CHAPTER II

Shakespeare in Calcutta

This chapter looks at Britain’s entry into India and the consequent colonial strategies adopted by them. The major thrust of the chapter’s argument is the use of English education, especially the introduction of Shakespeare into the “curriculum” to assert the English moral and cultural ‘superiority’ over the ‘natives’. However, it would be incorrect to maintain that William Shakespeare’s plays made their way into India only through English education. Much before English education was institutionalized in India, educated Indians, especially in cities like Calcutta and Bombay, had become familiar with the bard through the playhouses set up by the Englishmen in Calcutta. As Sushil Kumar Mukherjee notes, the “names of David Garrick (1717-79) the great eighteenth century Shakespearean actor and Garrick’s Drury Lane Theatre, built in 1662, were familiar in Calcutta among the readers of Shakespeare and the lovers of theatre” (1). The first play-house might have been set up in Calcutta in 1831 but there was enough theatrical activity in Calcutta that created a need for Indians to set up their own theatre on English lines as S. K. Bhattacharya writes, “the English playhouses by their production of English, especially Shakespeare’s plays, created an appetite for theatrical performances” (29).

I. English Theatre in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries in Calcutta

Shakespeare productions in India date back to mid-18th century when British officers in India staged the Bard’s plays along with those of other English eminent playwrights for entertainment. The sources of entertainment were limited to the British officials and so English theatre was ‘imported’ to Calcutta. Many playhouses came into existence as a consequence. Nandi Bhatia notes that theatres formed an important part
of the English social life in India as early as 1757 (2004, 12). Poonam Trivedi and Jyotsna Singh note that the earliest modern theatre to be established in India was The Calcutta Theatre (1775) (13 & 1996, 121). However, theatre scholars like Sushil Kumar Mukherjee and Kironmoy Raha state that much before The Calcutta Theatre, the first English theatre to be set up in Calcutta was The Playhouse in 1753 that received help from David Garrick, one of the most celebrated actors of London (2). The Playhouse shut down soon with Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula’s attack on Calcutta in 1756. It was 19 years later in 1775 during the Governor Generalship of Warren Hastings (1772-1785) that The New Playhouse or The Calcutta Theatre was built at the expense of one lakh rupees. The Calcutta Theatre ran for 33 years and was closed due to financial strain. David Garrick, who had earlier helped to set up the Playhouse, supplied a number of painted scenes from London and an artist named Bernard Messink. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee quotes from a letter of 26 March 1781 (by Mrs. Eliza Fay) that this playhouse was well-equipped and “very neatly fitted up and the scenery and decoration quite equal to what could be expected here” (cited in Mukherjee 2). The Calcutta Theatre staged plays of Shakespeare, Massinger, Congreve, Sheridan and others. Trivedi notes that among various plays staged here, some eight plays were by Shakespeare which were performed more than once (14). The Calcutta Theatre was known for its performances and got special mention in the reviews of the newspapers. For example, the following is a review of The Merchant of Venice published in Selections from Calcutta Gazettes (29):
On 11 November 1784, a production of *Hamlet* was advertised as follows (*Selections from Calcutta Gazettes* 30):

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**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH, 1784.**

*Calcutta.*

We hear the Tragedy of "Hamlet" will be performed in the course of next week; but the managers have thought proper to omit the farce of the "Mock Doctor." For the better accommodation of the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Settlement, the Gallery is to be converted into Boxes.

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*Calcutta Gazette* dated 28 Feb. 1788 reports on the production of *Henry IV* at Calcutta Theatre as follows:

The representation of such a character as Falstaff requires very uncommon and eccentric powers. It is only one of all Shakespeare’s, never (we believe) even attempted by Garrick who certainly thus tacitly acknowledges his want of the requisite talents to do it justice. The gentleman who performed the part on Friday Night though he gave it almost entirely after a manner of his own, conveyed the humour of his author very irresistibly to the audience.

Another performance of *Richard III* on 25 January 1788 at the Calcutta Theatre was also praised, "We agree in the general opinion that the whole performance went off with
well-merited éclat” (cited in Dasgupta 1988, 193). A review of *The Merchant of Venice* was published on 20 November 1788 as follows (*Selections from Calcutta Gazettes* 270-1):

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20TH, 1788.**

*Calcutta.*

Last night the Comedy of the ‘Merchant of Venice’ was performed before a respectable audience. Shylock was accurate and spirited, and Portia elegant and interesting; her dress was much remarked and admired. Antonio displayed dignity and feeling, and Gratiano spoke his “infinite deal of nothing” with great pleasantry.

In the meanwhile several other playhouses were established like Mrs. Bristow’s Private Theatre (1789-90), Wheler Place Theatre (1797-98), Atheneum Theatre (1812-14), The Chowringhee Theatre (1813-39), Dum Dum Theatre (1817-24), Baitaconah Theatre (1824) and Sans Souci Theatre (1839-49). The number of such English playhouses shows the growing status of theatre in the social life of the English. Besides the repertoire of their own local actors, the play-houses also invited actors from London as for instance, Mrs. Atkinson who came from Drury Lane Theatre and Mrs. Chester from London’s Royal Theatre, James and Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Deacle, Miss Cowley and James Vining of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres. It is therefore clear that Shakespeare was one of the major dramatists to be produced in India in the colonial times. Jyotsna Singh argues that Shakespeare was readily imported to India since the productions of Shakespeare’s works enjoyed great popularity in Britain from the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries. And by the mid-Victorian period, the grand-scale pictorial realism of
the London productions, combined with the trend of canonizing individual characters, had left strong impression on the popular imagination. Shakespeare’s characters and plots had become both commonplace and source of inspiration for artists and writers. Thus, the Victorian colonists in India, while apishly promoting Shakespeare’s works in colonial Calcutta, were, in effect, reproducing the metropolitan culture as a part of the “civilizing mission” of the British Raj. And not only were the Calcutta productions popular, but visiting troupes from overseas increased the local exposure to dramatic “classics” such as Shakespeare […] (1996, 122).

Among the above-mentioned theatres, The Chowringhee and Sans Souci were specially known for their Shakespearean performances such as Henry IV, Richard III, The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice and Othello. Chowringhee Theatre opened on 25 November 1813. Hemendranath Dasgupta argues that the greatest influence on the educated Bengalis was to have Chowringhee Theatre as a theatre of their own which used the best talents of the times (1988, 246). To name a few stars attached to this theatre: D. L. Richardson, Horace Haymen, Esther Leach, J. H. Stokler and Henry Meredith Parker. Stokler was especially famous for enacting powerful characters like Iago, Cassius and Falstaff at the Chowringhee. Following is a review of Merry Wives of Windsor performed at the Chowringhee:

Last Friday, Merry Wives of Windsor gratified expectations. The quarrel was sustained with infinite drollery. Governor General was present. The house was crowded to excess and reminded us of the lines in the rejected address:-
“Now the full benches, to late comers, doom

No room for standing, miscalled standing room”

(cited in Dasgupta 1988, 262).

