CHAPTER 5

Incidents associated with the staging of Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini

Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini, the plays by Upendranath Das, depict all the movements that rocked the nineteenth-century Bengal. They indeed present a faithful picture of the colonial days. The plays portray people from different walks of life. While some have received liberal education, others have not. Thus even within the limited space available to him, the dramatist shows the clash of ideas that was unique to the nineteenth century. The study of the social history of this period will not be complete without reference to these two plays. However, Surendra-Binodini and Sarat-Sarojini are significant for other reasons as well. Two major incidents are associated with the plays. One is the marriage of Golapsundari, who was in the cast of Sarat-Sarojini and the other is the Dramatic Performances Act that was formulated to control the dramatic medium and the stage. While the first caused ripples in the society, the other led to the enactment of a law that remained in force even in the post-independence era. The thesis will not be complete without a discussion of these two incidents.

Sukumari’s Marriage

Golapsundari was one of the four actresses to be recruited by Saratchandra Ghosh for his Bengal Theatre. She stayed with her mother near the temple of Mahesh at Serampore. She appeared in the role of Sukumari in Sarat-Sarojini on January 2, 1875. She rendered the part so perfectly that she came to be known by the name of the character she impersonated. Later she also appeared as Binodini in Surendra-Binodini at the Great National Theatre. Golapsundari was a good singer and actress (D. Gupta 22). Upendranath Das arranged the marriage of Sukumari and Goshthabihari Datta according to Act III. However before going into the discussion of the
marriage and its consequences in the lives of the couple, introduction of the Act III would be an
unavoidable digression.

When the Widow Remarriage Act was still under preparation, the Young Bengal tried to take
it a step further. Their spokespersons, Rasikkrishna Mallik, Kisoricand Mitra, Radhanath
Sikdar, Pearychand Mitra and others, appealed to the committee to make certain amendments.
They justified the need for making the amendment by writing:

It does not lay down what shall constitute valid widow marriage. Such definition appears
to be absolutely necessary, since widow marriage, when it comes to pass, will be a new
fact in the Hindu Social System, and it may be naturally expected then that different men
will employ different modes of solemnizing it, and also it may be apprehended that such,
marriages will often be disputed in a Court of Justice (qtd. B. Ghosh Vidyasagar o Bangali
Samaj 262).

They suggested solemnizing the marriage after signing two agreements. The suggested
agreement would be:

DECLARATION A

I ..., widower or bachelor, and I ... widow or spinster, do hereby jointly and severally
declare that of our free will and accord, we have solemnized our marriage with each other
on this day of ...

Witness our hands etc.

The above declaration were made in the presence of ...
AGREEMENT B

I ..., having taken ... as my wedded wife on this day, do hereby bind myself not to contract a second marriage during her lifetime, and in the breach of this engagement on my part, to pay her the sum of Company’s Rupees ... on the date of any second marriage.

(qtd. B. Ghosh Vidyasagar o Bangali Samaj 262).

These agreements were to be registered within six months of the marriage and both the husband and the wife were required to abide by it. The Young Bengal got this petition signed by 375 people and sent it to the Government of India on February 7, 1856.

A few days before the Young Bengal sent their petition, Kailaschandra Datta sent another one signed by 44 people on February 1. They appealed ‘for the insertion of a Marriage Registration Clause, under which marriages of Hindoo Widows in whatsoever manner performed, will be held valid / provided they are registered by the contracting parties before public officials appointed by the Government for the purpose’ (qtd. B. Ghosh Vidyasagar o Bangali Samaj 262-263). They wanted to have a Widow Remarriage Act in the form of a Civil Marriage Act. They wanted the law to extend so that any two consenting adult male and female, whether a widow or not, could get married by it. Though the young Bengal and others showed a better foresight by appealing for a Marriage Registration Act together with the Widow Remarriage Act, the Government was not convinced. People had to wait for another 16 years when the Civil Marriage Act III was passed in 1872, mainly due to the efforts of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj.

