CHAPTER 2

THE TEXT IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETY AND THEATRE
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2.1. The text-in-context framework

"Once everything changed, except China; now there is nothing in China that does not change" (230). This wry comment by Ch’u Chai and Winberg Chai about the birth of modern China can be seen to apply to most of Asia. As the twentieth century arrived, it found Asian societies struggling to pull themselves out of the mire of economic stagnation, social decadence and political turmoil. The anxious search was for transformation. Through five decades these Asian societies transformed themselves into important centres of self-reflectivity and social experiment. Culture came in for self-questioning. Predictably, theatre as a cultural text performed change.

The analysis of plays in the context of their creation and reception forms a multi-layered investigation. It involves opening and releasing many voices and relationships and currents. It places great emphasis on the cultural nature of texts, on “the constitutive role of culture for human existence and the notion of the worldly nature of symbolic meanings that it opens up” (Lehtonen 3). Meanings are created as products of social reality; but meanings also participate in the production of this reality. ‘Con-texts’ are not looked at as ‘backgrounds’ of texts but ‘fellow texts’ which exist together with the texts; contexts are also inside the text, and they additionally are present both in writing and reading, or in production and reception. The analysis of texts in context is not an attempt to reduce a text to its context, rather, an attempt to study text and context as inter-dependent, interwoven and inter-creative.
This chapter proceeds to:
1. Provide a sketch of the social context in each culture.
2. Delineate the literary and performance contexts in each culture.
3. Briefly introduce the selected plays from the three cultures – China, India and Sri Lanka.
4. Examine some ways of interpenetration of these texts and cultures.

2.2. China

The first culture to be studied here is that of China in the second half of the twentieth century. China has an extraordinarily complex society which can be understood only with reference to its long history. Its dramatic present is rooted in a rich past, full of interesting possibilities and specific choices made, which reveal the spirit of its people.

2.2.1. The Changing Society of China

**Ancient China:** The Chinese civilization dates back to 1650 B.C., one of the earliest great civilizations. Its culture developed through the centuries and spread across the mainland homogenizing the customs and traditions of the advancing armies that periodically descended upon it. Chinese culture grew in complexity, sophistication and remarkable continuity, thanks largely to the geographical isolation in which it thrived. The physical environment provided the basis for its agrarian economy as well as the comparative political isolation it enjoyed.

The entire domain of Chinese land was made up of several feudal states and civil wars were frequent. However, the majority of the Chinese people were of one racial stock, shared a common civilization and were connected by a common language. The feudal states were units of an empire, and when dynasties rose and fell, the changes that occurred were more in political structure than in culture. Even during the 631 years (1280–1911) when China was under alien
rulers – the Mongols and the Manchus – the Chinese were dominated politically, but were culturally dominant.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the imperial government falling into decadence, corruption and inefficiency and the humiliation of unequal treaties at the hands of the Western powers demoralized the scholars and impoverished the masses. Foreign powers demanded commercial concessions. The Chinese slid into war after war and dethroned the emperor. In 1911, a Republic was established but after less than four decades it was strangled by the Japanese occupation (1937-45) and World War II (1939-45). The Communist Party came to power and established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century China was deep in the throes of social transformation.

Three great traditions of diverse origin and character have co-existed in China: Confucianism (sixth century BC), Taoism (circa fourth century BC) and Buddhism (circa second century AD). They have thrived independently and yet have coloured one another. Often, they have been simultaneously accepted by the same community and the same individual (Smart 62-63). Confucianism is a philosophy and system of ethics embodied in the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*. It propounds high intellectual ideals and its rules of moral conduct came to be accepted as binding on the people. Taoism began as a philosophy developed by Lao Tzu, but later developed into a religion with a large pantheon that included folk deities and spirits. Buddhism, a metaphysical religion, went on to become a major influence on Chinese philosophy, art and literature.

Through the centuries, the Chinese developed and strengthened various institutions that would promote social harmony. The most basic of these has been the family, where the centre of importance is not the individual but the kinship network (Ebrey 148). Chinese political thought evolved on the same model; it developed into the system of a paternal government and its ideal was the maintenance of social order.

The long isolation of the Chinese was breached with the arrival of Westerners in the seventeenth century. The Manchu government, looking down on the Western ‘barbarians’, often
refused proposals for a commercial treaty. The British then launched the Opium War, a turning point in the history of China. A number of unequal and oppressive treaties were imposed on the Chinese, and by these agreements, British, French and American powers secured concessions: in effect several foreign states were established within the territory of China. The Chinese economy took a downward plunge from which it could not recover. A historian remarks:

Now, in the mid-nineteenth century, came a series of events unprecedented in the varied history of China. A quite different civilization, the West, encroached upon the Empire, and the result was abrupt transition and a revolution which swept aside much of the traditional culture. Observers who watched the change were fascinated and at times bewildered, for the spectacle was what might have been expected had denizens of another planet invaded the earth, bringing with them an utterly alien way of life, dynamic and over-whelming. The change was rendered the more traumatic by the fact that Western civilization was itself undergoing a profound revolution, a revolution which in part was produced by the very forces that later shaped the new China of the mid-nineteenth century (Latourette, *The Chinese* 99-100).

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Manchu dynasty had become corrupt, debilitated and very unpopular. Dissensions at court, economic depression, and popular resentment were preparing the ground for a century of extreme political turmoil, economic upheaval, war and revolution. Some of the historical landmarks are the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 1895, the encroachments by the Western powers, the Opium Wars (1839)^1^, the fall of the Manchu dynasty and the end of imperial rule; the establishment of the Republic in 1911; the coming to power of a Nationalist government in 1928, the Sino-Japanese hostilities from 1937^2^, the civil conflict between the Kuomintang and the Communist parties in the 1940s;^3^ and the establishment of the new Communist government in 1949 (Chai and Chai 187-225).

**China from 1950 to 2000.** The victory of the Communists in the civil war brought China together under a powerful central government. On 1 October 1949 Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-Tung) as party leader proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. By the
end of the 1950s the Communist Party organized around one million branch party committees in villages, factories, schools and army units. The government took over the banks, contained inflation and took control of key industries. People were mobilized to accuse merchants and manufacturers of bribery, cheating and similar crimes. Their assets were taken over by the government. Hundreds of thousands of 'counter-revolutionaries' were executed and similar numbers were sent to labour reform camps.

Coming from a peasant background, Chairman Mao was convinced that the basis of the revolution should be agricultural reform and rural re-organization. Landlordism, high rents and cultivation of small plots by intensive application of labour had been the norm. The Communists now launched a national policy of land reform, whereby landlords and moneylenders were eliminated, and the land was divided among the peasant cultivators. Former owners and creditors were subjected to public trials and countless people were executed (Hsu 653).

A major objective of the Communist programme was to revolutionise the social patterns. Confucianism deeply influenced Chinese culture, through its educational system, the state and the family. The new government sought to cleanse society of these influences: to modernize education, revolutionize the state and destroy the traditional family system (Chai and Chai 187-195). The status of women was raised through the law, the education and employment. The structure of the People’s Republic of China was deeply influenced by the USSR. The Communist Party was in total control. In 1954 the First National People’s Congress adopted a constitution declaring that the Republic was a people’s democratic state led by the workers and based on an alliance of workers and peasants.

2.2.2. Theatre in China

Traditional Theatre in China: Performance. The history of Chinese drama is very long indeed. Records from as early as 200 B.C. refer to emperors who sponsored drama for a number of reasons: to celebrate important occasions, to accompany sacrifices to the gods and to
ancestors, and for sheer entertainment. Ancient texts stand evidence to a flourishing theatre scene in the court of Ming-huang (712–56 AD), of the T’ang dynasty (618 – 907) (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 13). The titles of more than 600 plays in the Jin dynasty (1125–1234) have been discovered and from Yuan times (c.1215 – 1368) the scripts of around 160 plays have survived (Ebrey 187). Theatrical performances in the thirteenth century were so popular that representations of musicians and actors formed part of the decorations on the walls of tombs; books on theatre were written by numerous scholars like Zhu Quan (1378–1448) whose book *Taihe Records of Music/Drama* included theory as well as documents about classical theatre and comments on playwrights and plays (Fei 42).

Over the centuries an enormous variety of dramatic styles evolved, an estimated three hundred, which are differentiated, even to date, by region. They are referred to as ‘regional theatre’ and vary primarily in the music that they use. The most popular theatre genre came to be known as Peking Opera.

**Peking Opera.** A twentieth century scholar Sun Kaidi argues that drama in China basically derives from puppets (Mackerras, *China* 27). Chinese theatre has always combined acrobatics, dancing, music, singing and chanting and story-telling. The visual aspects are highly stylized. Until the twentieth century there was no ‘spoken play’ in China, in the sense of a dramatic performance devoid of music, singing and chanting.

Chinese drama paid even greater attention to the person of the actor than to the playwright. The stage was very simple, with a backdrop curtain, but no curtain in front. The emphasis was not on elaborate stage properties; the significance of the action was projected by a complex set of formal symbolic gestures and portable objects. The categorization of the actors, their costumes and make-up, the gestures and facial expressions were extremely intricate.

There is symbolism in every detail of the play: in signs and make-believes, in the movements and costumes of the actors. Everything has its implications and suggestions, for the Chinese audience does not go to the theatre to see the play; it goes there to see how well the actor renders it. [...] Symbolism consists of two fundamental elements,
namely, simplicity and suggestiveness. Because of its simplicity, Chinese art is intelligible; because of its suggestiveness, it is full of imagination and feeling (Chai and Chai 181).

Theatre in China was performed in a large variety of settings and so could not but touch the lives of people throughout the country. Popular plays could be staged in a village street, a market-place or temple fair. The folk and classical theatre were an intimate part of the life of the Chinese, interwoven with events of family life such as marriage celebrations, of public life, such as festivals and ritual celebrations of the cycles of nature. Wealthy families in the cities hired actors' troupes to perform at occasions of sacrifice to ancestors and banquets to guests. Scholars in China were highly conscious of language structure and style and poetry, song and drama were carefully crafted. Fully benefitting from the technology of printing, Chinese plays from the eleventh century onwards have been preserved for posterity, have been performed for generations, and have grown enormously popular. The playwrights were generally well-educated men who collaborated with actors and story-tellers, writing librettos, or ballads for them. Editor Wang Jisi notes, "The townsfolk called such scholars "talented men". They had their own guilds or "book societies", in which they worked, exchanged experience and sometimes held dramatic contests. Indeed the appearance of these professional guilds gave fresh impetus to the development of the theatre" (2). The Yuan dynasty produced a number of remarkable dramatists, Guan Hangqing being one of the best known. Titles of more than sixty of his works are known and eighteen of these are extant today.

The playwright was however, not privileged in China over the performer, nor the text over performance. Theatrical offerings were a composite of music and song, dance and acrobatics, poetry and spoken dialogue, an early instance of 'total theatre'. Though the craft of the writer was highly prized, it was the actor who was the cynosure of all eyes. The actor and the 'sing-song girls' were enthusiastically admired by all classes of people. But their status was very low in the social hierarchy. Colin Mackerras notes: "They were looked on as wanderers and vagabonds, shiftless and dishonest, and worst of all, utterly immoral. [...] The attitudes of a community are reflected in its laws. In China actors were bracketed with slaves and prostitutes
as the lowest of the low, and edicts of 1313, 1369, 1652 and 1770 forbade them or their families to sit for the civil service examinations" (Chinese Theatre 78-79). These conditions made it impossible for the actor, however rich and famous, to opt out of the stage to enter the scholar-officialdom. The situation improved by the end of the nineteenth century, when popular actors began to perform for the aristocracy; earlier this had been the prerogative of special palace companies that seldom ventured outside the palaces. With the establishment of the Republic in 1911, the ministers of state and the rich citizens invited good actors to perform. Amateurs from good families and with a good education began to enter the profession. The status of the actor improved (Mackerras, Chinese Theatre 80). In the twentieth century outstanding actors like Mei Lan-Fang brought great prestige to the theatre.

The more formal performance sites for dramas included commercial theatres as early as the twelfth century, as well as temple and guild halls which had a stage; the permanent stage in the mansion of a rich family; or tea-house theatres. In the lives of the hard-working illiterate peasant as well as those of the gentry and nobility, theatre had a cherished role to play. Theatre and theatre artists, then, have been part of a living tradition, a vital cultural component that reflected, and reflected upon, the concerns of the people in China.

The Literary Aspects of Traditional Theatre. Though the aspect of performance held high priority in Chinese dramatic taste, the literary merits of drama were not ignored by critics and playwrights. In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Jide (? – 1623) wrote his Qu Lu (Principles of Lyric Drama), a comprehensive theoretical book of dramatic aesthetics. Wang’s book is the fruit of ten years work, of travelling and talking to other artists and scholars. His aim was to elevate the status of dramatic writing, and in a total of forty chapters he deals with subjects like theatre history, dramatic structure and technique and critical theory (Fei 64).

Another influential book, Casual Notes in a Leisurely Mood by Li Liweng (or Li Yu) (1611–1680), analyzes in detail playwriting, the performance, the performer’s voice and appearance. The author concludes: “A dynasty’s position in history rests on the plays that it produced. Therefore, while different from other genres, the art of playwriting is not a minor skill
but ranks high, along with history, biography, poetry and prose" (Fei 78–79). At the turn of the
nineteenth century, Wang Guo-wei (1877–1927), a brilliant modern scholar lived and wrote
during the Sino-Japanese War, the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the proclamation of the
Republic in 1911. Well read in German philosophy and Western ideas, Wang wrote extensively on
drama, the evolution of Chinese theatre, the form and content of plays (Fei 104).