Chowringhee Theatre, Calcutta (Mukherjee 545).

Chowringhee Theatre continued till May 1839 when a tragic fire destroyed it completely.

In August of the same year when Chowringhee was gutted, Mrs. Leach, previously associated with Chowringhee, opened Sans Souci at the Waterloo Street. Sans Souci continued to stage plays here for a year when a bigger theatre was built by raising a subscription at the Park Street. Dwarkanath Tagore and Lord Auckland contributed rupees one thousand each for the new theatre. The new Sans Souci opened on 8 March 1841 with a production of Sheridan Knowles’s *The Wife* (Dasgupta 1988, 269). The theatre’s fortunes dwindled when in 1843, during a performance, Mrs.
Leach’s costume caught fire. She was fatally burnt and succumbed to her injuries in a few days. Nandi Bhatia notes, “[D]uring the performance of _The Merchant of Venice_ in 1843, Mrs Leach died as a result of her gown catching fire from the footlights. After facing financial and administrative difficulties, the Sans Souci closed down in 1849” (2007, 160). However, the above-mentioned accident did not happen during _The Merchant of Venice_’s performance as Bhatia observes. The accident took place during the performance of _The Handsome Husband_, which followed _The Merchant of Venice_, in which Mrs. Leach was performing the role of Mrs. Wyindham. Regarding the closure of Sans Souci there seems to be a disagreement among scholars. Most scholars mention its use in 1849. Hemendranath Dasgupta explains that Sans Souci was actually leased out to a French Company and in 1846 the building was sold to Archbishop, Rt. Hon’ble Dr. Carew (1988, 274). However, one James Barry, a friend of Mrs. Leach continued to give occasional performances under the name of Sans Souci at his private residence at 14 Wellington Square (Dasgupta 1988, 274). It is thus a debatable issue as to where the famous performance of _Othello_ in 1848 took place. Dasgupta quotes from _Sangbad Pravakar_ that Baishnav Charan Addy played the role of Othello twice at Barry’s residence in 1848 (1988, 275). Sudipto Chatterjee on the other hand quotes from a letter by one Mr. Cheeks in _The Calcutta Star_ (12 August 1848) that the performance took place at Sans Souci in Park Street (cited by Chatterjee 1999, 76). Wherever the performance may have staged, it is significant in the annals of Indian theatre because a ‘native’ played the lead role for the first time in an otherwise all-English cast. The play was directed by James Barry and had Mrs. Leach’s daughter playing Desdemona with Basihnav Charan Addy, a Bengali, as Othello. It may be argued that the Indian actor was probably not cast for his histrionic talents but his colour which made him suitable to the role. This seems to be endorsed by a report in an English newspaper which called
him a “real unpainted nigger Othello” which set “the whole world of Calcutta agog” (Raha 13). The novelty of a ‘native’ playing Othello was advertised in the *Calcutta Star* thus:

On Thursday Evening, August 10th, 1848, will be acted Shakespeare’s Tragedy of ‘Othello’. Othello … the Moor of Venice … By a Native Gentleman … (Mitra cited in Chatterjee 2007, 59).

Although the play was advertised well, it could not be staged as scheduled. A report from the *Bengal Harkaru and India Gazette* provides information regarding the reason:

The friends of Young Bengal mustered in considerable numbers at the place of recreation, on Thursday night, to witness the long looked for *debut* of a native amateur in the character of Othello. Unfortunately, they were doomed to disappointment—not indeed owing to any defection on the part of the *debutant* or the Calcutta amateurs, but, solely because the parties who were severally to have played Iago, Brabantio and Emilia, were prohibited from doing so by the preemptory military order of the Brigadier of Dum Dum. A letter to that effect, we understand, was forwarded to the stage manager by half past 6; moreover, the police were in attendance, having received military notice to arrest the well-known amateurs should they have attempted to make their appearance. Many appeared to be greatly cut up at this untoward event, but none more so than poor Mr. Barry who promised to use his every effort to produce the play on Thursday next, and thus far solace those who might surmise—“Othello’s occupation’s gone” (cited in Frost 97).
The play was successfully staged on 17 August, 1848 and later on 12 September, 1848. The *Bengal Harkaru*’s review of August 19 praised Addy’s confidence and pronunciation:

Othello’s entry was greeted with a hearty welcome, and the first speech, ‘Let him do his spite’, evidenced considerable study and the absence of that timidity so constantly the concomitant of a first appearance. Slim, but symmetrical in person, his delivery was somewhat cramped, but, under all circumstances, his pronunciation of English was for a native remarkably good (Mitra cited in Chatterjee 2007, 61).

Another review in *The Englishman* criticized Addy’s speech and pronunciation but lauded him for attempting the role:

In the delivery, however, the effects of imperfect pronunciation were but too manifest. This was to be expected, but not to the extent it occurred. Scarcely a line was intelligible, and this did not arise from the low tone of voice; Othello spoke quite loud enough, but he ‘mouthed’ too much. Had he spoken in his natural tone, he would have succeeded far better. His action was remarkably good in some parts, and once or twice when he delivered himself in a modulated tone, we were much pleased with the effect produced. Taking it as a whole, we consider the performance wonderful for a Native. It reflects great credit on his industry and performance (Mitra cited in Chatterjee 2007, 64).
Jyotsana Singh, following Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, sees Addy’s entry into the colonial world as disrupting the simple colonizer-colonised binary whereby the Bengali actor by putting on the ‘white mask’ also “enacted his difference from the white world, both in fictional Venice and in colonial Calcutta” (1989, 446). She elaborates that instead of being appropriated by “the colonial sahib’s play-text, the Indian actor revealed the ambivalence of its cultural authority through a native strategy perhaps best described by Homi Bhabha as ‘camouflage, mimicry, black skin/white masks’” (1989, 446).