In 1861, Debendranath Tagore introduced a non-idolatrous form of marriage. It was called Vaidik form of marriage and avoided the traditional Hindu symbols of the salagram stone or the sacred fire.¹ The progressive younger Brahmos with Kesabchandra Sen as their leader went a step further by arranging intercaste marriage within the Brahmo fold.² However this created a rift
within the Brahmos. But the younger group was adamant and would not move from their chosen path. Their forms of marriage gradually began approaching the western model. They introduced mutual marriage vows followed by prayers and hymn-singing.³

By 1868, the Nababidhan Brahmo Samaj felt doubtful of the legal validity of this form of marriage. Kesabchandra Sen succeeded in introducing a bill in the viceregal council to indirectly legalize this form of marriage. The Native Marriage Bill provided a civil form of marriage applicable to non-Christians. This would supplement the religious form and further validate the unorthodox marriages. The orthodox Hindus vehemently opposed this Bill, thereby holding it up for two years at the select committee stage for consideration. They argued that the Government had no right to interfere in the sacramental Hindu marriage through the “godless” civil ceremony of registration. It was then that the Law Member James Stephen modified the Bill in 1871. He made it applicable only for the Brahmos and renamed it Brahmo Marriage Bill. It was now the turn of the Adi Brahmo Samaj to resist it. They were afraid of the Bill separating them from the parent Hindu community. It was then renamed as the Special Marriage Bill and was passed as Act III of the year 1872. This marriage was to be monogamous. The bride should be at least 14 years old, while the groom had to be 18 years old. The parties had to admit during the marriage that they professed no particular Indian religion. Thus this form of marriage would remain open to all willing to renounce traditional religions.

Upendranath Das played an active role in social reforms. Throwing open the doors of the public theatre to the prostitutes did not satisfy him. He wanted something more. He was under the impression that if the actresses got married, they could lead happy and chaste lives. They would also return to the folds of the respectable society. When Golapsundari was in the cast of Sarat-Sarojini at the Bengal Theatre on January 2, 1875, Goshthabihari Datta played the role of
the scientist, Haridas. Upendranath Das found a scope of giving a concrete shape to his views. The idea of getting Golapsundari and Goshthabihari married came to his mind. On February 12 the Education Gazette wrote that these two artistes of the Bengal Theatre were to be married according to the Act III. The marriage was solemnized on February 16, 1875. After their marriage, Golapsundari came to be known as Mrs. Sukumari Datta.

Upendranath Das was condemned by the society for the commendable act of getting the artistes married. After their marriage Goshthabihari Datta became a social outcast. He hailed from a rich Subarnabanik family of Calcutta. He had to leave his own house and stay with his wife in a separate one. There were wide protests. People sang: ‘আমি গোলাপ সুন্দরী / আমি কুমারী গোষ্ঠী / অমৃতা শ্রী গৌরী / দুনিয়ার লোক দেখে যা দে’ (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 83) ‘I am Sukumari – a prostitute / Myself and my husband perform on the stage / Come and see us’. It is needless to say that this marriage raised a hue and cry among the public. They hated the prostitutes, but they would go against any act of betterment. Binodini talks about this tragedy in the lives of prostitutes. She says in Amar Katha: ‘The path that we are destined to take is always condemned [...] even our attempts to protect ourselves invite censure’ (R. Bhattacharya 84).

Upendranath Das used to support Goshthabihari and his wife. After the Dramatic Performances Act was introduced, his father sent him to study law in England. In his absence Goshthabihari could not support himself and his wife. He followed the dramatist and boarded a ship sailing to England as a labourer. At England, Upendranath Das gave him the job of a hotel boy, but the latter soon died. In the meanwhile Sukumari gave birth to a daughter. She returned to theatre to support herself. She was in the cast of plays after that, but nothing more can be ascertained about her personal life, or about what happened to her daughter.
Introduction of the Dramatic Performances Act

Before discussing the events leading to the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, it would be necessary to discuss the 'national' dramas of the day. All these plays, which were performed at various places, during a span of about three years contributed towards building an atmosphere of protest against the British ruler. These plays created the background against which the plays performed by the Great National Theatre from February 19, 1876 for about two weeks are to be studied. The popularity of these pieces also indicates that they perfectly fitted the mindset of their audience. They played a major role in strengthening the nationalistic feelings of the Indians in the pre-independence era.

