PART I
CHAPTER 1

Early stage of the Bengali theatre

Though India can boast of dramatists like Kalidasa, Bhasa, Bhavabhuti, Bhattanarayana, Sriharsha and many others, drama gradually fell out of practice in India. This can be traced to the Islamic conquests that began in the twelfth century. The Muslim rule discouraged or forbade theatre entirely. It was then that vatras1 dealing with religious and mythological themes came into existence. Bengal had to wait till the Chaitanya age (1486 - 1533), when plays again came to be staged. Around the eighteenth century, gradually, kabi2, half-akhrai3, panchali4, kathakata5 and kirtan6 gained popularity. These were part of the popular culture of Bengal. When the English came to India, they brought with them the drama that was their national amusement. Later when western education was imparted to Indians, they began to dislike the existing forms of entertainment of Bengal. They longed for something as refined as the English drama. This longing saw its manifestation ultimately in the opening of the public theatre in Bengal.

Lebedev's Bengally Theatre

The history of the modern Bengali stage begins with Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev who opened the Bengally Theatre in November 1795. This theatre presented only two shows in a span of four months. But very little is known about the personal life of the founder of this theatre. The main reason behind this is the lack of proper documentation. The fact that a good portion of whatever information exists is in Russian adds to the problem of a research scholar who is not acquainted with this language. For example, just because Arun Sanyal was not familiar with Russian, he presented a wrong picture of Lebedev's life, specially his life in India. Hayat Mamood, on account of his knowledge of Russian, could gather some more information, while rectifying the mistakes of the earlier scholars.
Lebedev was born in 1749, not in Ukraine but in the town of Yaroslavl. It was commonly believed that he was born in a family of peasants. But Lebedev himself wrote in his only book published in Russian in 1805 that he was born in the family of a clergyman. The service record of Lebedev, after he joined Government service on his return to Russia, also mentions the same. From the scanty information that is available, Hayat Mamood draws the conclusion that his father was the clergyman in the private chapel of some rich landlord and that Count Andrei Kirillvich Razumovski might have been the first master. The nature of his job compelled Lebedev’s father to stay away from his family and therefore his son did not receive proper education. Lebedev joined his father in St. Petersburg at the age of fifteen. Now he was trained in music. His talent in music drew the attention of Count Razumovski, who took him to Italy. The latter was himself a composer, an expert on violin and a close friend of Hayden, Mozart and Beethoven. If such a person felt attracted towards Lebedev’s talent, it really speaks to the credit of the latter. Hayat Mamood feels that the Count might have taken Lebedev with him to Italy only to introduce him to the broader world of European music.

In 1777 Lebedev left Russia as a part of the envoy to Naples with Count Razumovski. However they could not reach Naples. Austria and Prussia were then engaged in a battle over Bavaria. Since Russia was diplomatically in good terms with Austria, the Count did not think it wise to cross the border during the war. Therefore Razumovski halted at Vienna, where they stayed for almost a year. Though Adelung says that Lebedev learnt violoncello in Italy, Hayat Mamood feels it was in Vienna. He supports this view with what Lebedev himself said. The latter said that during his one-year stay in Vienna, he gained so much proficiency in music that he could use it to financially support himself. That was why he decided to leave that place.
After visiting London and Paris, Lebedev boarded a ship for Madras in early 1785 and landed on July 27, 1785. He came to this city as a bandmaster and was hired by the East India Company or personally by the Mayor of the town on a contractual basis for two years at an annual salary of two hundred pounds. He left the city after two years in July 1887. About his reason behind leaving Madras, Lebedev writes in Memorandum:

Those two years thus pleasingly employed, and most harmonically Expiring, Infatuated by the general report that Bengal was a more Diffusive Theatre for the animated action of the bolder Race of Adventures than Madras [...] and stung also by the Emolution [sic] of enlarging my Scale of Knowledge in respect to things, as well as Men – I at once Determined on visiting that Country – not without an honest view at the same time that I will confess, of improving my finances also in a Prolific / Spot where it was said that innumerable Sojourners most of all nations had rapidly acquired Competent fortune (qtd. Mamood 77-78).

Lebedev came to Calcutta in August, 1787. But as Hayat Mamood points out, he must have reached Calcutta later. In those days it took about six weeks to reach Calcutta from Madras by sea. Dennis Kincaid writes: ‘Even if the voyage was only from Madras to Calcutta it was well to prepare for long sojourn on board. That journey might take six weeks […]’ (83). The Calcutta Gazette writes on September 13, 1787: ‘We are also happy to announce the arrival of a Gentleman in the Settlement, celebrated for his musical powers, which, we are pleased to find, he means to favour the public, shortly, with a specimen of’ (qtd. Mamood 79). Though the name of this ‘Gentleman’ is not mentioned, in all possibility, he might have been Lebedev. An advertisement given in the Indian Gazette on December 24, 1787 shows that Lebedev indeed used musical performances to earn his livelihood. The advertisement runs:
Concert.

On FRIDAY the 28th of DECEMBER,

Will be Performed AT THE OLD COURT-HOUSE

A CONCERT

Vocal and Instrumental

FOR THE BENEFIT

OF

Mr. LEBEDEFF.

Tickets, at one Gold Mohur each, to be had of Mr. LEBEDEFF, No. 9, Loll Bazar, or of Mr. SELBY, at the Old Court-House.

The Concert to begin exactly at 8 o' Clock

(qtd. Mamood 80).

This concert was highly praised by the India Gazette on December 31, 1787 and the Calcutta Gazette on January 3, 1788. Lebedev gave more performances and was very popular.