Thus it is obvious that prior to 1830s when the first Bengali theatre as Hindu Theatre (1831), there was enough theatrical activity on part of the English. This played an important role towards establishing modern Indian theatre. Whether the Indian elite had access to these theatres prior to 1813 is not easy to ascertain but in all probability, the audience were exclusively English. ¹ Kironmoy Raha notes that even the ushers and doorkeepers of such theatres were Englishmen (13). Even if the Indian elite did not have direct access to these theatres, they may have been influenced by extensive newspaper coverage of these theatres and their productions. P. Guha-Thakurta notes that the Calcutta Gazette, the Bengal Hurkara, the Bengal Courier and the Asiatic Journal regularly published notices and reviews of the performances held at the Chowringhee Theatre (42). The Calcutta Gazette, one of the earliest English language newspapers in India founded in 1784 gave a description of Mrs. Emma Bristow’s residential theatre at Chowringhee in its issue of 7 May 1789: “It was not merely an apartment in a house temporarily fitted up for a single representation, but a distinct edifice completely furnished with every usual convenience and decorated with every ornament customary in familiar places of exhibition — in short, a perfect theatre differing only from a public one in its dimension” (cited by Mukherjee 3). The Calcutta Gazette dated 31 August
1815 wrote about a performance of Richard III held on 25 August 1815: “We have not known there of any representation for some time past with more success” (cited in Guha-Thakurta 42).

Gradually, these theatres opened their doors to the Indian elite, which furthered the cause of establishing theatres by Indians. The reason for this selective inclusion of the ‘natives’ into the English society was the realization on the part of the British that they could not rule over the natives if they exercised the policy of segregation. Having understood the need to co-opt the native elite as a “conduit of Western thought and ideas”, the British employed the strategy of, what Homi Bhabha calls, “mimicry” whereby the ‘native’ elite was encouraged to “mimic” English culture, values, habits and assumptions (Vishwanathan 1987, 10). This inclusion of the Indian elite can be seen as a strategic move to expose them to the Western culture and values and to create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 249). Theatre was a vital instrument that could provide the elite Indians the access to English culture. The first prominent member of the Bengali aristocracy to enter the English theatre circuit was Dwarkanath Tagore who was also one of the founding members of the Chowringhee Theatre (1813) along with D.L. Richardson, Dr. H.N. Wilson and Henry Meredith Parker.

Subsequently, the English colonial authorities encouraged the ‘natives’ to establish their own theatres. The strong urge to have theatres of their own came not only from the English-educated Indian elite but also from the orthodox nationalists. One such project of ‘imitation’ can be found in the following editorial of Samachar Chandrika, a 19th century Bengali newspaper, as quoted in Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany (August 1829):
In the extensive city public institutions of various kinds and moral
descriptions have lately sprung up for the improvement and
gratification of its inhabitants; but their amusement has not yet been
consulted and they have not, like the English community, any place of
public entertainment. … It is therefore very desirable that 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 performance of song and
poetry once a month conformably to the written natakas or plays …
such a plan will promote the pleasure of all classes of society (214).

The point to note is that such a plea to set up theatres for Indians based on Western
models was published in an orthodox Hindu newspaper like Samachar Chandrika. The
newspaper had earned its reputation by using orthodox arguments in the religious and
social controversies of the day. It was, for example, against sati abolition and had
campaigned against it. This shows that the need to imitate the colonial master was, at
least on part of the nationalists, a sort of retort to stress that they were in no way inferior
to them. A committee was formed to establish a theatre based on the English model.
The members comprised Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Srikrishna Sinha, Krishna Chandra
Dutt, Ganganarayan Sen, Madhab Chandra Mullick, Tarakchand Chakravorty and Hara
Chandra Ghosh. As a result, the Hindu Theatre opened on 28 December 1831 in the
garden-house of Prasanna Kumar Tagore. Although this theatre was set up for a Bengali
audience and was established in a predominantly Bengali quarter, the plays performed
were either in English or English translations of Sanskrit plays. The theatre was
inaugurated with the performances of Act V of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Act I
of Bhavbhuji’s Uttaramcharit translated into English by H. H. Wilson. The Calcutta
*Courier* reported, “Babu Prasanna Kumar Tagore has fitted up a neat little stage in his house in Narkeldangah where some young Hindoo gentlemen admirably schooled in the Histrionic art exercise their talents for the amusement of their native and European friends *who are admitted by invitation*” (4 April 1832; italics mine). The theatre was not really a public one as it catered to an exclusive audience. It closed down after staging another performance in English.

There were other reasons that promoted the Indian theatre based on Western models during this time. Classical Sanskrit theatre had almost disappeared by the eleventh century and theatre activity in India was sustained by sparse folk and traditional performances, which too were on the decline by the eighteenth century due to the lack of patronage. There was a void as far as theatre was concerned. At this juncture, the decline of folk and traditional performances and the rise of English theatre paved the way for modern Indian theatre. This was furthered by the quest of the middle class Bengali men for a distinct cultural identity which the English theatre seemed to impart. Otherwise, why would a Bengali theatre — mainly, Hindu Theatre — meant for Bengali audience in a Bengali quarter of Calcutta choose to perform either English plays or Sanskrit plays in English translation? Sudipto Chatterjee describes this Bengali quest for a distinct cultural identity in the following words:

> The Bengal Renaissance was the outgrowth of the grafting of a foreign culture onto a more-than-willing native culture. For the Bengalis their response to what was imposed by the British was a search for a cultural identity that could, at some level, set them on a par with their European overlords. It is in the wake of this endeavour to assume/regain a respectful self-identity that, in 1840s, several theatres [among other institutions] were spawned in the native quarters of Calcutta (1995, 20).
Moreover, the indigenous reform movements stemming from the colonial intervention into social practices also paved the way for the emergence of modern Indian theatre. Folk and traditional performances had already come under severe attack for being ‘licentious’, ‘immoral’ and ‘degraded’ by the British. The Asiatic Journal (1837), for instance, notes that “[T]he songs, tales, histories, in fact every thing connected with Asiatic amusements and literature, are, with few exceptions, more or less licentious” (1837, 28). The educated Indian middle class followed the British and condemned these performances as ‘degenerate’ that needed cleansing to become a ‘respectable’ viewing. English theatre also provided access to power and a cultural respectability – no doubt ‘colonial’ – for the middle-class. That is why, as Kathryn Hansen observes in connection with jatra in Bengal, the bhadralok tried to consolidate their position and exerted “increasing pressure on their womenfolk to conform to British standards of ideal womanly conduct. They considered women’s popular songs with their robust sense of humour and frank sensuality threatening to the new ideal of domestic order and heavily restricted elite women’s association with female performers” (255). Quoting Meredith Borthwick, Hansen says that Brahmo Samaj in Bengal “uncompromisingly condemned gambling, going to prostitutes, smoking, drinking, and the theater” (cited in Hansen 253). Literati like Bharatendu “declared most kinds of popular theatre ‘depraved’ and lacking in theatricality … [and] championed a refined form of drama limited largely to drawing rooms and school auditoriums whose purpose would be to assist in the moral regeneration of the nation” (Hansen 253).