The protest plays began with Bharat Matar Bilap that was performed on February 15, 1873 at the Hindu Mela under the auspices of the National Theatre. It represented Mother India, dressed in rags and with dishevelled hair, pale and morose at the miseries and degradation of her sons who are reluctant to do anything to better their condition. Satyendranath Tagore's song ‘‘Malina mukhachandrama Bharata tomari’’ (‘O India, thy moonlike face is dark with sorrow’) used to move the audience to tears’⁴ (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 256).

Among the plays that followed were Hirak Churna Natak⁵ written by Amritalal Basu and staged on June 17, 1875. It represents the farcical trial of Malhar Rao Gaikwad of Baroda who was accused of having attempted to poison Col. R. Phayre, the British political agent in the Baroda court. Though the former was proved innocent at the Court, he was forced to abdicate and was exiled from his kingdom. Puru-Bikram⁶ was staged on October 3, 1875 at the Great National Theatre. This drama, written by Jyotirindranath Tagore described the heroic deeds of the heroic King Puru, who bravely fought against Alexander the Great. On November 7, 1875 was staged Bharate Yaban depicting the historical resistance of Prithwiraj Chauhan against
Muslim invaders. Banger Sukhabasan and Sarojini\(^7\) were performed on December 26, 1875. The former was based on Baktiar Khilji’s conquest of Bengal. To this list may be added Sarat-Sarojini\(^8\) staged on January 2, 1875 at the Bengal Theatre and Surendra-Binodini\(^9\) staged on December 31, 1875 at the Great National Theatre. Upendranath Das wrote both these plays. Though both these dramas were centred on particular families, they were full of scenes, dialogues and songs that inspired patriotic feelings.

The Bengal Theatre too was not to be left behind. They came up with Malhar Rao staged on May 22, 1875; Banga Bijeta written by Rameschandra Datta and enacted on September 11, 1875; Palashir Yuddha by Nabinchandra Sen on September 25, 1875; Banger Parajay on March 14, 1976 and also Ajmer Kumari. Then comes the phenomenon of Nildarpan as the first protest play of the Bengali theatre. Hemendranath Das Gupta writes:

\[\text{Nildarpan was not a political play, an excellent acting of it created a strong resentment amongst the audience. That this happened is beyond doubt. Torture of the peasants caused intense pain, the attack on Kshetramani created abhorrence for the wicked Rogue and Torap’s attacking the white spontaneously drew the sympathy of the audience. It can be easily assumed that the English would not see the play favourably.}\]

These plays produced tremendous effect on the minds of the people and naturally the attention of the British Government was drawn towards them. However these patriotic plays were not the immediate cause of the Dramatic Performances Act. Nor was the censorship a
reaction to the irreverent sketches of Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi in the immensely popular farce *Mustafi Saheb ka Pakka Tamasa*. Rustom Bharucha says: ‘Even if the British were offended by Ardhendu’s satire of the Raj (and I am tempted to believe that they were amused by it), it is unlikely that they would have instituted a censorship law on account of its excesses’ (21).

Though the staging of these dramas was not sought as an apology for passing the Dramatic Performances Act, the incidents relating to the Prince’s visit to the house of Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay were, however, made so. Before going into these incidents, the visit of the Prince needs to be discussed.

The son of Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VII, visited Calcutta on December 23, 1875. Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay, a junior pleader of the Calcutta High Court and a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, entertained the Prince at his house at Bakulbagan, Bhowanipore on January 3, 1876. The Prince arrived at the house of this Bengali lawyer, with the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook and other English ladies. At the entrance girls blew conch shells to welcome their eminent guests. After this, the Prince was taken to the zenana. But he went alone, leaving behind not just the Viceroy but also the ladies. Lord Northbrook is said to have protested against the Prince’s reception at a Hindu zenana. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote on 7 Magh, 1282 BS: ‘It is said that the Prince went to the Zenana [sic], leaving the ladies that accompanied him, behind and His Excellency, as a mark of displeasure wanted to tender resignation’ (qtd. Das Gupta *Indian Stage* II 265).

The women of Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay’s zenana received the Prince. He was given a traditional Bengali welcome with all the accompanying rituals and ceremonies. He was presented with ‘an emerald necklace, one pair of gold bangles, one pair of gold neck chain and some pair of Dacca embroidery muslin’ (Das Gupta *Indian Stage* II 265). Mrs. Mukhopadhyay with her
female retinue and neighbouring friends was all attention to the Prince. He too was extremely pleased to see them. Moreover the Prince seemed to have been astonished at the jewellery that Mrs. Mukhopadhyay and her companions had put on their persons. Before leaving he told Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay: ‘I see no difference between your house and my Windsor Palace’ (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 266).