**Theatre in the Twentieth Century.** The first decade of the twentieth century was
one of social and political turmoil for China: the Taiping Rebellion\(^4\), the Boxer uprising\(^5\), the fall of
the tottering Manchu dynasty and the establishment of the Republic. These events paved the
way for a gradual transformation of theatre. In the first decade the Peking Opera was not greatly
affected by the political upheavals. In fact, one striking feature of its history at this time was the
rise of the great *lao-sheng* actors (male character type for heroic drama). "This was caused by
the growing interest in China's heroic past, and consequently in heroic drama, which was possibly
aroused in China by the country's humiliation at the hands of foreign powers during this period "
(Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 38). Here we find theatre trying to revitalize itself.

Around this time new 'spoken drama' with social and revolutionary content made its
appearance. A number of well-known actors actively promoted the new progressive drama: they
became aware that theatre could serve not only as a means to uphold the status quo but could
also be used as an effective weapon against those in power. Thus, the arrival of the twentieth
century saw both the traditional theatre and the modern theatre flourishing simultaneously.

**Traditional Theatre in the Twentieth Century.** The prestige of the traditional Peking
Opera style theatre was undimmed as the century began. The figure of the actor continued to
fascinate audiences and to draw large crowds to the theatre houses in the cities. The best known
actor was Mei Lan-Fang. Brandon rightly remarks:

> His artistry and breadth of perception helped the old theatre attain a new pinnacle of
> public esteem. Not the least of Mei's achievements was his success in international
cultural relations resulting from his tours to America and Russia in the 1930s. He stirred
> Western thinking to new aesthetic insights on theatre. Bertolt Brecht and V.E. Meyerhold
were among those who admired, and were deeply influenced by seeing Mei's performances (36).

Despite the difficult social conditions the 1920s and 30s saw two major reforms in the world of theatre: a number of institutes of training and education for theatre apprentices were established; and professional actresses came to be accepted on stage alongside male actors, and some of these brought added power to the traditional theatre.

The rise of 'spoken drama'. 'Spoken drama' is a recent arrival in China, an outcome of the encounter of China with Western literature. The contact of China with the West in the nineteenth century led to questioning of many aspects of Chinese life and culture. One response to the encounter was a growing desire to understand and assimilate 'progressive modernization'. Thousands of young people went to Japan to explore the challenges of modernizing society; many other young intellectuals were sent to the West to study. When these people went back to China acquainted with other cultural practices and technologies, they came to be major influences in the process of modernization. The Chinese theatre saw the beginning of an entirely new genre: the spoken play, huaju. This is remarkable, considering that "in China, political revolutions have been more frequent than theatrical" (Wells 5).

The city of Shanghai immediately became the center for experiment. The Spring Sun Society, under Wang Zhong-sheng (d. 1911) who had studied in Japan, staged The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven in 1907, an adaptation of Uncle Tom's Cabin. By 1916 Hu Shi, a scholar who had studied in America was leading a movement to standardize language – replace the classical language intelligible only to the educated elite by a vernacular accessible to one and all. The work of Henrik Ibsen was widely discussed in literary journals like New Youth and a New Culture Movement flourished.

The Chinese had hoped that the Treaty of Versailles would redress their long-standing grievances of Western occupation of Chinese territory. In 1919 they were outraged to learn about the details of the Treaty that gave large concessions to Western powers and threatened Chinese sovereignty. In May 1919 a massive student protest arose in Peking and culminated in a
popular wave of dissent known as the May Fourth Movement. The character of the New Culture Movement changed.

Remarkably, the intellectual and political revolutions of the New Culture and May Fourth periods were led by people who were basically literary figures. The impetus for change in the theatre received a new boost. The Shanghai Dramatic Association and The Creation Society were founded in 1921. The first issue of the journal *Creation Quarterly* in 1922, included a play by Tian Han (1898-1968), *A Night at a Coffeehouse*, which was hugely acclaimed. It was staged all over the country until 1923, when it was dissolved by government order (Brandon 37). Large audiences had by then been exposed to modern theatre.

The Chinese Communist Party soon realized the potential for organizing theatre for political action. Vigorous measures were taken to recruit performers locally and train troupes. This effort developed into an extensive network led by the Workers and Peasants Dramatic Society. The Nationalist side, in turn formed the Farmers Resistance Dramatic Corps and performed to mass audiences. Through the 30s and 40s hundreds of itinerant troupes performed in tea-houses, in schools and factories and in the front-line. “Academics and literary men frequently joined forces with professionals. Urban intellectuals and the rural population shared a new direct relationship as a result of dramatic activities” (Brandon 39).

An important playwright made his mark on the theatre scene. Cao Yu (1910-1996) was a graduate in Western literature from a Peking university. He was an admirer of Greek drama, Eugene O'Neill and Anton Chekhov. Two of his plays *Thunderstorm* (1935) and *Sunrise* (1935) won him great renown and literary prizes. *Thunderstorm* was a dark condemnation of the Chinese family system and the social degeneration it led to. *Sunrise* dealt with the corruptive power of materialism. Cao's realistic characterization and dialogue and his exposé of the decadence of Chinese pre-war society established him as a playwright with a 'social conscience' and an important dramatic influence.

**Theatre after 1950.** The People's Republic of China was established on 1 October 1949 under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. This was the beginning of a whole new era for
the Chinese people. The decades of war with foreign powers and civil war between the
Nationalists and the Communists came to a decisive end. The nation was now launching itself
into a new age of revolutionary change under an all-powerful Communist regime. The next fifty
years were to see marked and distinct political phases and each had an undoubted impact on the
theatre of the day. The official line was Mao's conception of art: the role of the writer was not
merely to reflect social and economic changes brought about by objective and impersonal historic
laws. The writer was required to "awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them
to unite and struggle to transform their environment" (Mao, *Yan'an* 19).

In July 1950 the Ministry of Culture set up a Drama Reform Committee: its mandate was
to determine how practice in theatre should conform exactly to theory. The traditional plays were
scrutinized and those which contained reactionary feudal elements were banned, or certain
portions were abolished. No people's hero should be shown in a humiliating position before a
feudal figure, for instance, a monk. Plays which depicted patriotism, peasant rebellion or equality
between the sexes were retained and commended.

By 1958 and the Great Leap Forward, plays of all forms on contemporary themes were
strongly favoured, though traditional plays were not banned. New playwrights were now
acquainted with the theatre techniques of Stanislavsky, but the major influence was that of
Bertolt Brecht.

It was in 1963 that the government began to aggressively push its programme to
revolutionize the theatre. For the first time the trend was to abolish the traditional theatre. The
new repressive policy was led by Jiang Qing (or Chiang Ch'ing), the wife of Mao Zedong, and
supported by Mao himself and several powerful figures in Shanghai.

The Cultural Revolution was launched in late 1965. The ten years of this sweeping and
violent movement affected every aspect of the life of the Chinese, and principally the arts;
among these the theatre was the greatest casualty. Fittingly, the flood was let loose on account
of a play performed in Peking, entitled *Hairui Dismissed from Office*. The play by the vice-mayor
of Peking, professor and historian Wu Han, dramatizes the character of Judge Hairui from the
Ming dynasty who heroically fights the emperor. The play was probably meant as veiled satire against the prevailing political situation. Jiang Qing is believed to have convinced Mao that it was part of a conspiracy against him. They had an article published in the Shanghai Wen-hui condemning the performance. Apparently no one took the article seriously. Incensed, Mao launched the revolution through the media: “Let the Cultural Revolution be a soul-purifying process,” the papers quoted Mao, “the old order has to be abandoned” (Min 223–31). In a few months chaos was let loose. Mao’s youthful Red Guards went on a rampage to eradicate physical and spiritual vestiges of pre-1949 society. Jiang Qing and the ‘Gang of Four’ held a forum on ‘Literature and Art in the Armed Forces’ which laid down the line on theatre demanded during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Over the next decade a small number of ‘model operas’ was devised and professional drama companies were allowed to perform nothing else (Brandon 41).

With the death of Mao in 1976 and the fall of the Gang of Four, the Cultural Revolution was quickly set aside. Social and economic reform was accompanied by vast change in theatre. The 1980s came to be known as the ‘New Period’ and it was marked by a post-Cultural Revolution liberalization. A renewed interest in Western theatre was revealed in the Shanghai Shakespeare Festivals, colloquiums on Western playwrights, numerous translations of contemporary Western plays and publications on theatre. Chinese playwrights looked with enthusiasm not only at realism, but also at neo-Romantic, symbolist, expressionist and surrealist drama. The influence of Artaud, Brecht, Grotowsky and Peter Brook grew immensely (Ding 69–72). Chinese playwrights had rejected the role of indoctrinator and propagandist and were now seriously bent on exploring the human condition.

Playwrights in China at the turn of the twentieth century are extremely aware that the evolution of spoken drama in China was, for a long time, divorced from traditional aesthetics. Also, in their quest for the ‘essence’ of theatre, many are discovering points of commonality between contemporary western theatre and Chinese theatre – theatre as the experience of creation both by performers and audience, and also the theatricality of theatre. These important
insights have enriched contemporary theatre practice as it stands at the cross-roads of modernization and nationalization.

The plays selected for study cover the entire span of the latter half of the twentieth century and reflect a wide range of interconnections between the text and changing contexts.

2.2.3. The Chinese Plays

The Chinese plays offer an insight into the paths traversed by Chinese theatre during times of major socio-political change which includes the establishment of the People's Republic of China and Maoist Marxist ideology, reassessing relationships with Western powers and the world community at large, regenerating a bankrupt economy and redefining Chinese identity in modern times. The plays are to be read for what they say and, equally, in the interstices, for what they do not say.

*The White-haired Girl*: theatre captures the mood of the day

*The White-haired Girl* was written in 1951 by He Jing and Ding Yi and staged in the years immediately following the take-over by the Communist Party (1949), after prolonged strife and civil war and the launching of a process of transformation of a feudal society into a socialist Republic. It combines dialogue and song to weave a story of exploitation by a rich landlord, the predicament of a young peasant girl, and the eventual retribution and justice meted out by the Red Army.

**Plot, characters and theme:** The play trains its attention on the plight of the peasants in feudal China. Young Xier and her father struggle against great odds to make ends meet. Were it not for the unreasonable demands of Huang, the landlord, and the usurious rates of interest he imposes on small loans of money they have taken from him, Xier and her father would have been able to satisfy their needs and live a contented life in their friendly village neighbourhood. Young
Xier is in the prime of life, and is the apple of her father's eye. She is also in love with her cousin, Dachun, who is anxious to marry her. Act I opens on the eve of the Chinese New Year; the families pool their meager resources to rustle up a celebration. However, bad news strikes. The landlord summons Xier's father, grills him about his supposed debts and demands that the daughter be brought to him in settlement of the dues. The father, disoriented and terrified, eventually signs an agreement. But on arrival home in the evening, he is eaten with remorse and commits suicide. His body is discovered in the snow outside the doorstep the next morning. As Xier is plunged into shock and grief, the landlord's messenger comes to drag her to her master's house to be his mistress and his mother's servant. Acts II and III trace the girl's exploitation at the landlords' mansion. Her one ally is an older servant, Zhang, who shields her as best she can. Xier is found to be pregnant, and since the landlord is about to celebrate his marriage to a rich heiress, the servant girl has to be locked away — to be eventually disposed of. Zhang helps the young woman to run away: she crosses a stream and escapes into the mountains, evading her pursuers.

The title of the play derives from the ghostly figure that villagers espy on moonlit nights haunting a mountain shrine. Fearful and superstitious, they wish to placate the 'white-haired goddess' with food offerings. A young soldier from the Communist 'Red Army' who is visiting the village, is impatient to sweep away superstition; he maintains guard on the shrine and soon enough captures a young woman who has sneaked in for the food offerings. It is Xier, who lives with her young child in the depths of a cave. Lack of sunlight and a deficient diet have turned her hair white.

The culmination of the story is the trial of the landlord by officers of the advancing Red Army, including Xier's childhood sweetheart, now part of a regiment in the Eighth Route Army. The landlord is accused, publicly tried and convicted in the presence of the gathered villagers. It is a moment of vindication for them all, joy for Xier and her family and hope for the future under the new political system.
*The White-haired Girl* is clearly theatre as contemporary critique. The characters are stereotypes of the exploitative class of landlords and the oppressed peasant class. Its enormous contemporary popular appeal seems to have been based, primarily, on the cultural representations it offers: the class struggle, the portrayal of the Red Army as saviour of the masses, the mood of effervescent idealism that pervaded Chinese society in the wake of the establishment of the Communist government, and the hope for social justice for millions of Chinese peasants.

*Teahouse*: saga of a decadent society

*Teahouse* is a play well-known and well-loved in China; the work of a reputed Chinese playwright, Lao She. Written and performed in 1957, it is set in the old-world charm of a traditional Peking teahouse. A teahouse, in ancient China, was far more than a commercial eating place. It was a space for leisure, for socializing, for planning and plotting, for sharing stories and finding social support.

Structure and theme: In the three acts of the play, Lao She traces the changing fortunes of Chinese society through decades of political upheaval. A massive cast of characters embraces a cross-section of the Chinese people, both high-born and low-born, and offers a glimpse of the convolutions of many lives and destinies. Central to the play is the teahouse itself, and the successive generations of the family that owns it. In Act I we encounter the pre-modern Chinese society, highly hierarchical in character, leisurely in pace; we are introduced to the growing inequalities of income as we watch a palace eunuch buying himself the young daughter of a starving peasant for a wife. The political rumbles in the world outside can be felt within the teahouse: a collapsing economy, a decadent imperial administration, the encounter with aggressive foreign powers, the confusion of civil war. As Acts II and III unfold, the destiny of the teahouse itself is problematic: it is finally requisitioned by the local officers to be used as their headquarters as well as a 'pleasure house'. The proprietor, Wang, loses all hope and patience.
and shoots himself – even as the advancing Red Army brings hope of a more equitable and stable society.