Modern Indian theatre could define itself against the ‘crude’ and ‘degenerate’ indigenous theatre by adopting Western theatre which was taken to be ‘high’ culture by the Indian elite. An example of such reverence towards the English theatre could be
Vishnu Das Bhave, the father of modern Marathi theatre, ‘who was so impressed by “the order, the seating arrangements, the curtains, the scenery etc” of the Grant Road Theatre that he produced his own play *Raja Gopichand* in 1853 with all the apparatus of English plays, “unperturbed by dislocating hybridities”, observes Poonam Trivedi (14). Soon there was a flood of theatre buildings in Calcutta following the opening of the Hindu theatre on 28 December 1831.

**II. Spread of English Education**

The interest of the Indian elite in Western culture and theatre coincided with the British colonial policy of institutionalizing English education in India which played an important role in promoting Shakespeare and helped the growth of modern Indian theatre. The aim of imparting English education in India was from the very beginning a political strategy to consolidate British control over the subcontinent. In the words of Macaulay, English education was necessary to “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern” (249).

The middle-class Indian accepting the colonial master as ‘saviour’ was more than willing to adopt western education. An example of such reverence towards western education is manifested in a letter written to one Rev. Henry Ware of Cambridge on February 2, 1824 by Ram Mohun Roy who felt “fully justified in stating that two-thirds of the native population of Bengal would be exceedingly glad to see their children educated in English learning” (Mitra 1967b, 434). This aim could not have been realized before establishing the Orient as uncivilized and justifying the ‘civilizing mission’ of the West. This involved creating stereotypes about the Orient and then defining the Occident against those stereotypes. This way of defining the Orient, argues Edward Said, is a corporate institution “dealing with it by making statements about it,
authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1991, 3). As this knowledge about the Orient is created, the Occident could define itself against the Orient by making comparative evaluations and, thereby, emerging as the ‘superior’, and ‘civilized’ culture. The point that should be made note of here is that the knowledge created by the Orientalists is not objective but, as Said argues, “it is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures” (1980, 181). Once the Orient takes this construct to be true, it gives the ‘Occident’ the authority required to rule over the former. Gauri Vishwanathan notes:

Through its government-supported research and scholarly investigations Orientalism had produced a vast body of knowledge about the native subjects that the Anglicists subsequently drew upon to mount their attack on the culture as a whole (1989, 30).

Once the ‘superiority’ of the British was established, it turned to ‘educate’ the ‘uncivilized’ and ‘morally depraved natives’. However, under the guise of education there were political and economic interests of the British. The educated Indian would provide the British with cheap labour in the form of ‘baboos’ for administrative jobs and also, as Charles Trevelyan, a civil servant and brother-in-law of Macaulay, noted, “[T]hey will then cease to desire and aim at independence on the old Indian footing … and a long continuance of our present connection with India will even be assured to us” (93). There was, however, a clash as to what should form the subject of study. The missionaries wanted to ‘educate’ and ‘civilize’ the ‘natives’ through religious morals and values of Christianity as was the case in England where the Church exerted influence on educational institutions. Along with the Bible, R. Nelson’s The Whole
Duty of a Christian Designed for the Charity Schools in and about London (1704); T. Green’s Principles of Religion for Charity Children; Ellesby’s A Caution against Ill-company: The Dignity and Duty of a Christian and the Great Duty of Submission to the Will of God; and White Kennett’s The Christian Scholar; or, Rules and Directions for Children and Youths sent to English Schools, more especially designed for the Poor Boys Taught and Cloathed by Charity in the Parish of St. Botolph’s, Aldgate (1710), among others, were taught in schools in England while “works of imagination” were kept out of the mainstream curriculum (Vishwanathan 1989, 70). However, the colonial authority feared violent reactions from the ‘natives’, especially the educated ones if such a religious education were to be imposed upon them. A more secular education was favoured for the ‘moral upliftment’ of the ‘natives’. English literature and language was the best possible alternative for the British, although it had still not been established as a discipline in England itself, rather than religious studies or military control. Thus, literature was appropriated to inculcate among the natives European values, beliefs, assumptions and tastes. An ideological and a humanistic function was assigned to literature and language which was, as Gauri Vishwanathan argues, “vital in the process of sociopolitical control” (1987, 2). The desired role that literature was to play is clearly manifested in Horace Wilson’s words who emphasised the need to “initiate them [Indians] into our literature, particularly at an early age, and get them to adopt feelings sentiments from our standard writers, can we make an impression on them, and effect any considerable alteration in their feelings and notions” (cited in Vishwanathan 1989, 48).

There were, however, two thoughts as to how the ‘natives’ should be educated suggested by the Orientalists and the Anglicists. The Oriental philosophy was based on the assumption that India had a ‘glorious past’ which was lost and that it was the ‘white
man’s burden’ to re-cover the ‘riches of Indian heritage’ and thus to re-present the Indian (read: Hindu) identity. The Orientalists wanted to impart the education in European knowledge system through native languages along with indigenous forms of knowledge. A. A. Wilson writes,

> Upon its [Sanskrit’s] cultivation depends the means of native dialects to embody European learning and science. It is a visionary absurdity to think of making English the language of India. It should be extensively studied, no doubt, but the improvement of native dialects enriching them with Sanskrit terms for English ideas must be continued and to effect this, Sanskrit must be cultivated as well as English (cited in Kopf 505).

Thus there were ‘re-discoveries’ of the ‘glorious’ Sanskrit literature and languages by Orientalists. William Jones’s translation of *Shakuntalam* is an example. Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skins, White Masks* describes the polarization of a colonial culture into two categories — those who “threw themselves in a frenzied fashion into the frantic acquisition of the culture of the occupying power and (took) every opportunity of unfavourably criticizing their own national culture” and those who sought refuge in “setting out and substantiating the claims of their indigenous culture in a way which rapidly becomes unproductive” (1986, 190). In India, however, there seems to be a convergence of the two, thus making the English literary text, “not a site of conflict, but an accommodative ideal where the humanistic assumptions of that discipline could include both a Westernised consciousness and a revivalist one” (Loomba 15-16). Such an approach had the support of middle-class Indians who felt that western education would usher the revival of their own literature. The Hindu College founded in Calcutta
(1817) represented such thinking. Sir Edward Hyde East writes of his reminiscences of a meeting held on May 14, 1816 with the founders of Hindu College as follows:

the head pundit, in the name of himself and the others, said that they rejoiced in having lived to see the day when literature (many parts of which had formerly been cultivated in this country with considerable success, but which were now extinct) was about to be revived with great lustre and prospect of success than ever (cited in Kopf 182).