Finding a teacher to instruct him in Sanskrit and the local language was not easy for Lebedev. Mikhail Medvedev writes: 'It took many years to find an Indian who would care to decipher to a white man the letters of ancient Sanskrit – the “golden key” that unlocked the door to the priceless treasures of oriental science and knowledge' (qtd. Sanyal 113). Lebedev himself wrote to one of his friends that he wanted to learn Bengali, Hindustani and Sanskrit because without the knowledge of these languages it would be difficult for a wanderer like him to acquire accurate knowledge about the places. When he was on the verge of dropping the plan altogether, his sarkar introduced him to Goloknath Das, who was a school teacher. As Lebedev writes, he was ‘[...] grammatically skilled / both in the Bengal [sic] language, and the mixed dialects; he
also understood well enough the Shamscrit [sic] language' (qtd. Mamood 90-91). It was an interesting coincidence that he was no less eager to learn music from Lebedev, than the latter was to learn the Indian languages.

Lebedev began learning the Indian languages under Goloknath Das. The former did not stop here. He wanted himself to be examined to get an idea of the depth of his newly acquired knowledge. He writes in the Preface to his Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects: '... I candidly submitted my labour to some of the distinguished Pundits, namely to Jagon-mahon-bidde Ponchanon Bhotta Charjo; to Jogonnat Tarko, and to other learned Pundits, who to my entire satisfaction applauded my zeal in disclosing an object hitherto unknown to Europeans' (qtd. Mamood 92). He now composed Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects that was published in 1801. He also translated '[...] a short but useful dictionary, wrote several dialogues, and a part of the calendar (3 months) from which many facts are known, including the four initial processes of arithmetic. I also translated from book extracts of heroic poetry written by Bharat Chandra Ray [...]’ (qtd. Sanyal 117).

Lebedev writes in the Preface to his Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects that after completing his above-mentioned projects, he set about translating two English dramas into Bengali. One was Joddrell’s The Disguise and the other was Love is the Best Doctor, an adaptation of Moliere’s L’Amour Medecin. Lebedev was clever enough to observe that ‘[...] the Indians preferred mimicry and drollery to plain grave solid sense, however purely expressed – I therefore fixed on those plays and which were most pleasing, filled up with a group of watchmen chokey-dars; Savoyards, Camera; thieves ghonia; lawyers, Gomasta and amongst the rest a corps of petty plunderers’ (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Theatre 226). Having noticed that the Bengalis loved songs, he set to music the words of the famous Bengali poet Bharatchandra Ray.
Lebedev writes in the Preface to his *Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects* that after finishing the translation he invited several scholars to read it closely. After receiving their approbation, it was his linguist Goloknath Das who proposed that if Lebedev wanted public presentation of the play, he could provide him with actors of both sexes from among the Indians. The former immediately agreed and solicited the Governor General Sir John Shore for a regular license. Once it was granted, Lebedev built his own theatre at Domtollah, in the house of Jagannath Gangopadhyay which he took on a rental basis at Rs. 60 per month. The theatre was to accommodate about three hundred people. In a letter to Simbarski, Lebedev complained that he had a hard work training a group of uninterested, deceitful and uncivilized Bengalis (Mamood 107). The performers included three women and ten men. There is nothing surprising in the presence of the female performers. The Calcutta Theatre was in full reputation with artistes of both sexes. Mrs. Bristow too was very popular. It is but natural that Lebedev would not want to lag behind. He therefore introduced women on his stage.

One is left wondering about the location of Domtollah. The earlier maps of Calcutta suggest it to be a lane located between Chitpore Road and Chinabazar Lane. ‘It shoots off from Radhabazar or Chinabazar Lane just to the east of the present Pollock Street’ (Das Gupta *Indian Theatre* 233). The identical place is indicated as Ezra Street in the recent maps of Calcutta. Hemendranath Das Gupta continues: ‘[…] 21 Ezra Street, or a little to the east where the American [Armenian?] Church now stands may be taken as the probable site of the Bengali [sic] Theatre. People of that locality still call that place as “Natchghar”. Time could not obliterate popular memory and the place is still associated with amusements’ (234).

While these preparations were going on, Lebedev gave out an advertisement that announced the opening of a new theatre shortly. Carey quotes it:
By permission of the Honourable Governor General, Mr. Lebedeff's New Theatre in Dountullah [sic], decorated in the Bengalee [sic] style, will be opened very shortly, with a play called The Disguise; the characters to be supported by performers of both sexes. To commence with vocal and instrumental music called The Indian Serenade. To those musical instruments, which are held in esteem by the Bengalees [sic], will be added European. The words of the much admired Poet Shree Bharot Chondro Ray [sic] are set to music. Between the acts some amusing curiosities will be introduced” (134).

This advertisement was published in the Calcutta Gazette on November 5, 1795, which William Henry Carey must have come across. Lebedev gave out another advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette on November 26, 1795 for the first performance:

BENGALLY THEATRE
No. 25, DOOMTULLAH

MR. LEBEDEFF

Has the honour to acquaint the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Settlement,

THAT HIS
THEATRE

WILL BE OPENED
TO-MORROW, FRIDAY, 27th Inst.

WITH A COMEDY
CALLED
THE DISGUISE

The play to commence at 8 o’ Clock precisely.

Tickets to be had at his Theatre
The Disguise was presented on November 27, but only in one act. This was so because only a few Europeans could follow Bengali and a lengthy act might be boring for them. Lebedev says that there was so much of rush that only a theatre house thrice as large as his Domtollah Theatre could accommodate all the people.

