Theatre has been a companion to me for two decades now — an exciting and generous companion. The wealth of experience it offers theatre artistes — playwrights, actors, directors, technicians — is all too familiar. What I needed to explore was the significance of theatre beyond this small circle, its wider and more objective relevance, if any, to the community. This study comes in response to the insistent question: is theatre today a form of self-indulgence, yesterday’s art, sadly but fittingly crowded out by mega-technologies in a hurried world? Other people’s answers did not seem to provide the insights I was looking for.

As a student of English literature, my training had been grounded in Western drama alone. Now, it was Asian theatre that beckoned. The delimitation of the area of exploration was dictated by constraints of time and space; by the accessibility of published material in English translation; and by a half-acknowledged desire to personally experience, at first hand, at least a glancing contact with theatre in the cultures selected for study.

In one sense the area selected was wide: theatre in China, India (West Bengal) and Sri Lanka from 1950 to 2000. In another sense, it was restricted: I concentrated on certain regions within these cultures and excluded others. One sad exclusion was the enormous output of theatre in India today beyond West Bengal. Bengal received priority thanks to its
vibrant theatre for over two centuries and equally because the Bengali people experienced unspeakable social trauma in the twentieth century— and because the theme of the dissertation was theatre in times of social transformation. But theatre in Hindi, Konkani, Marathi, Kannada, Gujarati and English, for instance, was not included within the ambit of this study. The apprehension was that it might turn out to be too colossal a task.

Another dimension not explored was the impact of the economic changes taking place in the culture under transformation on matters of theatre. It is certainly an aspect that deserves study, but this was not attempted for want of competence in the field and difficulty of access to relevant data.

Given the wide chronological and geographical frames, it was, regrettably, not possible to attend performances of the plays selected for study.

The M.L.A. Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Fifth Edition, has been followed as the style-sheet.