There was a palliating effect on the colonizer-colonized relationship but, this proximity did not augur well for the Hindu-Muslim amity. As Sudipto Chatterjee notes that the ‘otherness’ of the British was now “transferred to the Muslims who were now looked upon as invaders of the land (jaban) and corrupters of Hindu heritage (mleccha)” (2009, 100). The Muslim was thus disconnected from the mainstream of Bengali culture. The policy of creating nostalgia for the past among the Hindu Indians and the British duty to ‘re-cover’ for them provided a kind of authority to the British to ‘re-present’ the natives. This glorification of historical past was a colonial strategy “deliberately posited at the heart of the colonizer’s historiography to justify and consequently solidify the colonial enterprise” (Chatterjee 2009, 102).

Anglicists like T. B. Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan dismissed Indian literatures and languages and promoted English education among the natives. Macaulay’s (in)famous Minute on Indian Education (1835) arrogantly declared that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of Indian and Arabia” and that he had never “met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations” (241). Charles Trevelyan in On the Education of the People of India (1838)
justified the ‘civilizing mission’ and supported the need to educate the Indian middle and upper classes in the ‘superior’ European literature so that the natives would be able to produce their own ‘worthy’ literature. He writes,

The cases in which the most lasting impressions have been made upon national character, in which the superior civilization of one country has taken deepest root and fructified most abundantly in other countries, have a strong general resemblance to the case before us [in India]. In those cases the foreign systems of learning were first studied in the original tongue by the upper and middle classes, who alone possessed the necessary leisure. From this followed a diffusion of the knowledge contained in the foreign literature, a general inclination of the national taste towards it, and an assimilation of the vernacular language, by the introduction into it of numerous scientific and other terms. Last of all, the vernacular tongue began to be cultivated in its improved state; translations and imitations sprang up in abundance, and creative genius occasionally caught the impulse, and struck out a masterpiece of its own (36-7; italics mine).

The Anglicists finally won the debate between them and the Orientalists regarding the subject and medium of study. Consequently, English education and English language as the medium were institutionalized in 1835.

Whether it was introducing the natives to English knowledge and language or providing them access to English theatres, both were, in effect, manifestations of Gramscian ‘hegemony’ whereby “Domination is [thus] exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the
economy, and over state apparatuses such as education and the media, by which the ruling class’s interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted” (Ashcroft et al. 116). Ania Loomba argues that English education offered “a programme of building a new man who would feel himself to be a citizen of the world while the very face of the world was being constructed in the mirror of the dominant culture of the West” (21). In this way, English education proved to be an effective tool of domination for the British as the Indian elite welcomed the advent of English education as a window to the new world which was ‘rational’ and culturally and morally ‘superior’.

III. Shakespeare Productions in Calcutta

William Shakespeare is still considered the greatest achievement of his race and culture and the repository of Christian beliefs. Shakespeare formed the core of the curriculum of English education imposed by the British to inculcate in the natives codes of proper moral behaviour, culture and values. Even the missionaries who had earlier resisted the British policy of secular education in favour of a religious one found in Shakespeare, along with Goldsmith, a carrier of their agenda. Reverend William Keane uses Shakespeare for imparting Christian values to the natives. He comments,

Shakespeare, though by no means a good standard, is full of religion; it is full of the commonsense principles which none but Christian men can recognize. Sound Protestant Bible principles, though not actually told in words, are there set out to advantage, and the opposite often condemned. So with Goldsmith … and many other books … which are taught in the schools; though the natives hear they are not to be proselytized, yet such books have undoubtedly sometimes a favourable
Hence, from the beginning Shakespeare was made to bear the burden of the civilizing mission of the British. It was necessary therefore to valorize Shakespeare and represent his plays as ‘universal’, ‘timeless’ and ‘transcendental’. This proved quite successful as the native elite took to Shakespeare and made him synonymous with ‘universal humanism’. Such reception continued even in post-Independence India as is manifest in the following extract from the Bulletin of the Shakespeare Society of India:

Professor Datta observed that we read Shakespeare because he transcends all ages, nations, and cultures, and can, therefore, be assimilated into any age, nation, or culture. He deals with human beings, their sentiments and feelings, and since these do not change in any real sense, Shakespeare’s appeal is timeless and universal. Further the issues he raises, the clash of values he depicts, are relevant to us and to our situation … On a more personal note Professor Datta confessed that in moments of crisis he recalls lines from Shakespeare and finds wisdom and consolation in them (cited in Singh 1989, 456).

In addition to the formal introduction of Shakespeare there were other reasons that helped strengthen Shakespeare’s position. For instance, Shakespeare was taught by Henry Derozio and D. L. Richardson who created among their students an unfading admiration for the dramatist. They were taught to recite lines from Shakespeare and enact them. Richardson advised his students to watch Shakespeare productions. Macaulay noted of Richardson: “I may forget everything else about India, but your reading of Shakespeare never” (cited in Presidency College, Centenary Volume 1956,
4). The 1853 Act which introduced competitive examination for civil services included English literature and language as optional subjects which included Shakespeare’s plays. Also, the travelling companies that frequently visited India performed Shakespeare’s plays and helped in popularizing them among the educated Indians. Soon it became a rage among the educated Bengalis to stage Shakespeare. As late as 1926, the English professor C.J. Sisson observed this fad for performing Shakespeare among Indian students who ‘busy[ied] themselves almost exclusively with Shakespeare in English’ (15).

The early 19th century Shakespearean productions in Calcutta which were mostly the student productions seem to be ‘faithful’ to English culture and language. Emily Eden, who spent some years in India with her brother in early 19th century, gives one such account of Calcutta College in her letters to her sister:

Yesterday we had an examination at Government House of the Hindu College, and the great banqueting-hall was completely filled with natives of the higher class. Some of the boys in their gorgeous dresses looked very well, reciting and acting scenes from Shakespeare. It is one of the prettiest sights I have seen in Calcutta (265).

Most notable students were the performances and recitations by the students of Hindu College and Sanskrit College. In 1837, the students performed *The Merchant of Venice* at the Government White House under the supervision of Dr. Wilson.

The period from 1837 to 1853 was quite dull for Bengali theatre. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee in his comprehensive study of Bengali theatre admits that “there is nothing known to happen in the Bengali theatre for about two decades” (15). *The Merchant of*
Venice was staged twice by the David Hare Academy students in 1853. The Bengal Hurkara of 28 Feb 1853 observes,

Mr. Clinger, Headmaster of the English Department of the Calcutta Madrassa gave instruction on Shakespeare’s dramatic plays to the alumni of the David Hare Academy and succeeded in training some boys to the competent performance of the plays taught [to] them and accordingly the play took place on two nights in the hall of the Institution. The part of Shylock was pronounced the best and the Merchant of Venice etc. was rather defective which it was hoped, diligence and performance would perfect in time.

