Upendranath Das was a multi-faceted personality. He was a dramatist, director of the public theatre, journalist as well as a radical social reformer. His character had both its dark and bright sides. However, he shall always remain a role model of the youths for his patriotism, irrepresible urge for social reform over and above his courage and determination.

Upendranath Das was born in a rich family of Bowbazar in 1255 B.S. His father Srinath Das was at one period, a lecturer of mathematics at the Sanskrit College (D. Gupta 36). Later he studied law and had a flourishing business at the Calcutta High Court. Srinath Das had nine sons and Upendranath was the fifth. After completing his B.A from the Sanskrit College, Upendranath wanted to go to England to study law. But his conservative father was against his son’s foreign travel. Sailing across the ocean was considered blasphemous in those days. Upendranath always hated his father’s conservatism.

It was customary in those days to marry early. Likewise Upendranath was married while he was still a student. About the time when he was having a strained relation with his father, regarding his study in England, his wife Manomohini got affected with cholera. It was so severe that Upendranath wanted to get her admitted in the Calcutta Medical College. Again his conservative father would not permit his daughter-in-law being admitted in a hospital. Instead he made arrangements so that the best doctors could attend her at home. But Manomohini died in 1868. This was the last straw and Upendranath left his house in protest against his father’s orthodox outlook.

After leaving his house, Upendranath Das stayed in Madras for some time. On his return to Calcutta, he founded the Indian Radical League and became its founder-secretary. Soon he
became the leader of the youths dedicated to the cause of social welfare. He believed widow remarriage to be an integral part of social reform and worked to popularize it. When his classmate Jogendranath Bandyopadhyay married the widowed daughter of Madanmohan Tarkalankar, Upendranath Das organized a public function to felicitate him and Sibnath Sastri. The latter writes: ‘জম্মু মন্ন্ত্র একটি নিখুঁত বইয়ে ওইলেখিতাম [...] এই সময় হইতে উপেনের পরিব্রাজক আমাদের একটি বন্ধুর বনস্পতি হিস্টিয়া (Atmcharit 79) ‘We got transformed into great reformers [...] Since then we developed intimacy with Upen [Upendranath].’

Upendranath Das wanted to do what he preached. When his first wife was dead, he decided to marry a widow from Bhowanipore. Sibnath Sastri mentions an amusing anecdote regarding this marriage in his autobiography. Upendranath told him that the girl’s mother consented to her daughter’s re-marriage, but her uncle who was also her guardian was not prepared. Therefore she had to be abducted from her Bhowanipore residence. Sibnath Sastri and some enthusiastic youths brought her to the office of the journal edited by Upendranath Das around 10:00 pm. But the marriage was scheduled to be solemnized the next day. She was then taken to the house of the progressive Brahmo reformer Gurucharan Mahalanabis for that night. Sibnath Sastri brought her to the venue of marriage the next day. Since Upendranath had already converted to Brahmoism, the marriage was of the type sanctioned by the Brahmos. A prayer was held, followed by some Brahmo hymns. The marriage also abided by the rules laid down by the Brahmos.

In the meanwhile Upendranath Das was introduced to the theatre by his close friend Sisirkumar Ghosh, the editor of the Amrita Bazar Patrika, who was associated with it. The former became the director of the Great National Theatre. Upendranath wanted to use the stage as a platform to further the cause of social reform. He staged his Sarat-Sarojini (January 2, 1875). It was followed by Surendra-Binodini (December 31, 1875). By this time the Prince of
Wales visited Calcutta and how the series of events led to the enactment of the Dramatic Performances Act has already been discussed.

In his efforts to cope with the misfortunes of his life, Upendranath fell sick. He also developed the practice of beguilement. Instead of paying heed towards clearing his debts, he used to borrow more money. Without clearing his tenancy dues, he used to escape from the rented house overnight. Many a time Sibnath Sastri had to borrow money to save Upendranath, his wife and their little son. Once he arrived at the house of Sisirkumar Ghosh with his family at 2:00 am. The latter helped him get a boat at that late hour. After this he stayed at the house of Dr. Loknath Maitra at Benaras. The doctor bore all the expenses of maintaining the family of Upendranath. Even there, he secretly borrowed money from others and returned to Calcutta in ill-health, leaving Dr. Loknath Maitra to repay his debts.