The success of the first show inspired Lebedev to come up with another presentation, which was partly in original and partly in translation. He gave out an advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette on March 10, 1796:

**BENGALLIE THEATRE**

No. 25, DOOMTALLAH

Mr. Lebedeff presents his respectful compliments to the Subscribers to his Bengallie Play, Inform them his second representation is fixed for Monday the 21st instant, and requests they will send for Tickets, and the account of the plot and scenes of the Dramas, on or before Saturday the 19th Instant.

For the better accommodation of the audience, the number of Subscribers is limited to two hundreds, which is nearly completed, the proposals for the subscriptions may be had on application to Mr. LEBEDEFF, by whom subscription at One Gold Mohur a Ticket will be received till the subscription is full.

Calcutta, March 10, 1796.

(qtd. Bandyopadhyay Bangiya Natyasalar Itihas 16).
Lebedev says that on both the performances the house was full and therefore thanks his audience in an advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette on March 24, 1796.

**BENGALLY THEATRE**

Mr. LEBEDEFF, respectfully acknowledges the very distinguished Patronage, the Ladies and Gentlemen of this Settlement Subscribers to his Second BENGALLY PLAY, honoured him with, and begs leave to assure them, he has the most grateful sense of the very liberal support afforded him on this occasion, and intreats [sic] they will be pleased to accept his warmest Thanks.

March 24, 1796.

(qtd. Bandyopadhyay Bangiya Natyasalar Itihas 17).

Subir Raychowdhury argues that the audiences consisted of the British who were not acquainted with the Bengali style and that the mention of the ‘Bengalee Style’ is just an advertisement stunt. He justifies his point by arguing that, firstly, the tickets were too costly for the ordinary Bengali spectators. On the first night tickets were priced at 8 sicca Rs. for the box and 4 sicca Rs. for the gallery. For the second night all tickets were uniformly priced at one gold mohur. Though such tickets were out of reach for the Bengalis, it was not so for the audiences of the English who bought tickets at 16 sicca Rs. for the box, 12 sicca Rs. for the upper box and 8 sicca Rs. for the gallery. The price thus suggests that even if Bengalis came to Lebedev’s theatre, they were not responsible for the ‘overflowing house’. The other reason that makes Subir Raychowdhury believe that the audiences were mainly British is the stiff Bengali of Lebedev. The Bengali audience would not feel comfortable with such a language.

Many like Hemendranath Das Gupta, Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, Sisirkumar Das and others believe that Goloknath Das, and not Lebedev, was responsible for the translation. They however
do not give any evidence in support of their argument. On the other hand, Lebedev writes in the Memorandum: ‘[...] I translated two Dramatic Pieces The Disguise [...] and Love is the Best Doctor into Superior Bengallie Language [...]’ (qtd. Mamood 388). He also writes in his Preface to his Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects: ‘[...] I translated two English dramatic pieces, namely, the Disguise, and Love is the Best Doctor [...]’ (qtd. Mamood 398). There is no reason why we should not believe Lebedev. More so when he says that it was Goloknath Das who first suggested the idea of staging The Disguise. Had he been responsible for the translation, Lebedev would have surely mentioned that. Goloknath might have helped him with the meanings of difficult words and idioms and also have selected the songs that could be introduced in the play.

As the language of the Bengali version of The Disguise shows, the translation was indeed the work of some foreigner. Sukumar Sen says that Lebedev’s knowledge of Bengali was praiseworthy only because it was possessed by a foreigner. Two examples of Lebedev’s stiff and incomprehensible Bengali may be cited: ‘লেন, লেন নন্দ। দূর ভব, দূর হউক। আমি উত্তরে ভোগাইয়া। যে আমি বাংলিয়া আমি।’ (মৃতি তাপাই তাম)’ (qtd. Mamood 279) and ‘হাঁ! — আমি বাঙালি মমেদ, আমি মন্দ কোনোদিন জান আমি পরিসারের দান নেই, আমার ব্যয় উপনুকুল হবে – কি! করেন ও কুকুর তালা মহিমাচ ৬মন আপনাস মেরিয়া আমার এমন দুঃখের জন্য দেন ওই সব্বাটে? লেন ওই সত্তা’ (qtd. Mamood 280). Such a language and that too with so many spelling mistakes or two spellings for the same word can never be the work of a Bengali, leave apart a Bengali teacher. It also proves that no correction was done in Lebedev’s translations. His acknowledging the scholars might be simply showing courtesy and gratitude. Indeed none but Lebedev is responsible for the translation.

In spite of having an overflowing house, Lebedev wrote that the performances returned only half of what he had actually spent. He wanted to spend the whole of it once more in hope of
making profit. He therefore sought the permission of the Governor General to allow him give performances in both English and Bengali. He was given the permission. He then advertised for a show where only Indians would be allowed. Mrs. Antonova refers to an advertisement that was written but may or may not have been ultimately published where Lebedev intended ‘to invite the Asiatic Inhabitants only, at and in the Vicinity of Calcutta’ (qtd. Mamood 94). However Lebedev could never again stage another show. Apparently this may seem to be due to the jealousy of the Calcutta Theatre. But the latter actually did not have much to fear because both the theatres were staging plays in two different languages and more so when Lebedev managed to stage only two shows in a span of four months. The Calcutta Theatre did not have any problem when the Wheeler Theatre was founded in 1797.

Hayat Mamood says that though there is an absence of sufficient proof, it seems that the British did not trust Lebedev in the least. They feared him to be a Russian spy. They did not have any proof for espionage and therefore could not take any legal action against him. But they were desperate to get him out of Calcutta. In 1795, there were two more Russians, other than Lebedev, in Calcutta. Nothing is known about what Esaie Taron did, but John Holst who was in Calcutta for the last ten years was an ‘Asst. in the Secret Deptt’ (qtd. Mamood 103). This made Lebedev’s case even more sensitive.