Hemendra Nath Dasgupta notes that the play was attended by some six or seven hundred Indians and Englishmen who were quite pleased with the performance (1988, 299). Other Shakespeare enthusiasts were to be found in the Oriental Seminary. In 1853, the students and ex-students of Oriental Seminary “raised a subscription of Rs.800 among themselves and with that the stage was built and dresses purchased” (Bengal Hurkara, 7 April 1853). The new theatre which was called Oriental Theatre was situated in the school premises. The theatre was established mainly for staging Shakespeare plays and opened on 26 September 1853 with a production of Othello with a repeat performance on 5 October 1853. The production received rave reviews from newspapers. Bengal Hurkara (28 Sep. 1853) appreciated the production for helping to ‘improve’ the native intellect:

The performers were, all of them, youngmen … and the character which we feared would be the worst represented, was the best represented—Iago by Babu Prianath Dey [Dutt] was acted with an
evident knowledge of the character … the mode in which they acquitted themselves must have given much satisfaction to every member of the audience who cares for the intellectual improvement of his native fellow-citizens.

Another performance at the “Oriental Theatre” was advertised in The Citizen (2 March 1854) thus:

The Oriental Theatre
No. 268, Gurranhatta, Chitpore Road,

*The Merchant of Venice*

Will be performed at the above Theatre
On Thursday, the 2\(^{nd}\) March, 1854
By Hindu Amateurs
Doors open at 8 P. M.
Performance to commence at 8\(\frac{1}{2}\) P.M.
Tickets to be had of Messers. F. W. Brown & Co. and Baboo Woomesh Chunder Banerjee, Cashier, Spences Hotel.

Price of Tickets Rs. 2/- each.
The Tickets distributed will avail on the above evening.

The *Morning Chronicle* of the same day appealed to

[T]hose who are desirous of seeing how young native gentlemen can wear the buskin, should attend the Oriental Theatre this evening and we promise them that they will come away with a higher impression of native tragic talent than that which they may possibly, at present, be improved. We recollect some months ago witnessing at the same Theatre a performance of Othello and we presume the same company
will appear tonight, we have no doubt that they will be well worth-
hearing.

The productions of Oriental Theatre are significant because they performances were
open to public who could buy a ticket to watch them unlike the private theatres of Calcutta. But Oriental theatre had a short life and the last production was that of Henry
IV (Part I) on 15 February 1855.

Apart from the student productions there were other productions held in private
and public theatres in Calcutta. Pyari (Parry) Mohan Bose’s Jorsanko Natyasala staged
the much-acclaimed performance of Julius Caesar in English on 3 May 1854. Sambad
Pravakar of 3 May 1854 showered praises on the production and compared it with the
Oriental Theatre:

Pyari Babu’s house was illumined and decorated in the nicest way. The
audience numbered around 400, and would have been more but for
rain and storm. Babu Mohendra Nath Bose acted in the role of Caesar,
Kistoodhan Dutt of Brutus and Jadu Nath Chatterjee of Cassius and the
artists were thus all of culture. Even the performance by the amateurs
of the Oriental Theatre stood inferior in comparison, and they were
astonished at the excellent way the performance of such a play was
rendered.

However, The Hindu Patriot (11 May 1854) was quite critical of the production and
condemned it for bastardizing the Bard:

We ourselves are the most steadfast admirers of the Drama. Nothing
will give us greater pleasure than to behold Shakespeare springing into
new life under the histrionic talent of our educated countrymen, but we cannot calmly look on while the old gentleman is being murdered and mangled.

From the above discussion it is clear that early Bengali theatre and its Shakespearean productions in the 1850s were driven by a desire to ‘imitate’ the Western canons of drama and theatre. A change occurred in the post-eighteen fifties when the Bengali audience craved for Bengali plays. Newspapers started voicing the need to stage Bengali plays in Bengali theatres. The same review of The Hindu Patriot mentioned above further suggested that “the Joranskowallahs [to] take in hand a couple of good Bengalee plays and [we] will promise them success”. In the same vein, the review of the Oriental Theatre’s Henry IV lamented the lack of public response and advised the staging of Bengali plays (The Hindu Patriot, 21 Feb 1855). It was probably due to this reason that there was a decline in the number of Shakespearean productions from 1857 onwards. Bengali drama was on the rise. The first original Bengali play to be written was Ram Narayan Tarkaratna’s Kulin Kulasarvasa in 1854 focuses on the evils of polygamy. The next twenty years saw the emergence of Bengali social drama when plays like Tarkaratna’s Kulin Kulasarvasa and Naba-Natak (1867), Umesh Chandra Mitra’s Bidhba Bibaha (1856), Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s Sarmistha (1859) and Dinabandhu Mitra’s Nildarpan (1860), were staged. 1872 witnessed the establishment of first Bengali public theatre — National Theatre — though housed in a private residence. Soon more public theatres were opened in Calcutta like Hindu National Theatre (1873), Oriental Theatre (1873), Bengal Theatre (1873), Star Theatre (1883), Minerva Theatre (1893), Emerald Theatre (1887) and Unique Theatre (1903). However, the emergence of professional theatres in Calcutta saw the decline of the newly born Bengali social drama. Perhaps a reason for this was the institution of Dramatic
Performances Control Act of 1876. Rustom Bharucha says that professional Bengali theatre of the time “was not equipped to deal with the rigors of censorship on a theatrical level” (23). He adds,

For the most part, the plays of the Bengali theatre between 1872 and 1912 included musicals, domestic comedies, sensationalized versions of mythological stories, and religious melodramas based on the lives of saints and devotees. Even historical subjects were pretexts for escapist entertainments that specialized in songs, dances, theatrical tricks, spectacular devices, and melodrama (23).

One finds Bengali theatre of the last quarter of the 19th century following the footsteps of Parsi theatre in Bombay. It was around this time that Shakespeare plays began to be staged again with vigour albeit with a difference. His plays were performed in Bengali by professional Bengali theatres. The trend was to ‘Indiannise’ and to assimilate the plays. Hemchandra Bandopadhyay, for instance, in his “Introduction” to the translation of Romeo and Juliet defends his indigenization of the play in the following words:

I have tried to present the story of the play of Shakespeare and the essential features of the characters in a native mould to suit the taste of the readers of my country. I cannot say how successful I have been. But I believe that without adopting such a method no foreign play will ever find a place in Bengali literature, which will be denied nourishment and advancement. After a period of such exercises, faithful translations of foreign plays and poems will find acceptance in Bengali literature. But now, for some time to come, I believe, this method is indispensable (cited in Das 58).
Those who failed to indigenize Shakespeare were rejected by the audience, as for an example Girish Ghosh’s *Macbeth* (1893).