This incident, however innocent, was severely commented upon and raised a storm of protest throughout the country. The Prince, in spite of being the son of the Queen and himself the future King, was, after all, an outsider. ‘What created a stir amongst the Bengali intelligentsia was that the Prince had been permitted to see the ladies of the house, who welcomed him in the traditional Indian style, blowing conch shells’ (Bharucha 22). The press and the stage joined in expressing severe condemnation of the action. The Hindu Patriot regretted ‘that the national feeling had been outraged at the price the Babu paid for his honour (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 267-268). The Amrita Bazar Patrika was more outspoken in its protest. On 23rd Paush, 1282 BS it wrote: ‘The Hindu society can bear all oppression, but no shock to its womanhood. Any person, who allows the family to be thus defiled from outside, is a disgrace, nay a great enemy, to the Hindu’ (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 268).

This action of Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay received strong censure from the society. Satirical songs poured forth from all quarters. The Great National Theatre mercilessly satirized the visit of the Prince. At the earliest opportunity they prepared and staged the farce Gajadananda o Yubaraj.10 On February 19, 1876 this farce was staged together with Sarojini. There is confusion regarding the name of the author of this farce. Abinas Gangopadhyay states Upendranath Das to be the author of this farce in his book Girischandra (126) and so does Hemendranath Das Gupta in his The Indian Stage Vol. II. But he contradicts himself in his Bengali book Bharatiya
Natyamancha Vol. II where he says that there are different views regarding the authorship of this farce. It must be noted what Girischandra Ghosh says:

‘ভারত-মাতা’ প্রকৃতি নাট্যনাল ধর্মোপাধ্যায়ের যাহা জক্ষীর হইয়াছিল, তে সম্প্রতি অর্ধেন্দুর প্রবক্ষায়। যে সকল করণ অভিনয় হইত, ভারতে বিশেষ রাজনৈতিক কাঠামো বিদ্যমান এবং তীর্থ বাচ-পতিতে ঐ সকল সকল রচিত না হইলেও অর্ধেন্দুর অভিনয়ের সৌন্দর্য বিকাশ হইত। অর্ধেন্দুর ধারণা ছিল রাজনীতি তৈরী অনেক কৃতীত্বের প্রতি প্ররোচক যুগ্ম উদ্ভাস করা যায়, অনেক ক্ষেত্রে পরিষ্কার হয়, নীতিশাস্ত্রে, রাজনৈতিক বিষয়া রসময় তৈরী তেওয়া নাম, রসময়ের কার্য-এলাকা কার্য - তাহার জ্ঞান ছিল (Nat Churamani Swargiya Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi 353) ‘Bharat-Mata, etc. were performed at the National Theatre at the insistence of Ardhendu. The pantomimes that were staged had a strong political sting. Though these were not composed in a strong satiric vein, Ardhendu’s acting completely depicted it. He believed that stage can raise people’s hatred towards many evil practices. It can impart moral and political values. He also believed that working for the stage was same as working for one’s country’.

The prologue and songs that were written by Girischandra are now without any trace. However Hemendranath Das Gupta managed to get a few lines from Amritalal Basu (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 79). In Gajadananda o Yubarai the women sang in chorus as they moved round the Prince:

ওলা সূরাত পারণে আর, ধ’রন নিয়ে গা
কেন গায়ে পড়িল ওলা সাজে যা
যাত নিচে কাড়ি, চলতে কি পারি,
একটু করে চল
ওলা ধরে নিয়ে গা (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha Vol. II 79).

Oh I can no longer go round, my feet are aching

Why are you inclining on me – move away

With a basket in my hand, how can I walk
Please stop moving a while

Oh I have sweated all over.

This was followed by a quoted poem composed by Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay satirizing his brother pleader as ‘ফোটো দিয়ে মুক্তির দান’ (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 79) ‘Long live, thou son of a Mukhopadhyay’. Though he had earlier gone so far as to address the Prince of Wales as ‘brother’, he could not tolerate the outsider’s presence in the Hindu zenana and composed the poem Bajimat. Kshetramani used to sing:

আমি গীতী শক্ত
ভাবে কিছু বোকা ডেল
অনেক মুক্তির ফল
আমার মতন গীতী ডেল (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 80).