There seemed to be a cold war between England and Russia even in the eighteenth century. Peter the Great (1682 – 1725) dreamt of extending his empire to India when the English and French East India Companies were contesting for political and economic supremacy in the country. Still the Anglo-Russian relation was running smoothly. Friction came during the rule of Catherine the Great (1762 – 1796) when England felt threatened by the policy of southward expansion and feared it would disturb the balance of power that existed in Europe. When
England made an unsuccessful attempt to have Russia give up the Ochakov fortress to Turkey. Russia in turn contemplated threatening the British position in India. Paul and Napoleon together planned an invasion of India which added to the ‘Russophobia’ of the British. It is true that all the countries realized that the strongest blow could be struck at England in India. Thus the overcuriosity of the Russian embassy in London towards the Indian affairs made the British feel unsafe. The Russian embassy could get better information once Lebedev arrives in Calcutta. Again, in a letter to Simbarski, Lebedev mentions his hope of reward from the successors of the Queen Mother Ekterina Alexievna for his mission in foreign lands under hostile conditions. Though there is no direct evidence against Lebedev, yet the British fear towards this Russian seems justified. At last they were compelled to hatch a conspiracy against him so that Lebedev would leave Calcutta in his own will.

Rowarth, the manager of the Calcutta Theatre was also an Assistant in the Secret Department till 1790. It cannot be said for sure whether his job at the Calcutta Theatre was to conceal his true identity. Joseph Battle was a scene-painter of the Calcutta Theatre. The conspiracy began with Battle applying to Lebedev, while pretending that ill-treatment of Rowarth compelled him to leave the Calcutta Theatre. Pitying him, the Russian employed him as a scene-painter and also made him an equal partner of the theatre. An agreement was also prepared. Battle recruited performers including two European actresses. Lebedev began paying their salaries even before they actually performed. In the name of improving the theatre house, Battle began disfiguring the theatre and spoiling the existing sceneries. He befriended those who had already betrayed Lebedev. One day, a friend of Battle left coal tar on fire within the house and it got engulfed in flames. The latter did not even feel sorry. Upon Lebedev ‘remonstrating on the impropriety of his conduct and assuring him that I abruptly insisted on his performing his Contract, he
absolutely departed [...] he took employment again with Thomas Rowarth [...] Still not contented, to crown all, my actresses by them were enticed away and refused to stand to their signed Contracts [...] and refused even to return’ (qtd. Mamood 391). By the time the Battle-episode was over, the attorneys of the friends of Battle and others began approaching Lebedev with false claims of money. Had the aim of the conspirators laid only in destroying Lebedev’s theatre, they would not have gone so far. Lebedev still had no complaints against the well-mannered Englishmen, rather against those who brought ill-repute for their country. He also feels angry on himself for his foolishness. Lebedev was so badly persecuted that he was compelled to leave Calcutta on December 3, 1797, almost a pauper.

Amateur Theatre

A little before 1756, the first English Theatre was opened in Calcutta. Many English actors and directors also came. The Bengalis were naturally attracted towards this new form of entertainment. But, as already mentioned, the tickets of entry to these theatres were priced so high that the ordinary Bengalis could not get access. Only the very rich ones could attend the English theatre and that too occasionally. Even when they were present in the playhouse, there was a barrier of language. As a result they failed to enjoy the plays whole-heartedly. Thus the rich Bengalis together with their not so fortunate brothers turned to other forms of entertainment. The Indians were ‘[...] commonly seen on the race-course, booking their bets [...]’ (qtd. Ghosh Banglar Bidwatsamaj 61). Indians had their own race-course. Horse races were held in the garden-house of the raja of Posta and they had starter and jockey as well as booking betting. Besides, there were fights of bulbuls in the grounds of Asutosh Deb10.

The Bengalis indulged in another form of entertainment. They loved to attend yatra, kabi and half-akhrai. Obscenity was inherent in these forms of recreation. The educated youths of the
Hindu College found these traditional forms of entertainment abhorring. They attended the shows at English playhouses. They longed for something more refined like the English drama and resented the lack of a Bengali theatre. The *Asiatic Journal* of August 1829 published the exhortations of the *Samachar Chandrika* urging for dramatic performances by Bengalis in their mother tongue: ‘[…] men of wealth and rank should associate and establish a theatre on the principle of shares, as the English gentlemen have done and retaining qualified persons on fixed salaries, exhibit a new performance of song and poetry once a month conformably to the written Nataks or plays, and under the authority of a manager […]’ (qtd. Das Gupta *Indian Stage* 279-280).

The English theatres of Calcutta were the forerunners of the Bengali stage. They inspired the educated Bengalis with a love for theatre and a strong desire for the establishment of a Bengali theatre. The English stage in Calcutta used to be patronized by the Bengalis. For example, Dwarakanath Tagore lent support to the Chowringhee Theatre and the Sans Souci Theatre. Pabitra Sarkar says that Bengalis could participate in the English theatre through three different ways. They went as audiences. They could be proprietors. For example, Dwarakanath Tagore bought the Chowringhee Theatre when it was up for auction. The third way was shown by Baishnabcharan Adhya when he appeared in the eponymous role of Othello at the Sans Souci Theatre on August 1, 1848.