The earliest Bengali production of Shakespeare on the public stage was probably *The Comedy of Errors* in 1873. Nothing much is known about the performance. The following year saw the productions of *Cymbeline* (*Kusum Kumari*) and *Macbeth* (*Rudrapal*). *Kusum Kumari*, an adaptation of *Cymbeline* by Chandrakali Ghosh, was staged at the National Theatre. *Macbeth* was adapted by Haralal Ray as *Rudrapal* for The Great National Theatre and performed in 1874. R. K. Yajnik notes that the adaptation was too literal to impress the ordinary playgoers (176). Ray had only changed the English names to Hindu ones. Sarottama Majumdar observes, “contemporary accounts report an unruly and abusive audience who actually managed at one performance to have the play abandoned halfway through” (237). Girish Chandra Ghosh’s *Macbeth* was staged on the opening night of Minerva Theatre in 1893. The event was reported by the newspapers as an important one in the history of Bengali theatre. Ghosh considered Shakespeare to be his model. Raha informs us that “Girish Ghosh had wanted the average theatergoer to be acquainted with the Bard’s plays and nursed the hope of producing a number of his tragedies” (41). However, Ghosh’s dream was shattered after the dismal failure of *Macbeth* which he had translated the play himself and produced. The advertisement in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 28 January 1893 appeared as follows:
Opening Night/ The Minerva Theatre/ 6 Beadon Street

Saturday, the 28th January, 9 P. M./ Shakespeare in Bengal/

MACBETH

I have got the piece mounted by European Artists and Dressed it under European supervision and “make up” by Mr. J. Pimm.

G. C. Ghosh
Manager

The set was mounted by one Mr. Weelard. Ghosh himself played the part of Macbeth with Teenkouri as Lady Macbeth. The production proved to be a boon for Teenkouri’s career as she left an impression on the minds of the audience. The Indian Nation of 20 February 1893 praised Teenkouri’s histrionics and commented, “[I]t is impossible to say of a Shakespearean play that it has been acted to perfection, but we can say of this play that it was acted very well at the Minerva. The parts that were especially well done were those of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who had a Mrs. Siddons-like appearance”. Mukherjee provides the names of other members of the cast: Malcolm (Surendra Nath Ghosh/Dani Babu), Macduff (Aghore Pathak), Lady Macduff (Pramada), Porter, Old Man, First Witch, First Murderer and Doctor (Ardhenu Mustafi) and Banquo (Kumud Sarkar) (82). The failure of this production is significant as it throws light on the Bengali taste of the time. While it was well received by the elite Indians and the Anglo-
Indian newspapers, the masses rejected it. *The Englishman* (8 February 1893) commented,

The Second performance of *Macbeth* was shown before a large audience including several European gentlemen. Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh, the manager, played the part of Macbeth and the play as a whole was well rendered. A Bengali Thane of Cawdor is a living suggestion of incongruity, but the reality is an astonishing reproduction of the standard convention of the English stage.

*The Hindu Patriot* published a lengthy review of the production:

The representation of *Macbeth* in the Minerva Theatre on Saturday last as the opening piece, marks a new departure in the dramatic history of Bengal. The novelty of the representation, as well as the excellence of the general get-up, had attracted a large audience which turned out to be an appreciative one. Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of the modern stage of Bengal, as he may be rightly called, had the whole work under his personal supervision, commencing with the translation of the masterpiece and including the scenery and dresses which were as correct and effective as might be desired. The success became, therefore, a foregone conclusion, when Babu Girish Chandra took the leading character. The part of Lady Macbeth is always one of great difficulty, even in the hands of accomplished actresses, and it is not much of surprise if it was not so well done as might have been desired. But as time wears on, better results may be expected. The other actors sustained their parts very well and the witch-scene was full of mystic
terrors that impressed themselves deeply upon the audience. It is difficult to predict whether translations of Shakespearean masterpieces will be favourably received as a rule. If this does not turn out to be the case, Macbeth bids fair to prove an exception. The pavilion has been built and fitted up at enormous cost and the best dramatic talent of the city has been engaged (cited in Dasgupta 1944, 116).

However, the play had to be withdrawn from the boards after ten productions. The reason for the failure of the production on the box-office might have been many. However, the most important among the many reasons, which Ghosh himself admitted, was the lack of songs and dances. In a letter addressed to a friend of his, he wrote, “most go to see songs and dances, few for drama. The public are [sic.] too uneducated to appreciate Shakespeare” (cited in Raha 41). However, there was more to that. Although Ghosh had translated the play from English to Bengali, he did not take away the ‘foreignness’ from the text. The stage was English, the costumes were English, the make-up was English, the locale was Scotland, in fact the whole context was foreign. Ghosh had failed to notice that the Bengali desire of imitating the Western canon of drama and theatre by the late nineteenth century had given way to the more local aesthetics. The Bengali audiences of public theatres did not want mere substitution of names or locales in Bengali but wanted a genuine Bengali play steeped in Bengali culture. In fact, during the late 19th century there was a debate regarding as to how Bengali theatre should develop. Madhyastha, a literary journal, published an article by Nripendra Saha emphasizing the need to include songs in Bengali theatre:

Some members of our modern educated community believe that theatre does not require songs at all. They have subjected themselves to such a belief having noted the lack of songs in the European theatre.
However, they have failed to contemplate that India is not Europe, European society and our own society are very different, European tastes and our tastes are credibly independent of each other (cited in Chatterjee 2007, 160-1).

There was only one way for foreign playwrights to be accepted by the general public. As Sudipto Chatterjee argues:

[…] when the principles of Shakespearean drama were applied unannounced to indigenous dramas, the plays were well received. In other words, the Bengali audience did not object to hybridity, but disliked direct imports. The blind respect for everything Sanskrit and/or Shakespearean had given way to a firm basis for an indigenous aesthetics that fed on both the foreign and the native (2007, 159).