*Teahouse* is significant as one of the earliest instances of the 'spoken drama' in China. Also, it showcases theatre in the role of social commentator rather than mere entertainer. It opens a space for reflection about times of extreme turbulence. Its attempts at realism in characterization and performance establish its status as a modern Chinese play.

**Cai Wenji: historicity in the service of ideology**

*Cai Wenji* is a historical play, reflecting Chinese concerns with historicity. Chinese history is re-interpreted in the light of contemporary social realities and perceived social needs. It was the kind of play Chairman Mao approved of. Guo Moruo (or Kuo Mo-jo), the playwright received accolades from Mao for his writing in the service of the State and the new society. The play was written in 1959, a decade after the founding of the Republic, with Communist rule well established. The tasks facing the administration were daunting. In a country that was still poor, enormous sacrifices were called for from the people in the service of the larger good. *Cai Wenji* gives voice to such a subordination of private loyalties to national service.

**Genre, plot and theme:** This play is one of five historical plays by Guo Moruo, and part of the long tradition of historical drama in China. It is set at a turbulent period of ancient Chinese history, between 208 and 216 AD, when warring tribes had been intent on seizing power and founding their dynasties. Cai Wenji, the female protagonist, is the daughter of a Han scholar. In the fray of battle among warring tribes, she is separated from her own people and eventually marries a tribal chief on China's northern borders. Many years later, when peace is declared with the Han kingdom, Cai Wenji is requested by the Han Prime Minister to return to the Han Kingdom. He would like to entrust her with the task of continuing her father's scholarly work of writing the history of the Han empire.
The five acts unfold the court intrigue and snags that almost impede Cai Wenji from leaving the Xiongnu tribe. Eventually, in the interests of the peace between the two kingdoms, her husband, the Zuoxian Prince permits her to leave. She does so with mixed feelings: extreme pain at having to leave behind her two small children and a sense of responsibility and pride in the onerous task assigned to her. The plot traces the movement of Cai Wenji from the kingdom of Xiongnu to the Han kingdom, from a state of confusion and self-pity to one of acceptance and understanding. The resolution of the play comes years later when her children are reunited with the mother, their father having died. Cai Wenji, now a reputed historian and poet, eventually marries a Han official.

The story was a well-known one to the Chinese people. In the play they found many themes: the divided heart of Cai Wenji, the value of social responsibility, the need for unification of all the ethnic peoples of China. The playwright has delved into history and turned his material into an object lesson about the moral responsibility of a citizen, above all other responsibilities, to the State.

*Nocturnal Wanderer*: rejecting the dogma of collectivisation

*Nocturnal Wanderer* (1993) by Gao Xingjian is an entirely different piece of writing from the other Chinese plays selected for study here. It is a creation by a Chinese playwright who gained renown in his own land, but subsequently found all his theatre work banned. The controls imposed on artists irked him beyond all tolerance. Convinced that he would never be able to produce and publish his plays in China, Gao Xingjian sought refuge in France. Here he found an admiring public for his novels, plays and paintings. He went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

**Structure, characters and genre:** The subject of *Nocturnal Wanderer* is a dream; through this nightmare the world of the protagonist, the Traveller, is exposed. Sordid and horrid, the images tumble one after the other, as the Traveller enters his own dream. He is now the
Sleepwalker. The setting is a train journey and the passengers the Traveller meets momentarily on the train turn into characters ambling down a street in the dream: the Tramp, the Prostitute, the Thug, the Master. The dreamer’s psyche turns them into representations of his secret fears, his secret urges. The Traveller journeys through his own, hitherto unexplored, subconscious.

Wrought of absurdist images, the play depicts a great deal of struggle and violence. A first-class train cabin: several passengers are sitting by the window, an Old Man, a Young Woman, a Young Man. Train inspector enters, a little conversation follows. Young Woman turns off the light and closes her eyes. Traveller starts to read a book. Stage lighting changes. The scene turns into a street. The Streetwalker, dressed only in an undershirt that stretches up to his knees, saunters under the light of a lamp-post on a rainy and foggy night. He stumbles onto a pile of cardboard boxes from which emerges a Tramp. They argue, the Sleepwalker moves on and is followed by a Ruffian, they knock into each other, and as they are entangled in a brawl, a Prostitute hails them. The Ruffian makes passes at her and chases after her. As the Sleepwalker screams, the Tramp crawls out of the box. The Sleepwalker confesses he is afraid for the woman’s safety. The Tramp crawls back into his box and as the Sleepwalker strolls along soliloquizing, a Thug pounces, grabs him by the throat and drags him into the shadow of a doorway. He subjects him to questioning and dumps him. The Prostitute reappears, they converse, she propositions him. The Sleepwalker puts his arm around her and they sit by the cardboard boxes. The Tramp re-emerges, disturbed from sleep. She finds a bag and proceeds to search it, despite the Tramp’s protests. It is full of old lottery tickets that the Tramp has been collecting. The Prostitute departs towards a shadowy doorway. Suddenly she screams, there is a loud bang and she falls. Lights out.

Act II is situated on the same spot. Only a high-heeled shoe is found where the woman fell. The Thug accuses the Sleepwalker of killing her. They argue, the Thug pulls out his gun and forces the Sleepwalker to carry a suitcase across the road. As they walk, a gunshot sounds, the Thug falls with a loud thud. The Ruffian appears and threatens to kill the Sleepwalker unless he stuffs the Tramp’s dead body into the cardboard box. The Sleepwalker manages to whack the
killer on the head and the Ruffian falls. The Sleepwalker clearly realizes there is pleasure in killing. Lights out.

Act III: The Sleepwalker is circling round the suitcase, soliloquizing about desire and death. The Prostitute appears from behind the door, accuses him of pushing her and calls him a killer. She agrees to having enjoyed her sexual encounter with the Thug. The Sleepwalker throws himself on her. The Ruffian emerges, crushes her fingers with his foot. As the Ruffian retreats into darkness, the Thug picks up the Prostitute and dances with her. She disappears into the dark, the Thug calls the Sleepwalker his dog and a worm. The Sleepwalker throws the suitcase at him. He picks up the suitcase and leaves. The Prostitute enters with the suitcase and starts to remove her make-up. From the suitcase she takes out a man's head which bears an extreme likeness to the Sleepwalker, rolls it on the floor, and she disappears. The Tramp enters with a wine bottle and stamps and squashes the head. They drink together and laugh and talk about the Prostitute. The Tramp cannot stop laughing at the Sleepwalker, who jumps up and throttles him and stuffs him into the suitcase. As he leaves he bumps into a masked man. As they grapple with each other, the sound of a train is heard. There is no one in the train coach, just a book on the floor. Conductor enters, picks up the book and exits. Curtain.

Nocturnal Wanderer shuns realism in favour of a more surrealistic technique. In the words of its author, "the play attempts to arrive at an explanation of some traditional themes such as the relationship between God and Satan, man and woman, good and evil, and salvation and suffering, and modern man's concerns for language and consciousness, as well as the relationship between the individual and the Other" (Gao, The Other Shore 189). It is a disturbing play by its very disjointed, episodic and violent nature and insistently begs questions about form, theme and aesthetic philosophy.

An overview of the Chinese plays: The playwrights writing and staging their work during these five decades have negotiated many issues of content and form. They have experimented with realism, have created new hybrids that integrate the old and the new and
more genuinely articulate modern Chinese identity. They have often captured the contemporary mood of the common people. The Chinese plays reveal the intense desire of theatre persons to represent and reflect upon the events and processes occurring around them during half a century. Taken together, they also seem to reveal the scant space, psychological and public, permitted to artists in China during these decades. During the 1970s, the decade of maximum repression, the playwright is altogether silenced. In succeeding years, a less restrictive atmosphere returns, but to free souls like Gao Xingjian and many others, the ambience is still too stifling. These writers opt for exile. Their work does not cease to be Chinese literature, even when the playwright may write in French, as Gao often does. Such theatre offers a valid counterpoint to the work of other playwrights who continue to write on the Chinese mainland.

The social and theatre contexts in India have been very different from their counterparts in China. The next section attempts to map these contexts in West Bengal and investigate ways in which they interconnect with the selected texts.

2.3. West Bengal

The latter half of the twentieth century has taken India for a roller-coaster ride: extreme socio-economic depression in the wake of Independence, waves of internal reform as well as political upheavals, coupled with war with neighbouring States, and by the turn of the century, its emergence as a major player in the global economic and political scenarios. Indian literature has reflected these unprecedented challenges. Bengali theatre with its deep political hues has participated in reflecting and discussing vital issues.

2.3.1. Social Suffering in West Bengal

West Bengal is a state located on the eastern side of India, sharing an international border with Bangladesh in the East, Bhutan in the North and Nepal in the North-West.
Bengal has been the birth-place of outstanding Indian personalities and an influential centre of culture. Among the best known Bengalis we count Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the social reformer from Burdwan; Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian Nobel Laureate in Literature, a noted poet, playwright and educationist; Subhash Chandra Bose, the freedom fighter and army official in World War II; Swami Vivekanand, the religious ambassador; Aurobindo Ghosh, the philosopher and writer; Satyajit Ray, the noted film director; Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist.

But the significant contribution it made to the life and culture of India did not spare Bengal from suffering and turmoil. In the 1940s the great Bengal famine killed millions. In the struggle for independence from British rule, the Bengali people were at the heart of the internecine strife that tore the Hindu and Muslim communities asunder at indescribable cost. And at the moment of political independence in 1947, the land was gripped by communal hatred and hysteria and the social fabric was deeply wounded.

The catastrophic events of the partition of Bengal into West Bengal (Indian) and East Bengal (Pakistani) did not mark the end of suffering for the Bengalis. A further crisis was the pouring of East Bengali refugees across the Indian border, as East and West Pakistan were unable to settle their differences. East Bengal seceded from Pakistan in 1971 and declared itself an independent State, Bangladesh. Economically, politically, emotionally and culturally, Bengal had been traumatized and from the 1950s faced the task of social reconstruction. West Bengal turned to Marxism in 1977 for stability, prosperity and social justice – dreams that its Communist Party government has not always been able to realize. Though Kolkata has regained some of its influence on the economic and cultural map of India, the masses are still struggling to find the basic necessities of life, over fifty years after Independence.
2.3.2. The Indian Theatre Tradition and the Bengali theatre

Indian theatre can be studied with reference to three forms, or as they have been considered, three stages of its growth: the classical Sanskrit theatre, the rural theatre forms and the modern theatre.

**Classical Drama.** The abundant archaeological evidence of the early Indian civilization does not provide physical evidence of early theatre history. Dance and music seem to have been enjoyed as part of religious celebrations, but all the evidence of early theatre is to be found in dramaturgical texts which survive in palm leaf manuscripts and in descriptions from other sources (Brandon 65). The most important source of information about the nature of the tradition of the ancient Sanskrit theatre is the *Nātyaśāstra* (A Treatise on Theatre), attributed to Bharata Muni, which is variously dated between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The *Nātyaśāstra* relates the mythological origin of theatre and sheds light on many aspects of theatre in ancient India. Here we find the most complete book of ancient dramaturgy in the world. In thirty-six chapters the *Nātyaśāstra* covers acting, theatre architecture, costume, make-up, properties, dance, music, play construction, organization of theatre companies, audiences, dramatic competitions, the community of actors, ritual practices, et cetera. It can be claimed that among the unique contributions of Sanskrit drama to world literature is its aesthetic theory. This aspect of the *Nātyaśāstra* is further discussed in Chapter 3, with reference to the artist’s role in society. Several dozen plays have survived from the period of first to the tenth centuries, the high point of the Sanskrit dramatic literature. Of these, the works of Bhasa (circa 400 A.D.) are best known. Kalidasa (circa 400 A.D.) is considered to be India’s greatest ancient playwright and his masterpiece *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition* is still frequently produced in modern times.

After the tenth century, Sanskrit theatre began to wane. Nemichandra Jain lists some of the possible reasons for the decline: social and political instability created by foreign invasion and internal conflicts, loss of creative energy in the Sanskrit language confined to an elite and a lack
of talented playwrights (30). Referring to the culmination of the process, Kironmoy Raha perceptively remarks:

(T)he decline of Sanskrit drama and theatre had set in even before Mahmud Ghaznavi invaded India from across the Himalayan passes in the eleventh century A.D. and Mohammad Ghori laid the foundations of Islamic conquest in the twelfth. Sanskrit drama had already become bloodless and bereft of vigour when the invasion took place and the conquest snuffed out the dying embers of Sanskrit theatre (4).

By the eleventh century Sanskrit theatre was all but extinct on stage, though its aesthetic theory and precepts have survived and today continue to influence modern Indian drama in diverse ways.

**Regional Folk Theatre.** By the fifteenth century theatre emerged in rural India through a large variety of forms. Each of these forms was unique, used the vernacular language and catered to the tastes and needs of the people of the particular region where it flourished. These were truly local forms. Sanskrit theatre, which had been patronized by court and temple had earlier developed a 'national' character as it was exhibited in urban centers across the land. By contrast, the rural forms, like the Jatra in Bangal, Bihar and Orissa, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan or Bhavai in Gujrat, Tamasha in Maharashtra, did not travel far beyond the regions where they had originated. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, these regional folk theatre forms flourished all over the subcontinent and attested to the vitality and variety of the culture of the people.

A powerful catalyst for the reappearance of theatre as a significant practice in India was Vaishnavism, a religious movement which centers on devotion (Bhakti) for God in the person of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu. Shiva was revered as the patron god of the arts. Theatre came to be a means of communicating the faith, and of involving performer and audience in a religious act.

In the fifteenth century, when the Bhakti movement swept Bengal, devotees went singing and dancing in procession. They sang in temple court-yards, narrating the events of their
patron god's life, and expressed their devotion with frenzied acting. The collective singing amidst
the clang of gongs and fumes of incense produced a mass hypnosis and sent these singers into
an acting trance. This singing with dramatic elements gradually came to be known as *Jatra*,
which means "to go in procession" (Gargi 14).