Upendranath Das now stayed with his wife and son at Sibnath Sastri’s house. He got affected with tuberculosis and the former arranged free treatment for his friend. Dr. Anandacharan Khastagir used to attend Upendranath. However the latter’s condition began to steadily deteriorate and he wished to see his father. Sibnath Sastri was not personally acquainted with Srinath Das. He therefore sought the help of Vidyasagar, the latter’s intimate friend. Vidyasagar was furious when he saw Sibnath Sastri pleading for Upendranath. However he was moved when he heard that the son wished to see his father in his death bed. He promised to bring Srinath Das.

The next day Vidyasagar went to Srinath Das’s house and took him in the carriage without telling where they were heading to. He thus cleverly brought about the meeting of the father and the son. It is not known what Upendranath told his father, but it is heard that he begged forgiveness. Srinath Das began giving financial aid to his son. Vidyasagar too gave Sibnath Sastri some money to help him look after Upendranath’s wife and son (Sastri Atmacharit 83-85).
Srinath Das took his son to his house and got him cured after prolonged medical treatment (D. Gupta 40). He sent Upendranath to England in 1877 to study law.

Upendranath Das stayed in England for eleven years. One does not have any detailed information about his activities in that country. He used to lecture about the condition of India at various places. He had to suffer financial straits since he did not have any regular source of income. He could not get over the bad habits about which Sibnath Sastri had complained. The Sanjibani wrote on Baisakh 9, 1290 B.S about an incident regarding Upendranath that was published in the Leeds Times. It is said that he married a British woman and was staying at a rented house about two months ago. When the landlady asked for the rent for lodging and food, his reply made her smell a rat. She sued and it was proved that Upendranath was guilty. He was told to pay a fine of Rs. 50 or face one month’s imprisonment. Being unable to pay the fine, Upendranath served the sentence. The Sanjibani lamented: ‘[...] কিছু এই কি তারার বিষ্ণুর ফল? এত কিছু পাইয়া এখন সেখার উপর আপনার পরিবারের উপর ভরকের কাৰ্য্য করিলেন?’ (qtd. Das xii) ‘Is this the outcome of his education? Did all his education bring about this dreadful disgrace to his country and his family?’

After returning to India in 1888, Upendranath Das again joined the theatre. He took the Bina Theatre of Rajkrishna Ray on lease and named it New National Theatre. Here he staged his farce Dada o Ami. It was based on the English farce Brother Jill and I and was published in 1888. He appeared in the role of Dhiren, the “dada” of the play. However he could not run the theatre for long. Again he fell sick and died on Sraban 22, 1302 B.S at the age of 47.

After the discussion of the brief life history of Upendranath Das, one may turn one’s attention to the plays he composed and staged. Sarat-Sarojini was the first play to be staged on January 2, 1875 at Great National Theatre. Mahendralal Basu played the part of Sarat, Rajkumari that of
Sarojini, Golapsundari that of Sukumari, Goshthabihari Datta that of the scientist Haridas (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natvamancha I 28). It was also staged on January 9 and 23, February 27 and May 15, 1875. The other play that he composed and staged was Surendra-Binodini. It was first staged at the New Aryan (Late National Theatre) on August 14, 1875. On the first performance Surendra was done by Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay, Binodini by Banabiharini, McCrindle by Hari Baishnab and Birajmohini by Sukumari. The same play was performed on the same stage on Aug 21 and 28, 1875. This play was also staged by the Great National Theatre on December 31, 1875, January 2 and March 1, 1876. On the first night at the Great National Theatre, the part of Surendra was played by Mahendralal Basu, Birajmohini by Sukumari, Haripriya by Dharmadas Sur and McCrindle by Amritalal Basu. Nothing more is known about Upendranath’s adaptation of the English farce Brother Jill and I, except that it was staged at the New National Theatre in 1888.