‘The Bengali theatre in Calcutta is a direct offshoot of the English theatre in the city which started in the middle of the eighteenth century […] Apart from being historically and chronologically the predecessors of the native theatres they were also the ultimate inspiration and model before the latter’ (S. Mukherjee 1). It is indeed true that the English theatre exercised an enormous influence over its Bengali counterpart. Among the Englishmen, Captain D. L.
Richardson and Dr. H. H. Wilson greatly encouraged the students of the Hindu College in their foray into the field of theatre. Even before the foundation of the Hindu College, Shakespeare's plays had an excellent market in Calcutta. With the opening of the Hindu College these plays were included in the curriculum and dramatic performances became an integral part of classroom teaching. Captain Richardson himself took parts and tried to inculcate the habit of frequenting theatre in his students. He was closely associated with the Chowringhee Theatre. Thus this playhouse greatly influenced the Bengali theatre. In fact the Hindu Theatre, the first amateur theatre of Bengal, owes its existence to Dr. Wilson.

After Lebedev left India, Calcutta had to wait for thirty-five years till Prasannakumar Tagore's Hindu Theatre came up in 1831. Many private theatres mushroomed in the next forty years. However, these theatres were mainly meant for the aristocrats. Since the rich Bengalis stayed at North Calcutta, the amateur as well as the public theatres of the later years were restricted to that part of the city. But gradually the craze for theatres affected the middle-class youth as well. It was an age of imitation and aspiration. Instead of borrowing ideas from the English and adapting those in their traditional ways, Indians wanted to become like their foreign rulers simply by imitating them. However, they gradually got over this tendency.

Prasannakumar Tagore took a lively interest in anything that contributed to the progress of his country. He founded the Hindu Theatre. Though this was the first Bengali theatre, it did not open with a Bengali play. The May issue of the Asiatic Journal of 1832 declares the opening of the theatre on December 28, 1831. They began with the last act of Julius Caesar and a portion of Uttararamcharita of Bhavabhuti, translated by Dr. Wilson. The Calcutta Monthly and the Hindu Reformer of January 1832 added that Dr. Wilson also supervised acting. The amateurs included students of the Hindu College and the Sanskrit College. The dignitaries present
included Sir Edward Ryan, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Col. Young and Radhakanta Deb. Though the theatre was so named, the audience constituted either of Englishmen or the newly educated Bengalis.

The India Gazette wrote on March 31 that the actors of the Hindu Theatre were as talented as their English counterparts. The Samachar Darpan commended the performance at the Hindu Theatre in an article on January 7, 1832. They wrote: ‘ইংরেজ অর্থ বাংলার করিকে নাটককার বেসায়িত্র প্রতূ করিয়াছেন এবং একজন ইংরেজ নিজেক রাখিয়া ঐ বিষয়ক করিয়াছেন আমাদিগের দেশী অধিকারী ও বেশকারী টেরা চিতির এক রকম দেশ করিয়া দেয় […] ইংরেজাভিকারী ভাষাভিত্তিক [sic] সমাবৃত প্রতূ ভাষাত মন্দ কি ভাষারা পো স মাঝারি যাবেন ভাষা অমিলন হোক হায় বিয়াসামান্য কথা’ (qtd. Bandyopadhyay Bangiya Natyassalar Itihas 22) ‘These people have spent their own money in preparing various types of costumes and have appointed an English trainer to teach them this art. People in various roles always look the same under the native proprietors and the costume designer […] There is no doubt that the English proprietors are a thousand times better than their Indian counterparts. It can be believed that the actors dressed by them shall exactly resemble the person they are impersonating’. It is interesting to note that the writer of this article looks upon the Hindu Theatre as a vatra. Indeed many nineteenth-century journals referred to the English theatre as foreign vatra (Raychowdhury 1).

There were some very rude comments as well. Someone signed the ‘East Indian’ wrote in the Asiatic Journal of January – April 1832: ‘[…] what can be worse than to have the best dramatic compositions / in English language murdered outright, night after night, foreign manners misrepresented and instead of holding the mirror upto nature caricaturing everything human? […] A theatre among the Hindus with the degree of knowledge they at present possess will be like building a palace in the waste’ (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Theatre 283-284). Another article published in the Asiatic Journal of January – April 1834 rudely suggested: ‘[…] native aspirants
[...] may perceive the propriety of confining themselves to the representation of dramas to which their complexion would be appropriate (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Theatre 284). The writer does not deny the histrionic skill of the Indians, but feels they should not venture beyond Othello.

An article published in the India Gazette on March 31, 1832 says that Nothing Superfluous was staged on March 21 in presence of distinguished Europeans and Indians. However Hemendranath Das Gupta puts the date of staging of this play as March 29. The costume was reported to be superbly rich and the scenery, though inferior to those at the English theatres, was arranged with much taste. The Calcutta Courier wrote on January 28, 1840 that the Hindu Theatre ceased to exist after one or two years.

The students of the Hindu College and the Sanskrit College performed different scenes from Shakespeare and other plays on the occasion of the annual prize distribution of the year 1837. It was held at the Government White House. The acting was under the direct supervision of Dr. Wilson. This oriental scholar and Captain Richardson13 were the more noted ones amongst the teachers who directed the staging of plays at schools and colleges. Sometimes other English actors and actresses also came to attend the rehearsals of the students. Herman Jeffroy, a French scholar, who was the Head Master of the Oriental Seminary, also helped to create taste for the histrionic art and love of drama among Bengali students.

In 1840, on the occasion of the visit of the Governor General to his school, Jeffroy and his friend Reshi attempted to stage Julius Caesar. The attempt, however, proved abortive due to lack of fund. Hemendranath Das Gupta quotes from the Calcutta Courier: ‘We have on the authority of “Viswakosh” that Julius Caesar [sic] was staged at the Metropolitan Academy in 1852 by the ex-students of the Oriental Seminary formerly trained by Jeffroy and Reshi’ (qtd. Indian Theatre 297). The same view is also shared by Pandit Vidyanidhi, in the Sandarbha Sangraha and Pandit
Saratchandra Ghoshal in *Narayan*. But Jogendranath Basu does not mention this performance in his history of the Metropolitan Academy.