*Jatra* : Folk Theatre in Bengal. *Jatra* became a thriving theatre form and part of the
emotional life of the people in Bengal by the sixteenth century. Its themes were woven around
episodes from the life of Krishna and Radha. Gradually historical romances came to be included
in the repertoire of *Jatra* companies. By the eighteenth century, Bengal was firmly under the
control of the East India Company. The British introduced a system of permanent land
settlements which resulted in wide social transformation. The increasing prosperity and leisure of
the gentry gave rise to a growing demand for entertainment. The gentry of Bengal invited *Jatra*
troupes for festive occasions such as the Ratha Puja and Durga Puja celebrations.

In the nineteenth century, as tastes turned more secular, the *Jatra* repertoire swelled
with love stories, mythological heroes, historical romances, tales of legendary robbers, saints and
reformers. As political consciousness grew in the twentieth century, the *Jatra* writers gave
political overtones to their plays. Mythological stories depicting the struggle between good and
evil came to refer to the struggle between the Indian masses and the British government (Gargi
15). As *Jatra* entered the urban setting of Calcutta, a growing trading city and commercial center,
it came under the influence of other forms of entertainment, and appropriated some of their
coarse humour and bawdy songs. The English-educated ‘*bhadralog*’ or upper middle class of
Calcutta, who had become the leaders of Bengali thought and opinion, frowned upon the *Jatra* as
a crude form of entertainment. *Jatra* revealed its inborn vitality by its ability to adapt to changing
tastes. It entered a new phase when theatre persons like Brajamohan Roy and Krishna Kamal
Goswami, Mukunda Das and Motilal Roy gave it contemporary relevance and greater refinement.
*Jatra* troupes proliferated in Calcutta and adapted to the changing social scene. Women actors
were for the first time allowed onstage, the number of songs was reduced, the duration of the
performance was shortened. Political and social issues found their way into the *Jatra* stage. In
general, the twentieth century saw a remarkable revival of the popularity of the *Jatra* and of the interest of theatre researchers in this ever-adapting cultural form. Kironmoy Raha remarks on the tremendous changes taking place:

The change has been almost sweeping. One or two illustrative instances may be given to indicate its extent. In 1962, Tulsi Sahiri produced his successful play *Chnera Tar* as a *Jatra pala*. In 1967, a *Jatra* troupe, Tarun Opera, presented *Hitler* and in a seminar in 1972 Utpal Dutt argued in favour of *Jatra* as a powerful instrument for spreading political messages. Contemporary playwrights known for their modern views have written successful *Jatra* plays on subjects which have not the remotest connection with religious motifs or Hindu mythology. Actors and actresses move from one to the other and often cross over again. *Jatra* has become increasingly urbanized. Even when it is not performed inside a playhouse, a not altogether uncommon occurrence, such un-*Jatra* arrangements as raised platforms, theatrical lighting and sound effects, the use of microphones, are taken recourse to almost as a matter of course. But it has not been a one-way traffic. Theatre continues to borrow many conventions or features of *Jatra* and has in recent times been looking to it for clues for breaking theatrical barriers (10 – 11).

The traditional *Jatra* form has not only played as a grass-roots theatre of enormous appeal, but has provided inspiration to modern playwrights as storehouse of philosophy and techniques of theatre to be explored today.

Modern Bengali theatre has had a vigorous presence on the Indian cultural scene. But before focussing on this theatre in Bengal, one needs to briefly consider the constructs of modernity and postcolonialism in India, indeed, in Asia.

**Modernity and Postcolonialism.** The plays selected for study are all modern plays; however, some of them incorporate elements of 'pre-modern' and 'pre-national' theatres. Literary modernity emphasizes “a deliberate disengagement from past and present conventions in favour of verbal, formal, intellectual, and philosophical attributes that are new for their time, whatever the time” (Dharwadker 132). In the context of Asia, literary modernity cannot be understood
apart from a host of extrinsic factors such as issues of nationhood, political struggle and freedom, international power equations, economic development, social reform and postcolonial discourse, all interwoven into questions of cultural identity. An analysis of modern theatre in Asia brings to light complex negotiations between the 'traditional' and the 'modern', 'western' and 'indigenous', 'mytho-historical' and 'contemporary', 'rural' and 'urban', 'regional' and 'national'. Modernity in Asian theatre contains a salient vein of critique of Western modernity that impacted Indian culture through the paradigm of colonialism. Underlying the selected modern plays, one senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms of the old and the new. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, for over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for, the struggles of the people for freedom and for identity, however these may be interpreted.

In India, the practice of modern theatre has been accompanied with a fair amount of theorizing by playwrights, directors and critics since the 1940s. Some of the important new directions came from early members of the IPTA such as Anil Marcia de Silva, the daughter of a Ceylon politician, one of the founders of the association. In the 1946 IPTA annual report she re-states the principles that are to guide theatre practitioners: "to seriously study our past classical Sanskrit drama and our folk forms of drama, so that our writers and producers could experiment in a synthesis of these two forms with modern stage techniques and lighting" (Annual Report 5). She writes of the need to evolve a new drama, "one that will be essentially Indian, bringing forth real creative talent that will base itself on both tradition and technique" (Annual Report 5). Writer-directors like Utpal Dutt and Arun Mukherjee were uncompromising in their rejection of the elitist nineteenth-century Bengali urban proscenium theatre. Their goal was to carry performance and protest to vast and diverse audiences all over the country. As Dutt never tired of reiterating, "If the theatre loses its mass-audience, it loses its life, its meaning, its raison d'etre" (Dutt, ENACT 19). Though the IPTA as a movement lost its energy through a variety of
factors in the 1950s, its vision for theatre would have an indelible influence on the climate of thought in India.

In the last four decades of the century theatre has been performed in many modern Indian languages, including Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada and Gujarati. New playwrights have made waves and the new literary canon is multi-lingual; it includes Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* (Bengali), Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana, Tughlak, Nag Mandala* (Kannada), Vijay Tendulkar’s *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Marathi), Utpal Dutt’s *Surya Shikar* (Bengali) Arun Mukherjee’s *Mareech Sambad* (Bengali), Habib Tanvir’s *Agra bazaar* (Urdu), G.P. Deshpande’s *Uddhwasta dharmashala* (Marathi), Mohan Rakesh’s *Adhe adhure* (Hindi), Elkunchwar’s *Wada chirebandi* (Marathi), to name just a few. Playwrights like Mahesh Dattani (*Final Solutions, Tara, Dance like a Man*) and Manjula Padmanabhan (*Harvest*) write in English about contemporary social issues which plague the Indian middle-class. Cross-language translation is an important fact of performance in India today, with, for instance, Usha Ganguli translating, adapting and directing Mahasweta Devi’s Bengali story *Rudali* into a play in Hindi and Girish Karnad translating his work into English. The National School of Drama in New Delhi offers academic training and patronage to theatre practitioners. And names of directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, Anuradha Kapur, Usha Ganguli, Alyque Padamsee, Vijaya Mehta, Satydev Dubey and Jabbar Patel, have made it to the national map. Concurrently, grass-roots theatre happens, in a prolific but more muted way, under the initiative of groups like Badal Sircar’s Satabdi, Sanjoy Ganguly’s Jana Sanskriti, Ninasam, and Tanvir’s Naya Theatre in Chhatisgarh.

The theatre in India in the last few decades tends to be a markedly urban phenomenon, eclectic in its choice of themes, which range from the mythological (*Hayavadana*), to the domestic (*Tara*) and the socio-political (*Rudali*). Much of what happens on this theatre scene is non-commercial; the complementarity of a powerful written text with experimental performance styles has prompted the rise of playwright-directors and playwright-actors like Karnad and Dattani; women have found space as directors and critics; and a spate of serious theatre scholarship is noticeable in recent years (R. Barucha, N. Bhatia, S. Bandyopadhyay, M.
Chatterjee, A.B. Dharwadker). Theatre does not seem to work in conflict with the more recent media of cinema and television, though it does cater largely to a far more limited urban audience.

The theatre in West Bengal is one of the prominent theatres in modern India. We now trace its emergence and development with special emphasis on the decades between 1950 and 2000.

**Modern Theatre in West Bengal.** As the British General Warren Hastings consolidated British rule in India, the capital was shifted from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1773. The British community saw the growth of the city into a major trading center. As economic and social life turned secure and prosperous, the British in Calcutta felt the need for entertainment. Soon theatre houses were built (Calcutta Theatre or the New Playhouse – 1775, Chowringhee Theatre – 1813) and English theatre arrived in India. Calcutta English society was delighted to watch Shakespeare plays, and a medley of comedies, farces and serious plays that had been successful in England.

A memorable occurrence was the staging of a Bengali play in a theatre house built for this purpose. In 1787 a Russian, Herasim Lebedeff arrived in Calcutta. He struggled to learn Bengali, translated and adapted English plays into the vernacular and in 1795 produced *The Disguise* to a full house. His success was short-lived: the playhouse was burnt down, Lebedeff was hounded by creditors and thrown into jail. It is believed that here was the hand of some Englishmen connected with the rising English theatres in the city. It was not until 1835 that another Bengali play was performed in Calcutta: *Bidya Sundar* staged in the Shambazar Theatre built by Nabin Chandra Bose in his palatial house in Calcutta – an adaptation of a poem earlier dramatized by *Jatra* troupes.

The stage was set for the emergence of a modern Bengali theatre. There was at the time, no tradition of dramatic literature besides the folk forms like the rural *Jatra*. But before long, an educated and wealthy middle class threw up directors, playwrights and an audience that loved and actively patronized the theatre. A theatre historian looks at some of the factors that contributed to this artistic movement:
The spread of English education, the growing affluence of trading families, the absence of landlordism, the rise of the middleclass and the exploding growth of Calcutta; the strong pull of traditional *Jatra* among the common people on the one hand, and on the other, a reaction against it among the intelligentsia, an acquaintance with English dramatic literature and English theatrical forms in the playhouses of Calcutta - all these fertilized the soil for Bengali theatre to grow and take in many ways the shape it did (Raha 17).

The Jorasanko Theatre of the Tagores and the Belgachia Natyasala housed many adaptations of the Sanskrit theatre as well as original contemporary Bengali plays. The person regarded as the first Bengali dramatist was Ramnarain Tarkaratna, whose play *Kulinkulasarbasva*, in 1854, was the first Bengali play, written for the contemporary stage. Another early dramatist was Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), who wrote comedies as social satire and gained popularity among the growing westernized middle class. Dinabandhu Mitra (1831-1873) brought Bengali theatre greater vibrancy and more confident craftsmanship. His play of protest, *Nildarpan*, dramatized the exploitation of the common people at the hands of the British indigo planters. The play is bold in attacking British commercial interests and provoked a furore. Rev. James Long, an English missionary who published an English translation, landed in jail for his audacity. In 1870 the government passed the Dramatic Performances Act that began a practice of censorship.

The arrival of Rabindranath Tagore on the scene of Bengali theatre is considered by some as a great event, and his influence seminal. To others he remained an isolated figure: "Tagore has remained a lonely eminence and the Bengali theatre has maintained a respectable distance from him" (Raha 129). His plays *Valmiki-pratibha* (1881) *Phalguni* (1916), *Dakghar* (1917) can be seen as significant events on the Bengali stage. Tagore wrote more than sixty plays, but staged them mostly in his estate at Jorasanko. He may have wished to maintain a distance from the commercial theatre that demanded too many artistic compromises from a playwright. Tagore wrote operatic plays, dance dramas, verse plays, symbolist drama; he moved from Western
models to the more regional ones. However his influence as a dramatist never came to equal his stature as a poet.

By the 1880s commercial theatre had established itself, with keen rivalry between professional groups. Two play-houses rose to great prominence: the Star, formed by a group of actors led by Girish Ghosh in 1883; and the Minerva. The theatre was heavily actor oriented, and provided ample scope for 'star acting'. The influence of the Jatra tradition of acting as well as the accounts of actors in the English theatre added up to a rhetorical and grand style.

Theatre in Bengal in the years preceding Independence took on a strong political colouring. The 1940s were years of social turmoil for the Bengali people. On the political front, the Japanese invasion of Burma led to a growing fear that Japan might invade India. As Calcutta became a centre for the war effort, and huge amounts of resources were diverted into the defence effort, the economy took a downturn, even as profiteering and black-marketing mushroomed. The Bengal famine brought starvation to millions of peasants in 1943-44. In August 1946 communal riots tore the social fabric apart. The following year was the year of Independence, and it brought along yet further waves of violence in the wake of the Partition of Bengal. Theatre was temporarily a casualty in this chaotic scenario, but it quickly raised its head again as a socio-political commentator.

The most remarkable organization to make a contribution to political theatre in the 1940s was the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). This was part of the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. On its agenda was the determination to influence the intelligentsia as well as the masses. Its impact is further analysed in Chapter 3, in the context of debates in the 1940s about the role of theatre. Group Theatre, or theatre by amateur theatre groups, also took root and flourished. Commercial theatre in Bengali, Hindi and English also drew urban audiences. With Independence, theatre received State funding from the Communist government, thus broadening the scope of the art, but ironically robbing it of much of its bite as social protest. On the fringes, mass-based theatre activists like Jana Sanskriti, have sought to return theatre to its political role, and as an agent of social protest and change in West Bengal.
2.3.3. The Indian Plays

These have been years of far-reaching change for Indian society in general and Bengali society in particular. In the face of tremendous political and economic upheavals, the Bengali people have made remarkable contributions to the cultural scenario in India. Calcutta has been a powerful centre of a Bengali urban renaissance, with special emphasis on literature and cinema. Four plays have been selected, to represent various directions taken by Bengali theatre in the last few decades of the century.