This brings me to another production of Shakespeare by Amrendra Datta on 21 June 1897 which was a huge success with the audience. The production was Hariraj, an adaptation of Hamlet by Nagendra Nath Chaudhuri for Classic Theatre (1897-1906). The play ran for almost three years in Calcutta theatres. Amrendra Nath played Hariraj while Tarasundari acted as Aruna and in later productions as Srilekha. The play had a huge success unlike Ghosh’s Macbeth and many others that met the same fate. The Indian Mirror of 22 May 1900 praised Amrendranath extravagantaly and wrote, “[W]e must confess that Babu Amrendranath, rightly called by the theater going public the Garrick of the Bengal stage, absolutely surpassed himself in it (Hariraj)”. Another review in The Hindu Patriot of 20 June 1899 praised the performance: “The popular and evergreen tragedy Hariraj was put on the stage of the Classic Theatre on Sunday last … The management of the Theatre is excellent and it has spared no expense in the
direction either of dress or scenery to make the play attractive … The parts played by Hariraj (Amrendranath Dutta) and Aroona (Sreemutty Tara Soondary) are undoubtedly praiseworthy”. Amrendra Nath succeeded where Ghosh had failed—in ‘indigenizing’ Shakespeare. Raha notes Amrendra Nath’s anticipation,

Amrendra Dutta foresaw that unless served as Bengali plays with names, locales, characters and situations metamorphosed into native equivalents—unless, that is, they were free adaptations—Shakespeare or, for that matter, any foreign playwright had little chance with the audience (76-7).

Another reason for the easy acceptance of Hariraj with the audience was that, to follow Chatterjee’s argument, it did not acknowledge any relation with Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Thus, for the Bengali masses Hariraj was a genuine Bengali play without any foreign air about it. Moreover, catering to the demands of the audience, Datta had incorporated a number of songs and dances. Shormishta Panja notes, “Bengali theatre historians revere Ghosh as a giant of nineteenth century Bengali theatre and have mostly uncharitable things to say about Dutta, criticizing him for trivializing the dignity of the theatre. Still, Dutta’s efforts to attract the average Bengali to the theatre presented an alternative to colonial staging practices and brought the theatre much closer to the relatively informal and interactive staging of Shakespeare’s plays in Elizabethan England” (219).

The period from 1912 to 1922 in Bengali theatre is generally regarded as the period of decline. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee argues that with the death of Girish Ghosh in 1912, the Bengali theatre started declining (126-47). By 1912, the well-known dramatists and actors of the Bengali public stage had gone. The decade did not produce
many plays of merit. It was probably due to the absence of worthy plays in Bengali that the one finds some adaptations of Shakespeare during this period. However, these adaptations did not go very well with the audiences. In 1913, Minerva Theatre staged Cleopatra, an adaptation of the original by Pramathanath Bhattacharya. The play had Tarasundari in the title role and Dani Babu as Antony. Amrita Bazar Patrika (5 Sep. 1913) advertised the play having, “new princely costumes and superb sceneries made in accordance with Western ideals, which with a very rich cast and loved songs and dances will certainly prove to be a unique display”. Nothing much is known about the performance. However, a guess can be made by looking at the title which suggests it to be a ‘faithful’ translation of the original. It might not have succeeded much as there is hardly anything documented about the performance. Another performance of Shakespeare entitled Saudagar featured Amrendranath again in 1915 at Star Theatre. Saudagar was an adaptation of The Merchant of Venice by Bhupendranath Banerjee. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee provides the list of the actors in the production (130-1):

KULIRAKA Amarendra Nath Dutt
BASANTA KUMAR Kunja Chakraverty
NATABAR Kasinath Chatterjee
PRATIVA Kusumkumari
NIRAJA Narayani
ANIL KUMAR Dhiren Mukherjee
NIRANJAN Manmatha Pal
MOHANLAL Surendra Nath Ghosh
JUTHICA Ascharyamoyee

The performance at the Star Theatre, unfortunately, turned out to be the last performance of Amrendra Nath. While performing the role of Kuliraka, Amrendranath vomited blood and later on died.
After Amrendranath’s death, it was only in 1919 that a Shakespeare play was staged at Star Theatre. The play was a Bengali translation of *Othello* by Devendranath Basu and had the following cast: Othello (Palit), Iago (Aparesh Babu), Cassio (Probodh Bose), Desemona (Tara Sundari) and Nerissa (Neroda Sundari) ((Dasgupta 1944, 176). *The Bengalee* (15 March 1919) praised Tarasundari: “We were assured by more than one critic that the acting of Desdemona approached perfection and the heroine had shown a remarkable power of adaptability which extorted unstinted praise from the audience”. However, except Tarasundari and Dani Babu, the production could not capture the attention of the audience. H. N. Dasgupta notes, “[T]he sales in the first night were good, but fell down from the second. None of the parts except that of Tarasundari was done to the spirit of the dramatist” (1944, 177). *Othello* shared the same reason which was responsible for the failure of Ghosh’s *Macbeth*. The translator had tried to be ‘faithful’ to the original which did not match the expectations of the audience.

Othello prepares to kill Desdemona: Bengali *Othello*, Star Theatre, Kolkata, 1919. Translated by Debendranath Basu. Tarkanath Palit as Othello, Tarasundari as Desdemona.
1920s witnessed a sea change in the Bengali theatre. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee notes, “the public theatre in Calcutta underwent a radical change in drama and production, scenes and lighting arrangements, dress and properties, as well as in external arrangements ad administrative matters” (152). As far as the content of the drama is concerned the focus once again shifted to the social and the political instead of mythological or supernatural which later found manifestation in Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). It was the availability of Bengali dramas now that might have pushed Shakespeare to the margins as there were not many Shakespeare plays being staged in Bengali theatre after the 1920s. Another reason might have been the growing fervour of nationalism when a foreign playwright would need to struggle to find a place. The flip side of this view could be that through the process of its ‘indigenization/Indiannizing’, Shakespeare plays were also used as social critique as well as for nationalistic comments. With the growing momentum of the freedom movement, Shakespeare plays lost ground to more overt and fervent nationalistic articulations. Sarottama Majumdar argues that “the public stage and Bengali playwrights consciously attempted to free themselves from his [Shakespeare’s] influence in order to find an individual voice and identity in keeping with the growing flavour of nationalism in the country” (237). It was only after the Independence that Shakespeare was taken up by the Bengali stage for production with a new zeal evident in Utpal Dutt’s productions of Shakespeare’s plays. The latest Shakespeare production in Calcutta is Suman Mukhopadhyaya’s *Raja Lear* (2011) with Soumitra Chatterjee in the title role.
Notes

1 1813 was the year when Chowrangee Theatre was opened and was the first to have an Indian, Dwarka Nath Tagore as one of its founders.

2 It was not as if there were no Bengali plays ever staged. About half a century ago, Gerasim Lebedeff, a Russian adventurer, had started The Bengalee Theatre at Doomtoolah in Calcutta in 1795, ‘[D]ecorated in the Bengalee style’ where a Bengali translation of *The Disguise* was performed with a Bengali cast. Again in 1835, at Nabin Chandra Basu’s private theatre a play based on *Bidya Sunder*, a Bengali poem by Bharat Chandra (1712-1760) was staged. However, these sporadic efforts could not produce immediate results. It was during the second half of the century that Bengali plays were staged.
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