With me present, your aunt
What need to worry, you silly boy?
It requires many virtuous deeds
To have an aunt like me.

In a scene in front of the High Court, Amritalal Mukhopadhyay used to sing: ‘(এর) কঠ হচ্ছ ছাড় / কথিত্যন’ (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 80). It is difficult to translate these two lines into English while retaining the sting present in them.

February 23, 1876 was declared to be the benefit night of Amritalal Basu and that day Gajadananda o Yubaraj was again staged with Sati ki Kalankini (Mitra Amritalal Basur Jibani o Sahitya 67). Rumours were heard about the annoyance of the Viceroy with the farce. Therefore on February 26 the Great National Theatre presented Karnat Kumar and Hanuman-charitra – the same farce with a different name. The Viceroy ordered this performance to be stopped (Das
Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha II 80). On March 1, 1876 the Great National Theatre again
prepared to come up with Surendra-Binodini and the same farce with some modification,
criticizing the spirit of Sir Stuart Hogg, the Commissioner of Police and Mr. Lamb, the
Superintendent of the Police for having taken up a hostile attitude. The farce was given a new
name – The Police of Pig and Sheep. It was advertised that these would be presented, together
with a stirring English speech on actresses by the director, Upendranath Das.

The various poems composed on the topic together with the farces staged at the Great
National Theatre under different names, made the city too hot for Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay.
As Hemendranath Das Gupta says: ‘[…] after the third performance was announced,
Government finding that the police has been calumniated, came to his rescue, in right earnest and
set its machinery in force in favour of the prince’s [sic] distinguished host’ (Indian Stage II 270).
Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy issued an Ordinance from Simla as an emergency measure under
the Government of India Act, with a view to give the Government of Bengal power to control the
dramatic performances. This was to remain in force for two months till the end of May, until a
new law on the subject was to be passed by the Viceregal Legislative Council. Armed with this
authority Mr. Lambert, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Mr. Lamb, Superintendent of Police
with Amritalal Dutt, Inspector of Syampukur Thana, came to the Great National Theatre on
March 1, 1876 when the performance was going on. In absence of Upendranath Das, they
handed over an order to Amritalal Basu, forbidding them to stage farces like Gajadananda o
Yubaraj, Hanuman-charitra, The Police of Pig and Sheep and similar other ones, which are ‘[…]’
scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest’ (S.
Mukherjee 45), on pain of penalty, under the Ordinance.
It is not possible to get at the farces anywhere, because Gajadananda o Yubaraj was in manuscript and Hanuman-charitra and The Police of Pig and Sheep were extempore. But an idea may be formed from what the Amrita Bazar Patrika writes on March 1, 1876 about the repressive measures of the Government:

The story is soon told. The National Theatrical Company [sic] entertained crowded house with the farce Gajadananda and the Prince. A cry was raised by the friends of Jagadananda that the piece was obscene and disloyal. We did not see it before, but we have seen it since and consider it only a harmless piece enough. However painful it might be to the feelings of Babu Jagadananda and his friends to be thus caricatured, the farce was neither disloyal nor obscene.

Viceroy gives Lieutenant Governor an Ordinance but will the Police [sic] be Judges? The next move of Lord Northbrook is to suppress objectionable theatrical performance by force (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 271).

As can be easily comprehended, the obscenity, the slander, the sedition laid merely in the caricature of ‘the prince’s [sic] distinguished host’ (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 270). By hook or by crook, the Government wanted to stop the farces staged at the Great National Theatre.

The Ordinance alarmed the people. The Hindu Patriot with its conciliatory policy advised the Government a milder course. They too were much surprised over the feelings of the Hindus regarding the visit of the Prince to the house of Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay. But they were afraid that ‘a charge of criminal offence might not end in conviction up to the High Court and which might necessitate the presence of the Royal Highness and his suite, which would make him unnecessarily unpopular and that of the Hindu ladies, who assembled to receive him’ (Das
They wished that the Government had simplified the matter by merely writing a letter to the director.

