef's single minded effort has not had an impact in this country, because at that time Bengalis were not still aware of the stage. And the theater we find later is an imitation of the English people. However, Lebedef had a special influence on Bengali acting. Only after these two performances Lebedef went abroad with his work. And not much known about Golok Das either. There is no clue we find that what work he was previously involved in or how his life went or after that. It is very unfortunate that we are in the dark about such a talented person. But when we think about it today, we are truly amazed at how one person could have made so many arrangements for acting at that time. Ahindra Chaudhary believes that the actors and actresses were recruited from the travelling troupe of kirtan performers.

At that time in theater had no numbers or scene divisions. It would go from scene to scene like that. There was no formality regarding the actor's entry or exit. Once the actors had finished telling their lines or singing, they would sit down in the middle of the performance. He would get up again, if necessary, in the next scene. This change in style began under the influence of the plays produced by Lebedef. This influence came from actors, actresses and probably from Golok Das.

Evidence of this change is found in the 'Kaliraja Yatra' published in 1821. Kaliraja's journey from Chittagong to Kolkata is the subject of this play. There is a Vaishnava, a master and his wife. In this play, actors would enter the stage and exit after the performance. {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-160} Previously, where actors would go on stage together and sit on stage. This is the first time the stage entrance and exit etiquette has been followed. The influence of Lebedef's theater is noticeable in this performance. At the same time, the performance of the play was particularly successful, and it was published and has been praised in the various newspapers of that time. This suggests that attempts to give a new form to

the old theater began at that time. Another play titled 'Nolodomoyanti' was performed in 1822. However, gradually the influence of the English language and culture began to penetrate into the acting.

Establishment of Hindu college in 1817 and in 1831, a historic change began with the establishment of Prasanna Kumar Tagore's 'Hindu Theater'. Hindu theater then selected parts of 'Julius Caesar's' play, under Wilson's supervision of 'Uttar Ramcharit' etc was performed. Hindu college students felt special pride in being able to act like British. A young man named Vaishnav Charan Adhya who got to fame in the role of Othello in the 'Sans Souci' theater. {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-160} On the stage established by the British, French names like 'Sans Souci' suggest that the Britishers considered the French to be more cultured than themselves. It was from this kind of inferiority complex that they gave the theater its French name 'Sans Souci'. Just like we Indians, instead of considering our own culture as our own, we tend to western to make things more personal to us.

At that time, it was written in the pages of the newspaper "Hindu Patriotic" that Bengalis should have a stage to act in plays in Bengali language, for example, in Bombay Grand Road Theater, we see that in 1835 under the patronage of Rich families, proscenium stages began to be built in various parts of Kolkata and the backdrops of those theaters were painted and the costumes used, there were also very expensive. These types of proscenium theaters were performed the plays, which were: Bharatchandra's drama of 'Vidyasundara', Bengali translation of Sanskrit plays or a mythological play written in the style of Sanskrit drama. This is how Bengali theater began to move forward.

The play 'Kulinkulsarvasya' written by Pandit Ramnarayan Tarkaratna was published in 1854. This is the first Bengali original drama, again this is a popular Bengali social drama. The renaissance that took place in Bengal in the 19th century, which was expressed through various social reforms, the Bengali scholars were particularly inspired by the influence of that thinker could also be seen in theater. At that time, theater became the most powerful medium to attack social evils. The dramatic intensity that had served as a purpose in creating the theater gradually abandoned the operatic style and became dominated by dialogue. However, the language of its dramatic dialogue was not yet developed. The dialogue in the play 'Kulinkulsarvasya' was adapted from the spoken language, but the sharpness that can create tension in the spoken language was not there.