The David Hare Academy was founded on August 7, 1851 at Battala. They staged two shows of *The Merchant of Venice* on February 16 and February 24, 1853. The *Bengal Hurkara* writes on February 28 that Mr. Clinger, the Head Master of the Calcutta Madrasa, trained the students. The same journal announced on April 7, 1853 that Priyanath Datta and some other ex-students of the Oriental Seminary raised a subscription of Rs. 800 to prepare a theatre house where Shakespeare would be staged. It was christened the Oriental Theatre. Soon Kesabchandra Gangopadhyay also joined. They opened with *Othello* (September 26 and October 5, 1853). The other plays to be staged were *The Merchant of Venice* (March 2 and March 17, 1854) and *Henry IV* Part I and Meredith Parker's *Amateur* on February 15, 1855.

The Jorasanko Theatre founded at the house of Pearymohan Basu, the nephew of Nabinchandra Basu, opened with *Julius Caesar* on May 3, 1854. The *Sambad Prabhakar* praised their effort in an article on May 5. They felt that though the students of the David Hare Academy and the Oriental Theatre did put up a splendid show, the *Julius Caesar* at the Jorasanko Theatre was far better. However the *Hindu Patriot* was not pleased and in an article dated May 11, 1854, requested Bengalis to perform Bengali plays.

Though the schools and colleges trained their students in acting and there were several amateur theatres, they were in reality distinctly separated from the society. These never became part of their culture, as was the *yatras* and the *half-akhir*. But it must be admitted that these performances did create actors, gave them an idea of the stage, besides encouraging them to compose new plays. The English theatre gave Bengalis the first training in selecting plays for performances, stage direction and also acting skills.
All the plays performed by Bengalis in the first half of the nineteenth century were in English. The only exception was Nabinchandra Basu’s theatre that opened on October 6, 1835. Though the Hindu Pioneer says that about four plays were acted during the year, Bidyasundar is the only play that is actually known to have been performed. It commenced a little before midnight and continued till 6:30 am. Different scenes were acted in the different parts of Nabinchandra’s garden-house. The audience had to move to watch the play. Nabinchandra spent much to make arrangements from England to show storm and lightening on his stage. However the Hindu Pioneer felt the scenery was far from perfect.

Nabinchandra’s theatre was also popular for introducing women on the stage. The Hindu Pioneer greatly appreciated the portrayal of the female characters, particularly the part of Bidya played by Radhamani. It felt that the performance of women in this play looks forward to social reform: ‘Ought not the very sight of these girls induce our visitors present on this occasion to spare no time in educating their wives and daughters?’ (qtd. Bandyopadhyay Bangiya Natyasalar Itihas 292)

In spite of the presence of quite a few theatres, a permanent playhouse could not be seen. This was so because the performances being in English, they did not appeal to the general public. Even the educated youths could not enjoy it effortlessly. They had to exert themselves to grasp the meaning of the play in a foreign tongue. The actors too had to be very careful about their accent and pronunciation. They were ever mindful lest their throw of speeches goes wrong. They were afraid of offending the refined taste of their English audiences. This could very likely divert their focus from proper acting. Besides, the actors too could not enjoy their work wholeheartedly. Thus the absence of Bengali plays turned out to be the main reason behind this lack of interest. It explains why forty odd years rolled by before the first public theatre opened its doors.
Leaving apart Lebedev’s translated plays and Bidyasundar, Abhijnana Sakuntala by Nandakumar Ray is the first Bengali play to be staged on January 30, 1857. Since then the dramatic tradition in Bengal has remained uninterrupted. The Sambad Prabhakar wrote on January 15 that members of the Jnanapradayini Sabha, held at Asutosh Deb’s house, would stage Abhijnana Sakuntala. The play was staged on the occasion of Saraswati Puja. The Hindu Patriot highly praised Saratchandra Ghosh for his portrayal of the heroine. In fact the audiences were bedazzled by the elegance of Saratchandra when he appeared on the stage with jewellery worth Rs. 20,000 on his person. A second performance of the play took place on February 22. The only other play that they are known to have performed is Mahasweta on September 5, 1857.

Kulin Kulasarbaswa was the first play that dealt with a social issue. It was written by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna on the evils of polygamy practiced by the kulins. The landlord of Rangpur, Kalichandra Raychaudhuri gave out an advertisement in the Rangpur Bartabaha that the writer of the best play, titled Kulin Kulasarbaswa and submitted within six months, shall be given prize money. His aim was to make people realize the evils of polygamy through the medium of drama. The prize went to Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. This play was performed at the house of Ramjay Basak in the first week of March, 1857. About the performance of this play Mahendranath Mukhopadhyay, who played kulacharya in the play writes: ‘রাজেন্দ্রবাবু, রাজেন্দ্রবাবু ২টি তুলির নাইয়া মাষার লাখ টিকি বিলাতিত করিয়া রাখেন গর্তিত সাজিয়ালিয়ান। রাজেন্দ্রবাবুর হাতে একটি গাছাকার গ্যাবারা। তাহাতে পুষ্পিণ্য মধ্যে তাড়িতিকর করিতেন, তথা গোষ্ঠু গাছের অ উরার গায়ে পতিত’ (B. Gupta 78) ‘Rajendrababu and Jagaddurlabhbabu used to play the role of Brahmin pandits with a huge tummy and a tuft of never-cut hair at the back of their head. Rajendrababu would carry a snuff-box made of shell. When the both of them engaged in debate, the audiences would roll with laughter’. The play was
so popular that it was staged many times. At one of the performances, Vidyasagar, Nagendranath Tagore and Kisirimohan Mitra were also present.