The *Indian Mirror* wrote on March 1, 1876: ‘We need hardly say that the Ordinance is issued in consequent on performance of that scandalous farce entitled “Gajanund” [sic] on the stage of a disreputable Native Theatre in Calcutta. All honour to Lord Northbrook for the prompt action taken by him to unhold [sic] the cause of public morality and decency’ (qtd. Bandyopadhyay 193). The *Bharat Samskarak* wrote on March 3: ‘The managers of the National Theatre, alarmed by the wrath of the police, stopped the performance of the low-taste drama Gajadananda o Yubaraj. They performed the same drama by replacing the Prince by the son of Aurangzeb, the emperor of Delhi and Gajadananda by Hanuman. However the Government has prepared the cudgel for such dramas’.

When the performance of *The Police of Pig and Sheep* was stopped, there was a wave of resentment among the theatre people. They took revenge during the acting of *Surendra-Binodini*. In the play the Magistrate McCrindle tries to attract Birajmohini, Surendra’s sister by saying: ‘আমাকে গেরিয়া ভর পাইছে কেন, সুন্দরী? আমি কারও নাহি, করুকুর নাহি,- তোমাকে ভুষণ করিব না’ (Das *Surendra-Binodini* 43) ‘Why are you scared of me, pretty woman? I am neither a tiger, nor a bear. -- I won’t devour you’. During the performance of *Surendra-Binodini* on March 1, 1876, the manager Amritalal Basu, who was doing the part of McCrindle added: ‘আমি পিঙ্ক নাহি, শীতল নাহি’ ‘I am neither a pig nor a sheep’. The introduction of these words proved to be the bane of the theatre.
On March 4, 1876 when *Sati ki Kalankini* was being staged, the police came and arrested the director Upendranath Das, manager Amritalal Basu, proprietor Bhubanmohan Neogi, Mahendralal Basu, Matilal Sur, Amritalal Mukhopadhyay, Sibchandra Chattopadhyay, Gopalchandra Das and Ramtaran Sanyal. The proprietor was not at the theatre that day, but he surrendered at the Court the following day. Girischandra Ghosh was also at the theatre that day, but had already left before the police came. Significantly, the actors were condemned not for ridiculing the British political authority, but for producing the play *Surendra-Binodini* that was considered obscene by the Government.

*Surendra-Binodini* was earlier staged at the Bengal Theatre and also at the Great National Theatre on December 31, 1875. But the British rulers did not find anything obscene in those productions. The problem arose when the play was staged on March 1, 1876. As can be well understood, it was the words of Amritalal Basu in the role of the Magistrate Mr. McCrindle that instigated the police. It was the same night when Mr. Lamb and his associates had communicated the order under the Ordinance. But curiously enough, the subject of the prosecution was not that the text had departed from the original, but that the drama was obscene.

There is a scene in *Surendra-Binodini* in which the Magistrate Mr. McCrindle tries to attack Birajmohini, who, in an attempt to save herself jumps down from the balcony. At this the Magistrate exclaims, 'By the dragon – actually jumped down from the verandah!' (Das *Surendra-Binodini* 45). He comes down and after some time brings Birajmohini in his arms to the stage. Her costume in the front is bloodstained. Mr. Robertson of the River Police had been to the theatre in plain clothes. He reported strongly 'on the drama being libellous and obscene, tending to show that the blood was the result of the outrage of the girl by the European
Magistrate whom it tended to show as a monster. Besides the idea was that as the girl was not married, no Hindu would ever marry her but a fallen one’ (Das Gupta Indian Stage 279).

On March 5, 1876 the actors were sent up for trial. They were convicted of wilfully exhibiting obscene representations and reciting obscene words in public place. The public of Calcutta were shocked. Many learned people expressed their opinion in favour of the play, saying that such ‘obscenities’ exist in many English plays and also in Shakespeare and Walter Scott. Rev. K.M. Bandyopadhyay said that the so-called licentious part of Surendra-Binodini closely resembles the episode of the Knight Templer and the Jewish maiden Rebecca in Ivanhoe. The only difference lies in Birajmohini jumping off the balcony and then being brought in front of the audience in an injured condition (Raychowdhury 72). Amongst those who gave evidence in favour of the play were Mr. Owen, the interpreter of the High Court, Syamacharan Sarkar, the main translator of the High Court, Pandit Jogendranath Vidyabhusan, Pandit Maheschandra Nyayratna, Dr. Rajendralal Mitra, Dwijendranath Tagore, Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay and Rev. K.M Bandyopadhyay. But the trying Magistrate Mr. Dickens still considered the play to be obscene. On March 8, 1876 he rejected the evidence and sentenced Upendranath Das and Amritalal Basu to one-month simple imprisonment and discharged the rest of the actors. Both the prisoners stoically accepted the sentence.