Evam Indrajit: the angst of the urbanite middle-class

Evam Indrajit (or Ebong Indrajit) (And Indrajit) (1962) has been recognized as a milestone in the history of modern Indian theatre. About its significance, Satyadev Dubey rightly comments in 1989 that, "it is only in relation to Indian theatre history that Evam Indrajit really makes its presence felt; otherwise it is just a very good, sensitively written play, like many others written in the last decade in India" (Dubey 89). It breaks away from the well-established realistic techniques of the day to create a more impressionistic theatre, new to the Indian stage. Its existentialist tone creates "the first anxious protagonists in modern Indian theatre overcome by the burden of history and the emasculating effects of middle-class urban life" (Dharwadkar 65).

Characters, structure, style and theme: The play has a cast of seven characters – most of them stereotypes of men and women in contemporary urban India: Auntie/Mother, Manasi, Amal, Vimal, and Kamal. The two exceptions to this stereotyping are Indrajit, who is looking for something, "a world beyond geography", and the Writer, who is struggling to write a play. By virtue of their higher sensitivity and awareness, these two are condemned to walk the road, though there is no holy shrine awaiting them at the end of it. Through three acts we follow the undramatic lives of this bunch of people. In Act I, the Writer cannot begin to write his play since he finds he has nothing to write about, he knows no one. Auntie insists that he stop
scribbling and come to eat; a girl, Manasi, suggests that he should write about the audience. The Writer is dubious about such characters for a play. Nonetheless, he calls out to some gentlemen who have just entered the auditorium, invites them to come up the stage. They do. They present themselves as Amal, Vimal, Kamal – and Nirmal. But on the Writer’s angry insistence, the latter admits he is actually Indrajit. We catch glimpses of Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit growing up as young men in college, attending classes, discussing “cricket, cinema, physics, politics and literature”; graduating; planning marriage; attending job interviews. Indrajit tries to convince Manasi, his cousin, to marry him, but she cannot make up her mind, as she does not want to break any rules.

In Act II, Amal, Vimal and Kamal have office jobs and the Writer doubles up as peon and boss. They marry and their families go through many stages of life. Indrajit has gone out of the country, as an engineer, to London. Manasi considers marriage to Indrajit, but he is now uncertain. The Writer, still unable to write his play, is tired.

Act III shows us Amal, Vimal and Kamal playing cards and talking rapid-fire about the routine events of their lives. The Writer has received letters from Indrajit, but he cannot write a play about him.

**WRITER.** [... ] The more lines I write for him, the more he stands outside them.

Says they are not real. Oh! He knows too much – altogether too much. (50)

Indrajit returns to Calcutta. He marries someone else, another Manasi. Amal is going to answer an examination to get himself a promotion. Vimal is building a house. Kamal is entering the import business. Indrajit has stopped dreaming of doing “something unusual, important, unprecedented” (58). He now accepts his ordinariness and declares, “I am Nirmal. [ ... ] I’m just an ordinary man” (59).

**WRITER.** That does not make you Nirmal. I am ordinary too – common. Yet I am not Nirmal. You and I can’t be Nirmals.

**INDRAJIT.** Then how shall we live?

**WRITER.** Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. (59)
Aware as they are of their predicament as sensitive people, they are bound to be on the road, without respite, without God, with faith in the road, the endless road.

The play has only a shadow of a plot, eschews realism, and departs from accepted norms of 'conflict' and 'denouement'. Its collage of moments and fragments of situations is a complete departure from the well-established, realistic nineteenth-century conventions of the Westernized Indian urban stage. When it appeared on the Calcutta stage *Evam Indrajit* brought the Indian public a shock of recognition: here was a reflection of the *angst* and undefined frustrations of being a middle-class urbanite in early postcolonial India.

**Hunting the Sun: hunting for a theatre of the masses**

*Hunting the Sun* (*Surya Shikar*) was written by Utpal Dutt originally in Bengali and produced by a professional *Jatra* or folk-theatre company in 1971. The play was performed repeatedly by *Jatra* actors and directed by the author himself. The story combines the historical background of the court of Emperor Samudragupta at Ayodhya, with all its trappings of intrigue and extravagance, with a situation borrowed from the story of Galileo. The play offers a mass audience the spectacle and melodrama it expects from a *Jatra* performance, but also challenges it to question irrational tradition and prejudice.

**Structure, characters and theme:** The curtain rises on a street scene. Shishumar the mayor of the city heralds the sale of two slaves in the public square. He extorts a bribe from Mahasveta, the Prostitute, and orders her to be ready to dance, with her troupe, for the entertainment of General Hayagreeva, the conquering hero who shall be present at the slave sale. On arrival the General harshly grabs the woman and demands that she be sent round to his house for a night. Basubandhu, the Lord Chamberlain buys himself the slave Gohil as well as Madhukarika and her small son Veerak. As they prepare to make a grand exit, they are stopped in their tracks by Indrani, the woman disciple of Acharya Kalhan, the Buddhist monk. She challenges the bravado of the General and pleads for the release of Gohil, the slave. Intrigued by
the audacity and courage of the woman, Hayagreeva accedes to the request. As he is about to seize her for himself, the Virupaksha or High Priest enters with an order for her arrest: her crime is propagating heresy and atheism by declaring that the earth is round and refuting the Puranas. Hayagreeva refuses to let go of Indrani. The final appeal rests with the Emperor.

Scene ii is set in the royal palace. Dardura, the Vidushaka or court fool makes wry comments on the Emperor's self-indulgence and the lasciviousness of Urmila, the Empress. We watch Urmila try to seduce Hayagreeva, but he rudely rejects her advances and leaves. Basubandhu and Vidushaka enter with the offering of the two slaves for the Empress and a request for her good offices in punishing Indrani, the heretic. The Buddhist monk, Kalhan comes to ask the Emperor for the release of Indrani. The Emperor challenges the monk to prove his claim that the earth is round. The monk's proofs fail to convince the court, though the Emperor can see in his heart of hearts that Kalhan is right.

In Scene iii we discover Hayagreeva quite enamoured of Indrani, whom he has seduced but not won over. As he cannot gain her love, he frees her, in despair, but is prevented from letting her go by the Emperor himself who orders Indrani to testify in court against her master, Kalhan. On her stout refusal, she is led away to be tortured into acquiescence.

Scene iv depicts Kalhan in his monastery, urging his disciples to protect their books and join the rebellion against the oppressive Empire. Hayagreeva enters, trying to persuade Kalhan to save Indrani by renouncing his heresy. On his refusal, Kalhan's books are destroyed in a bonfire.

In Scene v, Indrani is tortured but refuses to testify against her beloved master. Hayagreeva brings news of a rising slave rebellion and Kalhan is dragged in chains. He will not betray his disciple, either. The Prostitute Mahasveta, who has been kindly treated by the monk, agrees to testify against him to placate the Emperor.

Scene vi reveals the slave Madhukarika tending Indrani's injuries. Indrani assigns the boy Veerak the task of finding and guarding the master's books, the source of knowledge and truth. Hayagreeva enters to beg of Indrani not to die; he confesses to having allowed Gohil, the leader of the slave rebellion, to escape. To his astonishment and joy, Hayagreeva discovers that Indrani
now loves him dearly. They prepare to face death together, death by trampling by an elephant. As they leave, we have the Emperor and the Empress watching the gory spectacle. The lechery of the Empress is exposed by the Emperor. Mahasveta prepares to save her skin by testifying in court against Kalhan, but is prevented from doing so by the slave Madhukarika, who has poisoned her wine.

The concluding scene, vii, brings news of a growing rebellion. Thousands of people have arrived to watch Kalhan’s trial. With the loss of the Prostitute, the Emperor stages his own show: Kalhan is brought in, chained, the Emperor reads out the monk’s confession of guilt. Kalhan tries to speak but cannot – his tongue has been gouged out. The Emperor exits in triumph, having persuaded the people of Kalhan’s submission. The play ends with words of consolation from Madhukarika to Kalhan that her son Veerak has got hold of Indrani’s books and shall dedicate his life to letting the world know the truth.

The theme revolves around the unmasking of superstition and manipulation of the credulous. The play is the work of a politically committed writer, deeply convinced of the responsibility and capability of the stage to provoke critical thought. It is a vehicle for his ideology, and this consideration colours his choice of target audience, theme and style. Hence its relevance and significance.

**Mareech, the Legend: unmasking the oppressor**

*Mareech, the Legend* (Mareech Sambad) (1973) by Arun Mukherjee has become a very popular piece in the repertoire of theatre in West Bengal. Its appeal seems to be so strong that theatre lovers repeatedly watch performance after performance of the play. It is perhaps stagecraft and the treatment of vital social issues that account for its wide significance.

**Genre, structure, characters and theme:** In traditional *Jatra* style, the play opens with a troupe leader or Ustad drumming up an audience and announcing the stories he will dramatize and the tricks he can perform. The language he uses is a mixture of Bengali, Hindi and
English. He is well prepared to cater to any kind of audience. A Chorus enters, followed by musicians and they sing a song in praise of the poet Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana. Attendants bring in a curtain that reads, 'Mareech, the Legend'. The story of Mareech, a demon from the Ramayana, is broached. Shot down by Rama and his brother Lakshmana, Mareech is saved by Ravana and takes shelter in the jungles of Lanka. When Ravana's sister Surpanakha is wounded by Lakshaman, it is decided to commandeer Mareech's help to avenge Ravana's honour. Ordered to abduct Sita to penalize her husband Rama, Mareech is horrified: he refuses to act against the god in human form to whom he has offered his devotion.

The drum plays, a curtain is carried in with the caption 'Lathiwallah Ishwar and the Cunning Nayeb'. Old characters exit and new characters enter: Ishwar, the peasant is being ordered by the landlord Nayeb to set fire to the house of Ragunath, a peasant leader, and start a riot to cripple peasant resistance. The job is meant to help re-assert the authority of Pal babu, the extortionist zamindar. Ishwar refuses, but is reminded that he is indebted to Pal babu, who once had him admitted to hospital when he was sick.

The scene changes once again: the new curtain that is brought in reads 'The President's Call'. The new set of characters are Gregory and Macky, American citizens. Macky, a C.I.A. agent attempts to persuade Gregory, a journalist, to enlist in the war. Gregory, who believes in democracy and disapproves of American foreign policy is most reluctant to agree.

Three points of time, three distinct situations: they have a common denominator, a man who is manoeuvred to knuckle under pressure from the powers that be. The three stories interrupt and intercept one another, with 'mistakes' happening, much to the annoyance of the Ustad: characters speak lines from stories other than their own, and the similarity of their plight is made only too apparent: Gregory is being blackmailed with a threat to blacken his scholarly father's reputation — Gregory commits suicide; Mareech obeys Ravana and is killed by an arrow of Rama; Ishwar has rebelled and, rescued by Raghunath, vows to fight for the welfare of the peasants. Pal Babu now advances to shoot Ishwar, who is saved by Mareech and Gregory. The characters break out of the planned story-line and the Ustad loses control, just as the oppressors
in the stories begin to lose control. Eventually, Valmiki, the great author of the Ramayana is summoned to justify why Mareech had to die the way he did – abetting evil. The poet claims to have written for his own day and age. He is aware of the fact that rulers exploit and ordinary folks die. He is wise enough to know that the mistakes the character have made are not fatal: “The world has not come to an end due to your mistakes! There will always be people left to learn from your mistakes” (48). Valmiki is impressed that Ishwar refuses to die – or rather is unafraid to die. “When a person is not afraid to die, you can’t have him die at your own whim and fancy! [...] Don’t you see that he is no longer simply a hired goon or an isolated peasant? He is now a group, a great human collective. Unless this entire group is wiped out, his death will fulfill no purpose. Even if you kill him he won’t be dead” (49). The play ends when the Ustad admits he has lost control of his plot and characters – but he is indeed happy that no one wants to die like Mareech, or commit suicide like Gregory.

The structure of the play, shuffling between three stories and as many settings, is intriguing and engaging to an audience, as is the theme of changing forms of exploitation, from the times of the Ramayana, to the American intervention in Vietnam and straight into present times. Both form and content single out *Mareech, the Legend* as a noteworthy instance of Bengali theatre.

*Water*: theatre for social justice

*Water (Jal )* (1977) was dramatized from her story of the same name by Mahasweta Devi, with the hope that the plays would go beyond the literate audience to a more diverse public. Like her other plays, *Water* too weaves history, myth and contemporary reality to give face and voice to the neglected tribal communities in India.

**Plot, characters and theme:** The setting is the village of Charsa, and the characters are members of the Dome community, a class of ‘untouchables’. The villagers are desperate for water. Maghai Dome, the water diviner detects water underground, wells are dug, but are
monopolized by Santosh Pujari, a landlord in the locality. The 'untouchables' are not allowed to
drink from the wells; but the cattle of the landlord are watered and washed near it. Phumani,
Maghai Dome's feisty wife relates how she and the other village women scratch the sands of the
river Charsa to collect a cupful of water. But in summer, the river dries and the villagers are
desperate to quench their thirst. Phulmani calls the river her co-wife, since Maghai Dome loves
the river, talks to her, flirts with her. Dhura, their son, demands that the father stop divining
water for Santosh Pujari who lets them suffer and starve. But Maghai Dome recounts that his
ancestors have been commissioned by the goddess, the nether Ganga, to help find water. They
take no money for it, it is their sacred mission. The anger and anguish of the villagers mount, but
Santosh continues to appropriate the drought relief and the villagers continue to fall prey to
disease and death. Jiten, the new school-teacher, a new-comer to the village, helps them in
whatever way he can, and complains to the Sub-Divisional Officer (S.D.O.) about Santosh Pujari's
excesses and appeals for justice, to no avail – the dice is loaded against him.