The search for creating sharpness and tension in dramatic dialogue begun much later, from the play by Michel Madhusudhan Duttain 1859. Madhusudhan was invited to Kolkata and became enthralled after seeing the play 'Ratnavali', people are so excited to watch this drama. Madhusudhan, a well-read English literature scholar, knew about English drama. So, he was astonished by the performance in a play like 'Ratnavali'. He was truly disappointed to see the state of Bengali drama. He lamented that the kings spent huge amounts of money on this trivial drama. Because of this attitude towards drama, friends of Madhusudhan requested him to write a play. He also promised to write. To fulfill that promise, he wrote his first play, 'Sharmistha' that year.

Two farces the very next year 'What do you call civilization' [ekei ki bole sobhyata] and 'On the neck of the old man's neck' [Buro Shalikher ghare ro] were published. Then 'New Bengal' and conservative social contexts are the subject of both the farce. Both plays were written in a neat, concise

style. And the two plays are known today for the quality of Madhusudhan's language. The acting of 'Sharmistha' followed the pattern of theater. The play was very popular. At that time Madhusudhan felt that the 'Amitrakshar' rhythm was necessary for performing the verses. In his next play 'Padmavati' he used the 'Amitrakshar' rhythm scheme. As the interesting field of Shambhu Mitra was recitation, so to say few words about Madhusudhan, he had taken few old rhythm and new rhythm through recitation as an example. He said that the rhythm of Kashiram Das's Mahabharata was recited in this way:

The Words of Mahabharata: Like nectar
Kashiram Das Hears: Listen virtuous

The path followed was in the tradition of ancient pilgrimage. It was sung in a tune that was almost like a song. But when acting out the ordinary characters, they used a lot of gibberish. But from the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, this trend evolved into a style that gave rise to many of the rawest prose styles.

"Who is so cruel and heartless!
The beautiful lake is dark,
All bodies lie in the cemetery
My father, mother and brother killed me"
[Ke herilo sororuhu hoiya nirdoy
Shobhahin sorobor ondhokarmoy.
Herisob sobmoy samsan sansar.

Pita, mata, bhrata dara moreche amar] {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-162}

But the flow of that Madhusudhan did was different. The play created by Madhusudhan appeared in Bengali drama literature with a different pace. If we compare it with the previous example, we will notice the difference between the style of the play 'Padmavati' and the afore-mentioned style. The flow that Madhusudhan brought to the play 'Padmavati' that is:

"Is it the same? Is that Padmavati?
That kamini goes
In this form, Kurangini is truly unlucky
Later on the way to kirat; everytime in this form
The bird rises and sits in the trap of Nishad".
[eki? Oei na sei Padmavati,

Aye lo kamini
Eai rupe kurangini nisonke obhaga
Pore kirater pothe; eai rupe soda
Bihongi udiya bose nisader phade.] {Mitra, Shambhu, RS-2, p-162}

The surprising modern style is embodied in the play Padmavati. Later, in the 'Meghnad Vadh kavya' and 'the krishna Kumari play' this style was followed in a spectacular manner, which captivated people. This power, this richness of Bengali poetry has never been noticed before. Madhusudhan had a greater claim to the theater than others, because he made his debut in the form of a play and was the first to use the 'Amitrakshara' rhythm in the play.

Conclusion

Shambhu Mitra's vision and practice redefined the contours of Bengali theater by bringing together the depth of classical traditions and the urgency of contemporary realities. His relentless pursuit of truth in performance, emphasis on social responsibility, and belief in theater as a tool for awakening

collective consciousness gave the stage a renewed purpose beyond entertainment. Mitra reimagined theater as a living dialogue between actor and audience dynamic, questioning, and transformative. His insights continue to inspire modern practitioners to challenge conventions, explore new forms, and engage with society's evolving complexities. In essence, Shambhu Mitra did not just shape Bengali theater of his time; he left a framework for future generations to keep reimagining it with courage, creativity, and conscience. Today, his legacy lives as a guiding force for theater practitioners who seek to balance tradition with innovation. Shambhu Mitra's insights remind us that theater is not static but an ever-evolving art form that must adapt to the cultural and ethical needs of its age. In reimagining Bengali theater, he ultimately redefined the very purpose of performance as an act of collective questioning, aesthetic refinement, and social transformation.

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