Ganeschandra Chandra, the well-known solicitor and lawyer, tried to get Upendranath Das and Amritalal Basu released on bail. At his instruction Messers Robert Allen and Wood appeared before the Magistrate, considered the above prosecution unjust and had both of them released on bail from the Criminal Bench of the High Court. Mr. W.C. Bonerjee, Bar-at-Law moved the petition for bail before their lordships. Justice Phear anc Markby heard the appeal at the High Court. Messers Manomohan Ghosh, Palit and Branson were the barristers. Justice Phear,
considering the evidence, felt that there was no ground on which the conviction could be legally supported. Justice Markby too concurred in the judgement. The accused were set at liberty. It is needless to say that Justice Phear had to face the wrath of the Government for giving his verdict. It was said that he was forced to resign. But Justice Phear had won the hearts of the people. To meet the expenses of the appeal a benefit performance of Sarojini was organized on March 11, 1876 with an appeal to the public: 'Patrons and countrymen, now or never is the opportunity to help us' (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 283). And everyone heartily responded to the call.

It was March 20, 1876 when the appeal was heard at the Calcutta High Court. Justice Phear and Markby acquitted Upendranath Das and Amritalal Basu of the charges placed against them. On the very same day Mr. Hobbhouse introduced the Dramatic Performances Bill in the Viceroy’s Council. As Hemendranath Das Gupta says: ‘[… ] it is a very curious coincidence that on the very day Mr. Phear’s[sic] judgement was delivered (20th March, 1876), Mr. Hobbhouse, the Law Member moved the Bill at the Legislative Council […]’ (Indian Stage II 289). While presenting the Bill, Mr. Hobbhouse said that the respected Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay had done nothing wrong. There was no legal offence or damage to self-esteem in his act. Still he had been much ridiculed and insulted. If the society did not commend his act, people could very well snap the social ties with the pleader, rather than thus defaming him. He said that the introduction of the Bill was to make such acts punishable by law. He further said: ‘Now it has been found in all times and in all countries that no greater stimulus could be supplied to excite the passion of mankind than that supplied by means of drama and that no feat was too difficult for the dramatist, who could produce any effect he pleased on the minds of the spectators’ (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 264).
After the presentation of the Bill for consideration, many protest meetings were held. The press too joined hands. But these fell on deaf ears. After the members of the Viceroy's Council considered the Bill, it was placed before a select committee consisting of Mr. Cockrel, Raja Narendrakrishna Deb Bahadur, Sir Alexander Arbuthnot and Mr. Hobbhouse. They unanimously agreed that the Bill should be passed. It was then placed before the Legislative Council for final debates. The Bill received the assent of the Governor General of India, Lord Lytton, who had recently arrived in India. Finally, on December 16, 1875 the Bill was passed into an Act.

Hemendranath Das Gupta says, 'The anticipated failure of the above prosecution seems to be the real cause of forcing the Bill into the Dramatic Performances Act' (Indian Stage II 289). The Dramatic Performances Act ran thus: 'That whenever the Government was of opinion that any dramatic performance was scandalous or defamatory or likely to excite feelings of dissatisfaction towards the Government or likely to cause pain to any private party or was otherwise prejudicial to the interest of the public, Government might prohibit such a performance' (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 289). This Act further gives power to any Magistrate, if he believes that any place is being used for a performance prohibited under the Act, to authorize any officer to enter that place by force and take into custody 'all persons whom he finds there for the said purpose' (Das Gupta Indian Stage II 289).