After taking charge of the Great National Theatre, Upendranath staged Amritalal Basu’s Hirak Churna Natak (December 25, 1875) and Jyotirindranath Tagore’s Sarojini amongst other plays. These two plays together with Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini either dealt with some political issue or stirred patriotic sentiments. Commenting on the plays of Upendranath Das, Sukumar Sen writes: ‘শুনি—কথনের বাড়াবাড়ি এবং পিন্ড—বস্তু—লাইনের মূলগুলি সমাজকালিন সমাজতাত্ত্বিক প্রমাণ দেখা গেল। দৈনিক উদ্ধে তো আরেকটি, দেই সত্য দেখিয়ে সাথীদের সাহায্য করিবার উদ্দেশ্যে বৈশ্বিক ঘটার ইলেক্ট্র রহিলা’ (qtd. Raychowdhury 50) ‘This was the first time when the excess of murder and injury and the use of pistol, gun, staves was seen in contemporary social plays. It has the enthusiasm of patriotism, besides a hint of the revolutionary urge to seek the country’s freedom’.

Though Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini are domestic plays, Upendranath Das infuses his fiery spirit into them. A picture of the nineteenth-century middle-class Bengali life has been
attempted at by the dramatist. But he does not miss a single chance where he can refer to the oppression of the British rule. He lashes out at the racist arrogance of the colonialists. By portraying the strong character of Surendra and Sarat, the dramatist tries to reach out to the masses and tell them how they are to mould their lives. Whatever Upendranath Das did as a member of the Indian National League has been, as if, attempted in the plays. He tries to stir his countrymen out of stupor.

In Surendra-Binodini Upendranath Das depicts a picture of the ‘bad sahib’ who was an example of depraved European masculinity. In the words of Dhruba Gupta, ‘He was the monstrous white man, who tortured, exploited and raped’ (qtd. Chowdhury 108). These portrayals showed the white man as lacking in civilized conduct, something about which he boasts loudly. Upendranath makes use of such depictions not only to rouse the indignation of his countrymen, but also make the British see the hypocritical behavior they indulge in.

After the second performance of Sarat-Sarojini on January 9, 1875 the Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote on January 14 that the play was immensely popular. There was such a rush for tickets that about 400 – 500 people could not get hold of one. The tickets were exhausted even before they could buy them. The article mentions that people were moved to tears by the play. They went so far as to request 2 – 3 more shows. One of the reasons behind the popularity of the play (and the same can be said for Surendra-Binodini as well) is that the audience imaginatively participated in it. The society represented in the play is just exactly what it was. It is this verisimilitude that made the plays so popular.

Ajitkumar Ghosh refers to some criteria that made a play popular amongst the nineteenth-century Bengali audience. What he says about other plays may be applicable to Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini as well. He says that Bengalis, by nature, are emotional. This is why
Bengali plays abound in sentimental dialogues. Lachrymose tears appeals more to them than the grandeur of tragedy. There is this over-indulgence in sentimentality in certain sections of both Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini. He also says that since Bengalis love songs, one may come across an excess of songs in the plays. Both Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini suffer from this fault. They indeed have too many songs and sometimes it gets really difficult to justify their presence.

The other fault that Ajitkumar Ghosh mentions is the strange preference of the Bengalis for a mixed bag of sentimental episodes instead of a logical flow of events. He says: ‘নেত্র নাটকের মধ্যে অনেক ঘটনা অপরাধিক এবং অভিনেতামূলক ঘটনা ও চরিত্রের আম্বানি ঘটা সেথা’ (128) ‘This is why one may see the onrush of irrelevant and melodramatic events in the drama’. Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini is not free from this fault either. For example, the impatience of Haridas in discovering a new species by excavating a particular spot is indeed carrying things too far. However, one must not dwell too much on the defects of Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini. It has to be kept in mind that the plays were written to suit the tastes of the nineteenth-century theatre-goers. The audience, for whom these plays were written, did not realize these faults, or in other words, they did not find anything wrong or unnatural in the plot or dialogues. Therefore the twenty-first century reader should not look for defects in Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini. They should rather judge the plays through the eyes of the nineteenth-century audience.