Driven to extremity, Jiten racks his brains and comes up with an idea: the river, which is
now swollen with the rains, can be dammed, if its banks are walled with boulders. Maghai and
his fellow villagers are enthused and give themselves to the work whole-heartedly. For the first
time they celebrate Holi with abandon and hope. But Santosh Pujari has alerted the authorities,
and the police are prevailed upon to disband the workers and demolish the dam. The men offer
stiff resistance and Maghai is shot; the bursting waters of the blasted dam carry his body away.

The play emphasizes the bond between the tribal folk and the movements of nature, and
is an ode to the fortitude of the masses, even as it is a scathing indictment of officialdom. Its
naturalistic technique combines with elements of song and dance to give it an interesting flavour:
a combination of Western and Indian elements of theatre.

An overview of the Bengali plays. Theatre in Bengal seems well represented in the
plays selected for study here. Its temper is basically political and speaks of the deep politicization
of discourse in West Bengal. This does not turn the plays into pale copies of one another, rather,
they offer numerous shades of political theatre. A serious social commitment informs most Bengali theatre of this period. And an equal commitment to theatre as a vital part of culture is only too apparent. Hence, the Bengali plays depict playwrights in constant quest for forms capable of articulating their ideologies. In the process, new audiences are addressed, fresh areas of life are focussed upon, new equations of power are addressed. The names of Bengali playwrights like Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Arun Mukherjee and Mahasweta Devi, and movements like the IPTA, are indeed prominent in the history of modern Indian theatre.

Having sketched the contexts of two of the three theatres selected for study the chapter turns to explore similar themes with reference to Sri Lanka: the social, political and cultural contexts as well as the theatre context. The Sri Lankan plays are then introduced.

2.4. Sri Lanka

The last few decades have been years of violence and instability for this island nation. Its location at the southernmost part of the Indian subcontinent has made it receptive to various influence from its much larger neighbour. Its island status, though, prevented it from being overpowered by the cultural or political influences from India. Sri Lanka has a history of accepting, assimilating, and adapting its imports. Its location in the Indian Ocean also opened routes for trade and political invasion from distant powers, just as it also spelled out opportunities for trade tourism, and migration. Modern theatre in Sri Lanka has been shaped by all these winds from many sources and has avidly created an identity for itself in recent times.

2.4.1. The Social Context in Sri Lanka

The Socio-Cultural Background: It is generally believed that the Sinhalese have descended from the people who migrated from North India and put down roots in the Island
around 500 B.C. These early migrants were Hindus and they conquered the natives, popularly referred to as *nagas* and *yakkas* or *yakkhas* (not to be confused with *Yakshas* or *Yakshayas*, which in Sinhalese mean 'demons') (Fenando M.S., *Rituals* 14). These prehistoric Balangoda cultures, seem to have been snuffed out by the early colonizers from India. A form of popular Hinduism evolved, not Vedic or formally based on the Upanishads, but an inclusive faith that made room for local gods and goddesses and awesome spirits. Buddhism was established (circa 250-210 B.C.) through the agency of Mahinda, it was consolidated by Mahinda’s sister Sangha Mitra who imported a sapling of the Bo tree from Boch Gaya under which Lord Buddha had attained enlightenment. Buddhism soon turned into a widely accepted popular movement. It flourished on the bedrock of Hindu belief and assimilated local norms and practices. The Theravada form of Buddhism suited the reality of the Sinhalese and took deep root. A number of Buddhist temples include shrines to Lord Vishnu or Upulavan, who is called the protector of Sri Lanka.

From the sixteenth century Ceylon was invaded by waves of European powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British ruled the country for various lengths of time. They were primarily focused on trade and many administrative and development measures were undertaken to enhance their trade capability. These colonial efforts had a marked effect on Sri Lankan society. By the time the British came to power in Ceylon, they found a well-established aristocracy, westernized and influential with the masses: these they utilized as a class of 'mudaliyars' or semi-independent administrators, to liaise with the population at large and the independent powers, e.g. the Sinhala King at Kandy and maintain a balance of power. The Dias Bandaranaike family is a pre-eminent instance of such an influential class.

The British tended to favour the minority English speaking Tamil elite in the North, Hindu or Christian by religion, to the disadvantage of the majority non-English speaking Sinhala population. In his personal reflections on Sri Lankan society today, Fr. Merwyn Fernando comments: "The Britishers had groomed the natives so well that colonialism continued after independence, the colonialism of the English-tutored elite over the un-westernized, vernacular-
speaking masses. [...] There was no socio-cultural transition corresponding to political independence. This is the root cause of all the woes and violence we have suffered up to now” (94).

The anti-colonial movement generated deep interest in the revival of vernacular languages and literatures. Whereas English has been the medium of instruction in schools that paved the way for University education, from the 1950s Sinhala and Tamil were given higher status, and a new class of bilingual intellectuals – Sinhala/English or Tamil/English – with English as the link language between the Sinhala and the Tamil communities. Later, school children were educated only in the mother tongue, the link language was lost and young people came to be separated on linguistic and ethnic lines. The ill-fated result was a fragmented sense of a 'separate' identity (Obeyesekere 40-43).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Sri Lanka has been plagued with ethnic strife between the Sinhala Buddhist population and the Tamil, mainly Hindu, population concentrated to the North, in the Jaffna province. A section of the Tamil population formed the extremist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (L.T.T.E.) and over three decades of terror were unleashed upon the people. The ethnic war drained the economy, crippled exports and the tourism industry, caused severe law and order problems and profound social tensions, and disrupted normal life. At the fag end of the 1990s the peace negotiations between the Sinhalese government and the terrorist L.T.T. E. were strengthened through the mediation of the Norwegian government. The peace-talks continue into the twenty-first century.

2.4.2. The Theatre Tradition in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan history does not witness to a long or vigorous tradition of secular drama. Theravada Buddhism may have had a large role to play in this: in its doctrinal form it discourages religious ritual in the community and stresses individual salvation. Thus Buddhist orthodoxy did not originally support communal rituals or a performance culture. Consequently, the long Sri
Lankan literature tradition does not include drama texts — religious or secular — from the classical and medieval periods: or if it ever did, the literate Buddhist clergy failed to preserve it. Buddhist monks were enjoined to avoid performances, musical and dramatic, though they were permitted to engage in painting, sculpture or writing. Buddhist temple worship — the šrīn ceremony — did include chanting, magic practice and food offerings, and in time, under the influence of Hindu ritual at the Sinhala courts, elements of music and dancing in formal processions crept into Buddhist ceremonies. King Parakramabahu 11 (1236–1271), a patron of the arts himself, is recorded as having issued an order to monks not to indulge in "poetry, drama and such despicable arts" (Obeyesekere 87). Theatre critic Ranjini Obeyesekere notes the resulting tension: "Throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, one is aware of the tension between the highly individualized form of religion as it was expected to be practiced by monks or individuals seeking salvation, and the continuous and ongoing pressure for it to be transformed into a practical religion of this-worldly support for the laity in their day-to-day activities" (87).

Unlike the classical tradition, the folk culture in Sri Lanka is rich in dramatic performative rituals. These were generally propitiatory rituals dedicated to gods and demons, probably predating the arrival of Buddhism on the Island. Curing rituals and demon exorcisms were part of the popular culture and so entrenched in the popular imagination that they continued to enliven the important moments in the community through the centuries. Performers in vivid masks and costumes engaged in song and mimetic dance with satiric interludes targeting persons in authority in the village.

A number of traditional secular folk forms are still performed in villages, primarily as entertainment. A few of these can be noted:

**Kolam** — satiric plays from the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, characterized by earthy humour and comic miming and caricatures of local authority figures, laced with stories adapted from the *Jataka Tales*.

**Sokari** — a form of folk drama seen in the central hill country. The texts are believed to date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the South Indian presence in the court at
Kandy was powerful. Kandyan kings at the time married queens from South India, who brought with them large entourages. Sokari is associated with harvest festivals and fertility rituals in honour of the goddess Pattini.

**Nadagama**—an operatic folk drama that gained popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth in the South-Western Coast of Sri Lanka. It is believed the form derived from the South Indian street drama or Terukuttu and was subsequently used by Catholic missionaries in the Northern regions of Jaffna to dramatize Christian themes. It came to be adapted and absorbed into the folk culture. Tamil and Sinhala languages often mixed freely here. Flamboyant masks are used in these ritual-cum-folk forms of art. Scholar M.H. Goonetilleka has researched and documented the various categories of masks and believes that these masking traditions are an extraordinary cultural phenomenon and a significant contribution Sri Lanka has made to the Asian cultural spectrum (*Masks* 202-4).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the growing urban populations of the Western sea-board came into contact with a more recent form from India, the ‘Parsi plays’. These plays were produced by the westernized Parsi community from India, and were a form of Hindustani musical drama. Highly commercialized, they were noted for their lavish costumes and elaborate backdrops and technical sophistication. Much shorter than traditional performances, they were staged in a makeshift theatre and stressed not social satire but lively music and dance.

Quickly, a Sinhala version, the **Nurti**, evolved, and urban middle-class audiences were regaled with performances combining Hindustani musical scores with a Sinhala text and strongly anti-colonial and nationalist themes. C. Don Bastian (1852–1921), John de Silva (1857–1922) and Charles Dias (1874–1944) gained enormous popularity. John de Silva satirized the Europeanized upper classes and sought “to rescue the nurti performances from the position it had descended to as a vehicle of a hybrid Anglo-Oriental culture, and to make drama a medium for the propagation of national and religious sentiments among the people” (Obeyesekere118). John de Silva’s plays were held in high esteem not only by middle class audiences but by intellectuals, writers and critics.
English theatre gained acceptance in the city of Colombo under British rule. The educated upper classes patronized English plays and European plays in English translation. The audience was small, westernized and rather alienated from the Sinhala theatre forms, including the greatly popular Nutti performances.

**Theatre from the 1950s.** By the latter half of the century, the bilingual intellectuals were consciously engaged in creating a resurgence in Tamil and Sinhala literature. This new energy found powerful expression in literature. E.F.C. Ludowyc and Ediriwira R. Sarachchandra, professors of literature at the University of Sri Lanka at Peradenya worked with students at the University Dramatic Society to stage adaptations and translations of Western realistic drama. The breakthrough came in the 1950s when Sarachchandra's experiments in a new Sinhala form of poetic drama brought together in a creative synthesis Western theatre techniques and dance forms of the Kolam and Nadagam traditions as well as the opera style made popular by the Nutti plays. In the early stylized dance dramas, Maname (1956) and Sinhabahu (1958) Sarachchandra worked with themes from Buddhist legend which he explored with new psychological insights. The playwright also borrowed from the Japanese Noh and Kabuki traditions and went on to create powerful drama that appealed not only to the intellectual elite but gained enormous acceptance with Sri Lankan audiences at large.

Sarachchandra's work is considered to be the bedrock of modern Sri Lankan theatre. Coming as it did, quickly in the wake of political independence, this theatre devised a new voice and suggested a Sinhala identity. D. M. de Silva assesses Sarachchandra's work:

His plays quite definitely represented in their own sphere a decisive phase in the 'struggle against imperialism'. They express potently the national sense of identity, reassured it perhaps, and certainly transfigured it – a function of abiding significance in post-colonial society. That they performed this function without themselves subsiding in a national hysteria is a vital factor in explaining their continued effectiveness and validity. [...]. Consequently his plays do not address themselves to the transient mood of a nation
but to its permanent experience, and with it to the experience of all mankind; they contrive to be national without losing their claim to be universal (30-31).

By the mid 1960s audiences were tiring of the many poor copies of Sarachchandra’s operatic dance dramas and Sinhala playwrights turned to realistic theatre. The shift also reflected a changing political ideology, a more radical Marxist socialism which required that art engage with the socio-economic issues of the day. Sinhala theatre was deluged with adaptations and translations of modern European plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Miller, Williams, Sartre, Anouilh and Beckett. Brecht became a major influence. Rapidly, original plays about contemporary local issues swept the stage, of diverse artistic merit. Though in retrospect many of these plays were seen as mere polemical pieces of short-term interest, the theatrical output of the day helped breach the gap between the high-brow literary language of the Universities and the colloquial speech on the street. A rich spoken language was fashioned as a theatrical idiom more adequate to serious discourse.

The Drama Festivals sponsored by the state played a major role from the 1950s to the 1980s in generating interest in the theatre among playwrights, directors, actors and the audience. Dozens of new plays were written and produced, these were discussed and debated with vigour in daily newspapers and literary journals and audience support for the theatre grew exponentially. Theatre did face tough competition for audiences from the Hindi cinema and more decisively from Sinhala ‘tele-dramas’ but the serious theatre had come to stay. Obeyesekere aptly assesses the situation: “At the beginning of the nineteenth century Sri Lanka had only the remnants of a folk drama confined mainly to the villages; by the latter part of the twentieth century it had not only developed a sophisticated theatre but become a nation of avid theatre goers” (131).
2.4.3. The Sri Lankan plays

The Sri Lankan plays studied here are entirely the creation of the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lankan society contains sizeable minorities, of which the Tamil is the largest, no Tamil plays were available in English translation, nor was there access to critical writing on Tamil theatre on the Island. Some of the plays selected were originally written in Sinhala, others in English. The plays selected cover some of the main genres and themes that have emerged on the theatre scene.