It must be noted that the opinion on obscenity in a drama differs. So it is not fair to leave it to the executive authorities to pronounce what is obscene and what is not. As in the case of the performance of Surendra-Binodini, the executive authorities called it obscene, but the High Court, upon the evidence of the experts, found the drama to be free from obscenity. Hemendranath Das Gupta says: 'The obnoxious Bill, therefore took away from the constituted courts of justice the power of giving a judicial decision upon the character of a drama, and has
thus vested the sole authority in the executive officers. The principle underlying the Bill was therefore open to serious objection’ (Indian Stage II 291).

The Amrita Bazar Patrika complained on December 14, 1876: ‘It [the Bill] so much curtailed the liberty of the people’ (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 291). It further wrote: ‘That we are practically lifeless under the burden of the administrators and if the Government continues to rule by the enforcement of such laws, we shall have to seek a region where the frowns of the present administration will simply fall on our deaf ears’ (qtd. Das Gupta Indian Stage II 291). All except the Indian Mirror and Sulabh Samachar felt resentful of the Act. However the Act extended to the whole of India. It conferred powers on the Local Governments to stop the performance and suppress or forfeit any drama that it considered seditious, obscene or defamatory.

Though the immediate provocation for the introduction Dramatic Performances Act was the satirical plays, the real purpose was ‘to put a curb on plays which contained patriotic sentiments and roused national feelings against the British Government’ (S. Mukherjee 46). The Government had been watching the national plays with grave concern. ‘Gajadananda o Yuvaraj [sic] simply provided them with an excuse to come down heavily upon the public theatre with a heavy hand’ (S. Mukherjee 46). Girischandra Ghosh lamented: ‘চলন্ত কি পুরাণ না নাট্যকের অধিবর্তন্তা ও সমালোচক পুলিশ সার্ভিসক-সম্প্রদায়ের কোন প্রতিবাদ নাই। পুলিশের নির্দেশনার চাহিদা, dialogues ও scene বদলাতে হয়’ (qtd. Raychowdhury 55) ‘How unfortunate for the country that the police are the judge and critic of drama. The literati do not protest. Characters, dialogues and scenes have to be changed according to the instructions of the police’. Gradually, instead of expressing their political aspirations, the dramatist felt safe with stories from the Puranas or The Arabian Nights. The Act thus suppressed the healthy growth of drama.11
NOTES

1 Debendranath Tagore used this new form of marriage for his daughter. She was 14 years old, contrary to the usual age of 10 or 12 years.

2 In 1864, Parbaticharan Das married a widow of a different Hindu caste.

3 In 1866, Prasannakumar Sen married Rajlakshmi Mitra by exchange of mutual vows.

4 This song was written at the suggestion of Sisirkumar Ghosh, the founder and editor of the Amrita Bazar Patrika.

5 In this play, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi was Malhar Rao Gaikwad, Amritalal Basu was Mr. Scobble, Advocate General, Lakshmi was Lakshmi Bai and Kumar was Jagattarini (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha I 29).

6 In this play, Mahendralal Basu was Alexander, Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay was Puru and Khsetramani was the queen Ailobila.

7 Here Sarojini was played by Binodini, Bijay Singh by Amritalal Basu, Lakshman Singh by Matilal Sur, Bhairebacarya by Gopal Das and Ranadhir by Mahendranath Basu. This play was immensely popular with the audience (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha I 30).

8 In this play Mahendarlal Basu appeared as Sarat, Rajkumari played the role of Sarojini, Golapsundari was Sukumari and Goshtabihari Datta was the scientist Haridas.

9 Mahendralal Basu was Surendra, Sukumari was Birajmohini, Dharmadas Sur was Haripriya and Amritalal Basu was the Magistrate McCrindle (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha I 30).

10 In the farce, Mahendralal Basu appeared as the Prince, Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay played Gajadananda, while Kshetramani was Pisi or the aunt (Das Gupta Bharatiya Natyamancha I 30). However Hemendranath reverses the roles of Nagendranath and Mahendralal in the second volume of Bharatiya Natyamancha (80).
It is interesting to note that soon Lord Lytton also passed the Vernacular Press Act into law on December 16, 1877. Thus both the press and the stage were brought under the control of the Government. The ban on the press was, however, soon lifted by the Government of Lord Ripon, but the Dramatic Performances Act continued even after the independence and 'has been abolished only recently as a result of persistent agitation' (S. Mukherjee 46).