Kaliprasanna Sinha’s Bidyotsahini Rangamancha opened with Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s translation of Bhattanarayana’s Veni-Samhara on April 11, 1856. Kaliprasanna himself took a part and was highly praised for his acting. The encouragement that he was offered induced him to find out stage-worthy plays. He translated Kalidasा’s Vikramorvasi and staged it on November 24, 1857 and was commended by the Hindu Patriot on December 3. He then composed Sabitri Satyaban Natak. It is the first of the few dramatic pieces that were actually composed in Bengali. It was staged on June 5, 1858.

The Paikpara Raja Pratapchandra Sinha and his brother Iswarchandra founded the Belgachia Natyasala. There was not a more popular theatre in its day. It was famous for acting, stage décor and music. They spent lavishly to stage Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s translation of Sriharsha’s Ratnavali. Many prominent Englishmen and Indians were present on the occasion. The performance of Kesabchandra Gangopadhyay was superb. He came to be popularly called ‘Garrick’ after the famous English actor. The Sambad Prabhakar highly commended the acting, costume and make-up of the actors.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt was engaged by the Rajas to translate the play into English for the convenience of the British audience. This translation activity gave him the inspiration to compose plays. He soon came up with Sarmishtha, which was staged on September 3, 1859. It was staged six times, the sixth being on September 29, 1859 when Grant and other prominent Indians were present. Michael Madhusudan Dutt translated it into English for the convenience of the British audience. About this production he wrote to Rajnarayan Basu: ‘When Shermista [sic] was acted at Belgachia the impression it created was simply indescribable. Even the least
romantic spectator was charmed by the character of Shermista [sic] and shed tears with her. As for my feelings, they were "things to dream of, not to tell" [...] (qtd. Bandyopadhyay Bangiya Natyasalar Itihas 50-51). Sarmishtha was the last play to be staged at Belgachia Natyasala. This theatre was closed after the untimely death of Iswarchandra Sinha.

When the question of widow remarriage was being debated in Bengal, many plays were composed on this theme. The most prominent among those was Umeschandra Mitra’s Bidhaba Bibaha Natak, staged by Kesabchandra Sen and the youths of his group on April 23, 1859. Since it was staged at the mansion of Ramgopal Mallik, where the Metropolitan College was founded, it was named the Metropolitan Theatre. The Bengal Hurkara wrote on April 27, 1859 that though the play began at 8:00 pm and continued till 3:00 am, all members of the audience sat through the performance till the end. The acting was so good that it seemed to be real. Pratapchandra Majumdar, the biographer of Kesabchandra Sen wrote that Vidyasagar was present on more than one occasion and was so moved by the performance that he failed to check his tears.

Before Jatindramohan Tagore founded the Pathuriaghata Banganatyalay, his younger brother Saurindranath presented Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s translation of Kalidasa’s Malavikagnimitra on the stage of their ancestral house. The first show was in 1859. The Somprakas highly commended the second show held on July 7, 1860. Jatindramohan opened his theatre with his dramatic version of Bidyasundar, which he did after omitting the obscenities. It was staged with Jeman Karma Temni Phal in December 1865. Bujhle Ki Na, a farce, was staged on December 15, 1866. Malatimadhava was first staged on January 14, 1869 and the Sambad Purnachandroday lavished praises for this production. Malavikagnimitra and the farces Chakshudan and Ubhaysamkat were staged on February 26, 1870. The theatre was suspended for a year. The Hindu Patriot wrote on January 15, 1872 that people felt miserable when the Pathuriaghata
Banganatyalay did not perform plays in 1871. They reopened with Rukmini Haran and Ubhaysamkat on January 13, 1872 on the occasion of the visit of Lord Northbrook and other English dignitaries.

The Sobhabazar Private Theatrical Society was founded by the princes of the Sobhabazar royal family. The Sambad Prabhakar wrote on July 27, 1865 that the aim of this theatre was to flush out the superstitions and evil practices of the society. The Hindu Patriot expressed joy seeing the prominent Indians pay their attention to a refined form of entertainment instead of cheap ones. The theatre opened with Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s Ekei Ki Bale Sabhytata on July 18, 1865 and again on July 29. On August 3 the Sambad Prabhakar wrote that if anyone amongst the audience is of the nature of the dramatis personae, he must have simultaneously felt ashamed and amused at seeing the dramatic representation of his secret games. On February 8, 1869 they staged Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s Krishnakumari. The Hindu Patriot praised their endeavour in an article on February 12, while adding that whatever little mistakes cropped up was only due to the absence of an experienced trainer.

After seeing Gopal Urey’s vatra, Saradaprasanna Gangopadhyay, Gunendranath Tagore and Jyotirindranath Tagore felt inspired to open a theatre. They first staged Krishnakumari and then Ekei Ki Bale Sabhytata. They wanted to stage plays that, besides being stage-worthy, would deal with social issues. In an advertisement given out in June 1865 in the Indian Daily News they announced that awards would be given to writers of the best plays on the issues of polygamy, condition of the Hindu women and the atrocities of the zamindars. However in another advertisement in the Indian Mirror on July 15 they withdrew the topic of polygamy, because Ramnarayan Tarkaratna had promised to compose one. He came up with Naba Natak in May 1866. It was staged on January 5, 1867. The acting was excellent. It made Ardhendu Sekhar
Mustafi comment that he learnt whatever was left to know about acting after watching this performance. The Somprakas commented that though there were minor faults, the performance was indeed commendable. Hindu Mahila Natak was composed by Bipinmohan Sengupta and he was duly rewarded. But this play was never staged because the theatre ceased to exist.