A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy: speaking the unspeakable

A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy is a one-act play written by Ernest MacIntyre (or McIntyre) and staged by the group Stage and Set in 1973. In the guise of a family crisis, wherein parents and grandmother discuss the murder of one son by another, the playwright approaches the problem of good and evil. The theme harks back to Cain and Abel and the story of fratricide in the Old Testament. The play begins with a quotation from a poem by Richard Eberhart, “The Fury of Aerial Bombardment” (1904):

You would feel that after so many centuries
God would give man to repent; yet he can kill
As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
No farther advanced than in his ancient furies. [...] (Somewhat Mad 207)

Structure, characters, tone and theme: The question of the choice of evil, undimmed with the passage of centuries forms the core of the play. The story is set in a plain middle-class domestic setting. As the Father comes back home from work, tired and irritable, the Mother informs him that their Son Ranjit has killed his brother Upali. She is “just about fed up with these children” and demands that Father should “give them a sound telling off” (210). The manner of killing is discussed: Ranjit pushed Upali’s head in the oven. The discussion is
punctuated with matter-of-fact remarks about the milk and tea that is being served. Ranjit is questioned and offers a pat reply, “I killed Upali, but it was his fault” (210). He goes on to relate that he was baking a pie when his brother barged in and yelled, “I must have my share of the pie, because everything in our father’s house belongs to all of us” (213). The boy is ordered to clear the mess. The parents watch Ranjit drag the dead body for burial under the orange tree. The mood begins to change when the Mother continues to chatter about the furniture but the Father lets out an agonised howl:

**FATHER.** Oh my God, for heaven’s sake, keep your bloody centre table, keep your damned side chairs, keep your damned corner settee, your Pyrex dinner set, your living children, your dead children, yourself and everything that goes with it, because I am tired of this somewhat mad and grotesque comedy. (218)

Ranjit comes in, repenting:

**RANJIT.** Please forgive me, Father, I did not know what I was doing. (221)

He begs for another brother and promises he will never kill again, but the parents are terrified that he will not keep his promise.

The entire play is punctuated with a chorus-like chant from the Grandmother who comments on the contrasting news of the discovery of mass graves in Bangladesh and the celebrations of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro side by side in the newspaper, and keeps singing broken-heartedly, “Oh come and mourn with me a while” (223). Curtain falls. The bizarre situation offers a telling comment on Sri Lankan society where Sinhala and Tamil factions were out on a rampage, one against the other, causing enormous social suffering. The one-act play also transcends the local situation to explore the nature of good and evil, angel and beast.

This particular play is extremely valuable to a student of text-in-context: it is one of the rare available play-scripts in English that touches upon the harsh realities of ethnic violence on Sri Lankan soil. Another one that has been mentioned in critical literature, but has not been of easy access is *The Intruder* by T. Arasanayagam (Goonatilleke, *Ethnic Conflict* 453). The
Aburdist form seems to lend itself rather effectively to a dramatization of this thorny and volatile theme.

*The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain* : Buddhist legend in postcolonial costume

*The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain* (1989) is one of the early plays by the most famous Sinhala playwright, Ediriwira Sarachchandra. It is based on one of the Jataka tales (*Swarnahansa Jataka*), a collection of stories about the Buddha in earlier incarnations before Enlightenment. The play was written originally in Sinhala (*Bhava Kadathurawa*) and later in English, by the playwright. Editor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke comments, “it is not a ‘transcreation’ but seems to me an original effort, somewhat like Beckett’s French and English versions of his plays” (8).

**Structure, characters and theme:** The play dramatizes the story of a Brahmin woman, her two daughters, Nandavati and Sundarinanda, and a *Sanyasi*, a wandering ascetic, a reincarnation of the father, Somadatta, a Brahmin who had died a few months previously. As the mother and daughters struggle to eke out a living in the village, the *Sanyasi* comes looking for shelter for the night. He claims to be the brother of their dead father. The mother houses him in a corner of the outhouse. The next morning he is gone, leaving behind a gorgeous golden feather. The mother insists on having it sold, and gets a thousand gold coins for it. The *Sanyasi* returns the next day and is sheltered once again in the shed. In the night the curious girls visit him only to discover him transformed into a magnificent golden swan. The feathers he leaves behind on successive evenings are sold for a huge price and the mother’s greed is exacerbated and she confines the Swan. The Swan confesses that he is a reincarnation of the father, come to provide for his family, and begs to be allowed to fly away to freedom. But the mother has brought along a group of grasping merchants and they pounce on the Swan, pluck all his feathers and cause its death. The chorus sings at key moments in the play, providing background information, narration as well as commentary on the action.
The Golden Swan derives some of its significance from the fact that the playwright seeks to define and elaborate his understanding of Sinhala identity. The play's theme of acquisitiveness offers a critique of contemporary Sinhala society, in sharp contrast to traditional Buddhist values. In this post-Independence period, questions of culture and identity engross the attention of the men of letters in Sri Lanka and plays like The Golden Swan turn theatre into a forum for public reflection and debate.

The Bearer of Woes: unbearable woe for the artist and society

The Bearer of Woes by Prasannajit Abeysuriya was written in 1989, in the decade that came to be known in Sri Lanka as a 'Time of Terror.' Though it was the first play by this young playwright, it is an experimental piece of theatre combining serious social critique and exuberant stage-craft.

Structure, characters and theme: The original title of the play, Dukgannārāla refers to the role of an official in the ancient courts of the kings of Sri Lanka who carried the people's problems to the king. This Bearer of Woes bears on his own shoulders the burdens of the common folk. Within the play the title seems to fit the character of the Man, who agonises about social ills, and ironically, to the Woman he wants to rescue as well.

The structure reveals a play within a play. As the performance is about to start and the dancers make their entrance on stage, a commotion is gathering momentum at the entrance. A Woman clutching a small child bursts in. The usher attempts to push her out but she begs to be allowed to stay a little while. The Director, the Sponsor and the Actors all get involved in the action as a Man enters to carry away the Woman. The Man, a writer, claims to be anxious to protect her, and she protests that she and her children are starving since he has 'rescued' her from prostitution. He offers the Woman a stable life with a husband and children, which she refuses, since the Man's writing does not earn them a decent living. As the actors get acquainted with their relationship and their struggles, they seek to find solutions to the problem in Buddhist
history. They enact a story from the Jataka tales: Queen Madri, the wife of King Vessantara, follows the king into exile and sacrifices her children and her own happiness on the altar of her duty to her husband. The idealistic tale fails to offer either the Woman or the Man with viable solutions. As they continue to squabble, the Sponsor, thoroughly exasperated, gets the guards to thrash the Man and exorcise him of his demons. Eventually, he tries to drag the Woman out:

MAN. [...] This may not be your legal husband talking, but it's the man who loves you and is the father of your child. I want to live with you because I don't wish to make that child also a fatherless orphan. Let us live like human beings or let us die. That's better than living like dogs. Today we must choose one or the other. Until my book is completed we will have to suffer just a while longer. You should put up with this and be a little patient. This is the last time I'll ask you. Answer me in one word. Can you or can't you?

(195)

The Woman leaves without a word, the man follows slowly. The actors too leave the stage. The Director, Sponsor and ushers, gradually follow them out.

The Bearer of Woes offers a critique of the harsh social conditions that oppress the marginalized. It is the work of a young playwright who has been living all his life in the throes of civil strife and ponders over the location of the artist within such a society. It offers special food for thought to a student of text-in-context: here the playwright explores the question of the capability of theatre to contribute to social justice and harmony. Weaving legend with fact, the play is an arresting instance of modern Sri Lankan theatre.

An overview of the Sri Lankan plays: The Sinhala theatre we examine here is a new development in Sri Lankan culture, which, as we have seen, did not emphasize performance. The energy of this modern theatre is astonishing, given its fairly recent origins, and also, the climate of political unrest in a 'time of terror' when they were performed. Within the prevailing Buddhist ethic, theatre seems to have gained, in the present day, the status of space safely permitted for
social debate. Within a culture grappling with postcolonial issues like the politicization of
language and ethnic strife, Sinhala playwrights have discovered for themselves and their
audiences an opportunity to question and articulate matters of culture and identity. Sadly, the
Tamil minorities do not seem to have found a corresponding space.

Having sketched the contexts — both of society and theatre — in each of the three
cultures and introduced the plays, we now analyse ways in which the text and the context in the
three locations have established connections to perform change.

2.5.1. The Plays Perform Change

Despite the marked differences in each context, the magnitude of the ‘social drama’ or
turbulence precipitated a process of change within the stage drama in China, India and Sri Lanka.
The main differences among the three cultures appear in the themes they choose to perform,
relevant to their specific circumstances. Some of these will come in for discussion in subsequent
chapters. However, one discovers numerous commonalities. In all three locations the theatre
seems to have delved deep into its fundamental nature to investigate its own power to transform
itself and society: the playwright moved away from being primarily the entertainer, towards the
role of social critic; the stage came to be, almost despite itself, a political space, where each
playwright took a stance according to his/her own lights and gave voice to a dominant or
emergent or even marginal meaning; the speedily changing social conditions demanded of the
theatre that it should question its techniques and forms to address contemporary needs and
expectations.

a. From Entertainment to Social Critique

In ‘normal’ times of social stability, theatre appears to find a comfortable role as
entertainer, delighting the public with intriguing tales, light satire, naughty jokes, poetic turns of
phrase and accepted stage conventions. Such ‘normal’ theatre flourished all over Asia at the start of the twentieth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, theatre as entertainer in Asia had received a shot in the arm as a result of its encounter with Western literature, especially Shakespeare. In India, particularly, translations, adaptations as well as new scripts on old themes, such as the productions mounted by Girish Chadra Ghosh, grew in popularity. In Sri Lanka, theatre as a popular form was literally born with the garb of entertainer as the influence of the Parsi theatre gave birth to the new Nurti plays.

It was by the middle of the century that the tumultuous social transformation began to make its demands on theatre’s vision of itself. The ancient stories with their welcome pathos and easy laughter had been entirely appropriate to a community that shared fundamental values and expectations; they now began to appear irrelevant and clichéd. Even as social and political instability made producing and attending performances more difficult, theatre stretched its resources and entered the lives of the people, with new themes, new styles, new performance spaces. Though never rescinding its role as entertainer, theatre now proclaimed itself a social commentator, a prophet, even a shaman or healer. An instance of such an avatar for theatre, can be observed in *The White-haired Girl*.

*The White-haired Girl* was constantly performed in the 1950s, and was enormously popular. In 1958 it was performed in a Peking Opera version, was adapted as in Shanghai in 1965 as a ballet which came to be accepted as a ‘model’ drama, and was filmed in 1971. It moved away from the stories of traditional drama. The hugely appealing theme of class struggle, and the bold experiment in form endeared it to vast audience. Critics have noted that “the fusion of song, music, chorus work and ordinary speech allied to a contemporary setting set *The White-haired Girl* apart from either traditional Chinese or modern Western stage practices, though both had clearly offered some inspiration. (It) was the first full-length representative of a new national genre named *geju*, song drama. [...] It was one solution to finding a middle way between past and present, a long-standing problem of Chinese theatre” (Brandon 40). *The White-haired Girl*
speaks of the capacity of theatre to metamorphose itself in response to felt needs, and give voice to people’s concerns.

In the context of West Bengal, an analysis of Utpal Dutt’s *Hunting the Sun* also reveals theatre as reformer and redresser of social ills. The play is stylistically an amalgamation of *Jatra* and modern realistic techniques to pose a vigorous and acerbic attack on superstition and blind faith. Utpal Dutt, a committed playwright of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1960s, launched a public campaign through theatre to win the common folk away from retrograde beliefs and practices and indicate a new rational mentality essential to progress in Independent India.

Here is a theatre of social commitment. Not for Utpal Dutt the elite performances running for a few shows in city auditoriums. His reach is towards the populace at large, his planning on a time scale of months and years. Plays that probe the depths of the mind, or fathom individual quests, do not interest him. The political and social issues of the community do. Emerging lines of discourse, as for instance matters of gender, find space in his work. In *Hunting the Sun* understatement, suggestion and subtlety are summarily dismissed in favour of an exuberant story and bold social critique.

In a similar, though never identical vein, other playwrights in each of the three cultures under study have sought to address important issues of the day, and offer redressal or direction to a society in crisis. In the play *Water* Mahasweta Devi passionately indicts the Establishment which, even in Independent India, has failed to deliver the basic necessities of life to vast numbers of tribal people all over the country. In *Cai Wenji* Guo Moruo turns to history, problematises the responsibility of the individual to the private versus to the public sphere of life, and legitimizes the newly determined loyalties – not primarily to the family, but to the State. The Confucian ethic that prioritizes the family is replaced with the new Communist ethic that calls for the subordination of individual and private needs to the collective good. In *The Golden Swan*, as in other later plays, Ediriwira Sarchchandra delves into traditional Jataka tales to reaffirm Buddhist ideals and values in a rapidly modernizing society. The woman is seen as the repository
and transmitter of values. The acquisitiveness of the Brahmin woman who causes the death of the Golden Swan comes in for condemnation as unacceptable by Buddhist standards. Here the playwright undertakes the project of examining and re-defining the Sinhala identity vis-à-vis the rather unnerving demands of a new age.

With the playwright in the role of prophet or shaman, the theatre seems to return to its ritual roots. As performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte correctly notes, rituals work in a community to secure a safe passage from a particular status to a new one. This holds true in the significant moments in the life of an individual, such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, illness, change of professional position and death. It holds equally true in moments of social crisis. Fische-Lichte points to the performances created by artists in various locations: “This passage is also to be understood as a passage from the given sign-concept, as well as semiotic processes, towards a new, yet undefined order of knowledge. The performances, thus, operate as the signature of a time of transition” (”Performance Art” 36). At a moment when individuals and collectives are experiencing unbearable stress in the form of discrimination, oppression or even physical torture, the performance in a way turns into a scapegoat ritual.

b. Political Awareness

In the turbulent times under study here, theatre seems to have assumed a markedly political tone. During periods of political uncertainty and confusion, the stage opened its doors to diverse stances, as playwrights gave voice to particular political ideologies or philosophies of life.