Baladeb Dhar and Chunilal Basu, actors of Pathuriaghata Natyasala, founded a theatre that opened with Manomohan Basu’s Ramabhishek Natak in early 1868. Plays for this theatre were written by this dramatist. One member of the audience present on the second performance wrote on March 25, 1868 in the National Paper that the people were not quite pleased because the play centred on a sad event. But that the acting was indeed praiseworthy was proved when most of the audiences were compelled to take out their handkerchiefs to wipe their tears. After five years a few distinguished Bengalis built a theatre house for this group and it was christened the Bowbazar Banganatyalay. It opened on January 17, 1874 with Sati Natak. Harischandra was the next play to be staged in January, 1875.

The craze for drama was not restricted to Calcutta. It soon spread to the suburbs as well. Barisal was the first to stage one sometime around 1857. The play they staged was Swarnasrinkhal. This was followed by Jessore (Sakuntala, January 1, 1858), Janai village (Sakuntala, May 29, 1858), Chuchura (Kulin Kulasarbaswa, July 3, 1858), Mymensingha (Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata, December 21, 1865), Janai (Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata, 1868), Krishnanagar (Nabin Tapaswini, July 17, 1870), Hooghly (Chandrabati, October 15, 1870, Chuchura (Lilabati, April 5, 1872), Tamluk (Ramabhishek, April 13, 1872) and Guwahati (Ramabhishek, May, 1872).

About this craze for theatre, Jatindramohan Tagore wrote to Michael Madhusudan Dutt: ‘এক্ষণে নাটক নাট্যশালা বাঙালি ছাত্রার মধ্যে সংরক্ষণ আরোপর ৱৃন্দের বিশেষ, এই কথ্যের বিভিন্ন থম শীর্ষে মাঠ না। এক্ষণে এই সময়ে বলাইয়া গণ্য
"Nowadays theatre is mushrooming in the country. It is sad that these are not long lived. Still this must be seen as a good sign, because this indicates that people are developing a taste for drama'. These theatres were sakher theater – a theatre in which the rich indulged as a pastime. Just as a child does not play with one toy forever, so also these nouveaux riche could not maintain a single pastime forever. With passage of time, they would stumble upon some other diversion. Thus they gradually ceased to remain attached to the theatre. Since these theatres were actually founded in the houses of the rich and it was again those rich who bore all the expenses, once they lost interest in theatre, the theatre had to shut down. Calcutta thus had to wait for some more time for the opening of the public theatre, where shows would be held regularly, without any break."
NOTES

1 Though *vatra* resembles drama in many ways, it is differentiated by the absence of scene, curtain or stage. It has an abundance of songs. All the actors sit at the place of the performance and only a few stand to announce the next event. It is also marked by amplification of sentiments.

2 *Kabi* is a wit combat through the medium of songs between two parties on mythical topics. One party sings after the other has concluded.

3 *Half-akhrai* was performed by young men of rich families with a variety of musical instruments. It was not practised in the suburbs.

4 In *panchali* the chief musician used to narrate mythological incidents by means of songs. Others of his party joined him in chorus.

5 *Kathakata* deals with narration and commentary on interesting episodes from legends. It includes songs and witticisms.

6 *Kirtan* is a song in praise of God. Later it came to include songs on the divine love of Radha and Krishna. *Khol* and *khanjani* are instruments that are typically used as an accompaniment.

7 In his Preface to his Russian book, the title of which may be translated as ‘Ways of the East Indian Brahmins: An Impartial Analysis of their Religious Practices and Established Customs’, Lebedev says that he was born in 1749. This is supported by the Government records and also by Russov. But if one calculates by the age mentioned on Lebedev’s epitaph, he seems to have been born in 1747. Desiotovski clears this confusion by saying that it was a mistake on the part of his family.

8 Johann Christoph Adelung misguided scholars by saying that Lebedev was born in a peasant family of Ukraine. Though Lebedev never mentioned Yaroslavl as his place of birth, in a letter to
Andrei Afanasevich Simbarski he mentions of his compatriot Fiodore Sovkof, native of Yaroslavl. Desiotovski is of the opinion that because Adelung was proved wrong in many places by later researches, it is wise to believe Lebedev as belonging to Yaroslavl till further evidence points to something else.

9 Beethoven had composed the Russian Melody with the help of the notations of Russian folk songs provided by Razumovski. He therefore dedicated three quartets to his Russian friend (Mamood 69-70).

10 Trevelyan mentions of a similar situation in England where cock-fighting and horse-racing presented much the same picture (B. Ghosh Banglar Bidwatsamaj 62).

11 During this period Asutosh Deb was happy with fights of bulbuls. One such fight was held around the time when the Hindu Theatre was opened. A letter was published in the Samachar Chandrika on January 28, 1832, written by one who was hurt at seeing no mention of this fight, while the paper published an article on the Hindu Theatre!

12 In the year when Prasannakumar Tagore opened the Hindu Theatre, the first play written by a Bengali was published. Interestingly, the playwright, Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay wrote it in English and named it The Persecuted.

13 Captain Richardson was famous for his recitation of Shakespeare. Macaulay once commented that he might forget everything associated with India, but forgetting Richardson's recitation was impossible.

14 On the second performance of The Merchant of Venice, the part of Portia was played by Mrs. Grieg, showing how the English theatre helped in the budding of its Bengali counterpart.

15 Just as in the field of literature, Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and others began their literary career with English but returned...
to Bengali, so did the actors like Kesabchandra Gangopadhyay and Priyanath Datta. Together with their friends they left the Oriental Theatre and played a major role in establishing Belgachia Natyasala and Pathuriaghata Banganatyalay. These people could make their mark only when they used their mother tongue.