Arun Mukherjee unequivocally admits to seeing theatre as a political space. Mareech, the Legend addresses an issue that was very close to the heart of Marxists in West Bengal: class-struggle. It was first produced in 1973, over twenty-five years after Independence, when Marxist ideals were seen as losing ground, consigned, in the phrase of Ronald Reagan, to “the trash heap of history.” However, many intellectuals in Bengal continued to believe that class considerations remained central to political and social life. Critic Himani Banerji remarks:
Yet the violence of class manifests itself everywhere in Bengal or India and the world. Dispossession grows, 'commoditization' grows, the world grows into a market place where very few can either buy or sell. Gender, caste, religion and 'race' are complexly woven into this organization of power of capital and class, and the talk of nation or community amounts to no more than a way for women or the poor to be manipulated to offer their backs for the ruling class to climb on. Never more than now did we need the stories of class and class struggle — but told in a way that is worthy of the social and formative complexity, the elusiveness, the many-facedness of the concept of class (viii).

It is within this context that we can situate *Mareech, the Legend*. Arun Mukherjee employs considerable creativity in devising the structure of his play; he infuses the theme with intelligence and wit that lends it complexity. The Communist ideology that Arun Mukherjee subscribed to, underpins the play. Himani Banerji goes on to note:

> This play dramatizes Marx's statement in *The Communist Manifesto* about history being the history of class struggles over a succession of stages of property ownership. The time span within this play ranges from the epic days of the Ramayana to the present, from mythologies to the streets of contemporary Calcutta. In between, Mukherjee provides a detour and a parallel through the imperialist USA. At each level, he presents a dominant individual's response to pressures exerted by the state, its ideological apparatus and the economic hegemony of the ruling classes. In so doing, he teases out the possibilities and dimensions of class struggle through this individual's growing awareness of his political agency (ix).

Though fully committed, politically, the playwright avoids stridency in tone; the ending is, ironically, inconclusive — no playwright, no Ustad, no authority can really deny a person his or her agency as a free being.

If *Mareech, the Legend* is a political statement in theatre, Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian's *Nocturnal Wanderer* is no less political. Taken in isolation from the socio-political context, *Nocturnal Wanderer* appears to have no political colouring. It stands on its own as a
dramatic probe into the dark recesses of an individual's consciousness. Through the nightmarish images and events in his dreams, the Traveller-turned-Sleepwalker comes into touch with his own suppressed desires and fears. This is the kind of play that politically committed playwrights like Utpal Dutt or Arun Mukherjee or He Jingzhi and Ding Yi would abhor as self-indulgent and socially irrelevant.

In the context of the life and times of Gao Xingjian, however, one cannot but discern the significance of the playwright’s chosen paradigm. The Nobel Lecture by Gao Xingjian in 2001 reiterated his distinct political stance — a rejection of the emphasis on the collective, or the nation, in favour of a literature of the individual. He declared:

> Literature can only be the voice of the individual, and this has always been so. Once literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party, or the voice of a class or group, it can be employed as a mighty and all-engulfing tool of propaganda. However, such a literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature, and becomes a substitute for power and profit. [...] Literature is man’s affirmation of the value of his own self, and is born primarily of the writer’s need for self-fulfillment. Any impact it has on society comes after the completion of a work, and the impact is certainly not determined by the wishes of the writer (5-6).

The playwright goes on to register his revulsion against Chinese government policies that dictated literary practice: "(B)oth the revolution in literature and the revolutionary literature alike passed death sentences on literature and the individual” (Gao 5). He laments the fact that in pursuance of such revolutionary ideals, numerous writers were shot, imprisoned, exiled or punished with hard labour. To Gao, intellectual freedom was of the essence, as was the need to transcend national boundaries to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature.

In the study of *Nocturnal Wanderer* and other plays like *The Other Shore*, it is apparent that in his theatre, Gao does not mount a frontal attack on a particular political ideology. He dramatizes the fact that the individual cannot live alone, he needs the Other; yet one can be
destroyed if one gets too close to the Other. Gao investigates the human search for a balanced distance between the Self and the Other.

When one turns to the Sri Lankan scenario, once again one comes face to face with theatre speaking politically. Prasannajit Abeysurya's *The Bearer of Woes* takes recourse to a blend of drama and dialectics to explore the relationship of the arts with society. Unlike the IPTA playwrights committed to a dominant political ideology, and equally unlike Gao Xingjian, who unequivocally rejects the concept literature as a tool of power and propaganda, the Sri Lankan playwright treads a different path. He dramatizes the writer's inner urge to reveal society to itself, and ultimately impact it; the impulse is met with resistance from members of this society who have little faith in the power of literature to affect reality; and the entire dilemma is reflected in the efforts of the actors — in the play-within-the-play — to provide answers to the agonized debate of the Man and the Woman.

The tone of the play veers from the serious — when the Man expresses his anguish at the fact that his writing has been banned; to the farcical — when the guards grab the Man and try to 'exorcise' him with a merciless beating; to the satirical — as when an actor comments:

1st ACTOR. You know, some Buddhist texts say it doesn't really matter what one does to survive or how one lives. The important thing according to them is to keep one's mind serene at the moment of death. Then pst... no problem...it's straight to heaven with no further talk! (188)

The ending is deliberately inconclusive: the writer challenges the Woman to follow him and be patient until he can make a mark with his writing; but the Woman silently walks away with her child, and the writer follows them. One is left with the impression that dogmatic and final answers are beyond the pale. All that one can do is clear a space for open debate.

One of the corollaries of socio-political turmoil in Asia seems to have been, as an analysis of these plays reveals, a growing need to examine and discuss the changing social and literary paradigms. Playwrights, performers and the public have often turned to the theatre to make some sense of their changing political realities. At points the theatre has been appropriated by
the oppressor to establish legitimacy. At other points attempts by artists have been summarily suppressed. At yet other points, the theatre, though it spoke with a subversive voice, has actually thrived as a permitted space in times of terror.

c. Experiments in Form

As individuals and communities have found their identities threatened, they have generally turned to the manifestations of their culture to make a positive statement. For a time, native theatre traditions were neglected and dismissed as inferior or irrelevant, and the aggressive Western forms appeared to have won the stage. However, this was to be a passing phase. Soon, artists turned to questioning the new and the old and in each of the three Asian cultures, richer vernacular forms were born. This has always been the fruit of experimentation and self-conscious questioning, in response to the demand for a relevant and legitimate voice. The spurt of experiment in artistic form and technique does not appear as a quest for mere novelty; it seems, rather, that theatre felt challenged and enthused to revitalize itself — or face decay — as a cultural artifact.

The plays selected for study witness to the multiple new directions explored by Asian playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century. Lao She’s *Teahouse* is a breakthrough in Chinese theatre in the 1950s, a new form called *huaju* or ‘spoken drama’. Here we find Chinese playwrights adopting Western styles and models. As has been noted earlier, traditional Chinese drama worked from a basic script that made room for extensive improvisation and extemporizing. Music, song and dance, and acrobatics were prominent elements in theatre, and the written text held a very subordinate position in the equation. Now we notice a major shift in the balance of dramatic elements. The play script is carefully crafted and published in a definitive form. The characters speak realistic prose. Realism as a new style of writing and performance enters Chinese theatre and transforms the very concept of what happens on and off stage. The ‘spoken drama’ engages with political and social issues, largely because this form is dominated by
intellectuals. The structure is also influenced by Western drama, as scenes move chronologically from one era to another, from the end of Manchu Empire to the encounter with foreign powers, to civil war, and the advent of the Communist government. There is an attempt at realistic characterization, though the cast is very large: it includes two generations of owners, customers and officials who frequent the establishment. The play is written to be performed in an auditorium, by itself a new development for the majority of Chinese spectators used to finding theatre in the market-square, in the teahouse and in the homes of the wealthy. As the use of space changes, the relationships between performers and spectators are also transformed. 

**Teahouse** deals, thematically, with the changing face of Peking society from pre-modern to modern; stylistically, it embodies the movement of modernity in its acceptance of realism over traditional symbolic modes, and of the literary text over the earlier, more ‘total’, multi-faceted spectacle.

In the Indian context, Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* stands as a landmark of experimentation in modern Indian theatre. Writing in the 1960s for a Bengali society intent on modernizing itself, Sircar attempts to capture the temper of the new urbanite, to dramatise and problematise emerging dilemmas and relationships. The commercial theatre of Calcutta, popular in the preceding decades – historical and mythical re-interpretation or romantic melodrama – did not seem to lend itself to speak for the contemporary situation. Sircar experimented with new concepts of structure, characterization and use of language to capture the mood of disillusionment of a sensitive Indrajit who ends up joining the monotonous routine of getting on with the business of living, which has sucked in Amal, Kamal and Vimal. Intrigued with voices he had heard on his visits to England, such as those of Ibsen, Brecht and Absurdist Theatre, Badal Sircar creates his own breed of characters: the Mother/Aunty, Manasi, Amal, Vimal, Kamal; the Writer; and Indrajit. Here we encounter, in the main, no profound psychological characterization. Instead it is new stereotypical figures that take shape on stage.

Structurally, the play dispenses with crisis, climax and resolution. The device of having the Writer write a play about four persons who have come to watch the play serves to break the
dramatic illusion and induce a Brechtian kind of distancing. The play appears to have no plot, yet one does find a progression, a sense of movement — for most of the characters, movement within a rut; for Indrajit, a movement towards acceptance of the fact that there is no escape.

Sri Lankan society too, experienced social trauma that must, of necessity, be dealt with through novel artistic forms. Trauma often robs individuals of their voice. Compelling themselves to break the silence, playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre resorted to experimental theatre to speak of unspeakable matters like ethnic violence and massacre. *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* turns to Absurdist theatre models to convey a sense of the absurdity and terror felt by the common people unnerved by fratricide. Having noted that the ‘ethnic’ conflict in Sri Lanka since the 1980s contained incendiary elements other than race — language, religion, economics and history — one approaches in this play the feeling of how close to the family, how close to the bone, the catastrophe feels to the person on the street. A realistic performance may have fallen woefully short of the effect intended by the playwright. Traditional folk forms like the ancient *Nadagama* might have seemed pitifully inadequate to accommodate new questions and new answers.

Ernest MacIntyre resorts to a one-act play in Absurdist format: as brother murders brother and parents discuss domestic trivialities in the same breath as fratricide, the old grandmother mourns the triumph of evil over good in a seemingly incongruous religious hymn. The very brevity of the play, and its bizarre plot and setting, manage to cast a glance, a very brief glance, at a horrific situation.

If theatre appears, at times, to hide from tasks as revolting as re-living trauma, it does, at other times, turn its hand to just such a project. In *Nocturnal Wanderer*, Gao Xingjian plumbs unfathomed depths and cumbrous issues of good and evil, individual freedom and pleasure in violence.

Quite removed from realism, Gao’s theatre takes on a surrealistic quality, with subterranean fears and desires catapulting to consciousness. Conceivably as a result of his exposure to violence, oppression and evil in the days of his youth — he was at one time a
member of the Chinese Red Guards – the awareness of dark impulses is nagging. It is through recourse to Artaudian images of cruelty and through innovative use of language that he creates his powerful effects.

2.5.2. Conclusions

In the fifty years of the latter half of the twentieth century, the cultures in China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka came under tremendous pressure: negotiating their identities vis-à-vis western powers, and all that this process entailed. In these three locations was once again re-played the myth of the encounter between two super-human personalities which provides the plot of some of the greatest stories created by the human imagination --- as in India, the story of Indra slaying the demon Vritra, who holds captive the sun and the rain (Rosenberg 357); or the story, in China, of the battle between Bao Chu and the King of Evil who has imprisoned the sun (Rosenberg 393): allegories of the conquest of chaos and of the release of the life forces. Philosopher Theillard de Chardin remarks, “To jolt the individual [...] and also [...] to break up the collective frameworks in which he is imprisoned, it is indispensable that he should be shaken and prodded from outside. What would we do without our enemies?” (164) In China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka the context with all its extreme social tensions and the performance text with its creative response, have together created meanings in the theatre.

Underlying the selected modern plays, one senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for the struggles of the people for freedom and identity, however these may be interpreted.

The themes indicated here form the core of subsequent chapters: the political dimensions of theatre and the role of the playwright in political costume; one major area of
contemporary discourse – gender – as constructed and articulated within these cultures; and trends in experimentation in theatre form.
Notes

1 Opium Wars: hostilities between China in Britain (1839-1842) related to the trade of opium carried out by the English East India Company. The Chinese government was greatly apprehensive about the ill effects on the health and morals of the growing number of addicts, as also about the reversal in the balance of trade, and the right of the government to prohibit the import of the drug. The war was resumed in 1856. Treaties were signed during 1858-1860, whereby major concessions were made to Britain, France and Russia. See Latourette, China 104-113.

2 The Sino-Japanese War (1894-95): this is a reference to attacks on China by Japan, repeated in the 1930s and 1940s to further Japanese imperialistic ambitions.

3 The Kuomintang or the Nationalist Party was led by Sun Yat-sen, later by Chiang Kai-shek. It had leanings towards America. Though the Kuomintang and the Communist Party did attempt alliances, they eventually fell apart and were locked in a bloody civil war. After its defeat in 1949, the Kuomintang took refuge in Taiwan. See Latourette, The Chinese 398.

4 The Taiping Rebellion (1848-1853) was led by rebel Chinese against the Ch'ing dynasty. The leaders of the rebellion followed a compound of Christian teachings and indigenous practices; the rebellion was in the main, an uprising against landlords, rich peasants and merchants.

5 The Boxer Uprising (1900) had as its objective the expulsion of foreigners, chiefly Christian missionaries.

6 The Great Leap Forward was a Five-Year Plan which stressed steel production and industrialization. 600 000 'backyard furnaces' are reported to have been started all over the country for this purpose. The Great Leap Forward was followed by a catastrophic famine that may have cost twenty million lives. See Louis 223.

7 The first Partition of Bengal in 1905 into two provinces provoked the first mass nationalist agitation in India and was repealed in 1911. The second Partition led to the birth of East Pakistan in 1947.