CHAPTER 1

Backdrop
The preamble

In the introductory part an endeavour has already been made to lay bare some of the special features of Bengali theatre in relation to the present study. But since it is an empirical study covering a period of almost 120 years, the whole spectrum of the Bengali theatre needs to be looked into so that the problem part may be understood in a better perspective. The backdrop therefore is attempted in depth but also in a precise manner. In doing so, care has also been taken to periodise the spectrum, and bring about the characteristics of the period including the personalities engaged in theatre. Afterall history of Bengali theatre is the history of these periods and personalities along with their social genesis.

The origin of Bengali theatre has been accepted by all and sundry as of non-indigenous sources. Even an outspoken theatre personality like Utpal Dutta, in a recent article of his, had to acknowledge the fact that “Bengali theatre was born out of an interaction with European thinking”. And he went on to elaborate further “.. even the theatre-architecture was a close imitation of the Calcutta halls built by the English” (Dutta, 1993). Thus the foreign culture contact, particularly the English theatre, comprising all its characters is also very important while a genesis of Bengali theatre is attempted to. This has exactly been done, so that the source and further movement in the theatrical arena is understood without any ambiguity.

Historical genesis

The first theatrical movement in the history of western civilization made its initiation in 5th Century B.C. in Greece. Curiosly enough at about the same time or may be a little later here in India probably in 1st Century A.D. a complete text book of dramaturgy has been found which is said to be written by a sage named ‘Bharata Muni’ and known all over the world as ‘Natya Sastra’ (Hartnoll, 1985). Greek theatre via Rome reached the European continent and had undergone many changes by first century A.D. These phases in England were known as medieval theatre, liturgical or church plays, Elisabethan theatre, restoration theatre and the theatre emoluted by the Bengalis namely, the proscenium theatre where painted scenery, a curtain in front, a roofed auditorium and marked side lighting began to be used. In contrast to this, it is generally believed that the ancient Indian theatre which had rigid bindings such as plot construction, stage-making, time of performance, gesticular acting etc had no influence
whatsoever on Bengali theatre. In fact whereas the ancient Indian plays thrived on scenic spectacle, ballat and opera, the western concept depended on plot, stage-craft and high-pitched acting. The Bengali theatre is an off-shoot of the second one. Of course there are reasons for that. The two invasions-Muslim and British in 12th century A.D. and 17th century A.D. respectively, were able to destroy the Indian cultural heritage to a large extent and the schooling of ancient Indian drama, particularly the tradition of Sanskrit dramaturgy, got completely cut off from the ordinary life. By the medieval period, the practice became almost defunct barring in certain religious shrines of southern India.

Thus it is not surprising when it is said that Bengalis learnt theatre as they had seen it from the British. The first attempt towards an English theatre was in 1779 when during Governor General Warren Hastings’ (1772-1783) time and at whose instance was established the Calcutta theatre (1779), (Raha, 1978). This was purely a British theatre, erected primarily for the European community who were far off from their native land and were greatly in need of their brand of entertainment. Gradually other theatre houses such as the Dumdum theatre (1817), Baitaconah theatre (1824), Sans Soucie theatre (1839-49), Chowringhee theatre (1813-1839) etc came up (Raha, 1978, Mukherjee, 1982). The plays and the play houses undoubtedly made the native population, particularly the English speaking middle class and the rich aristocrats curious as well as envious. Though it is not possible to estimate the exact number of audience, but that it increased considerably by the end of the third decade of nineteenth century, can be verified from an editorial in ‘The Oriental Observer’ written on 22nd February, 1840. It says “a Calcutta audience, an Indian audience we should say - is always compared with those of any part of Europe, a highly respectable audience” (Raha, 1978). Though it sounds amazing but within fifty years of its inception, the English language theatre has roused enough enthusiasm amongst the native population. So much so that one Mr. Baisnab Charain Audy, a native youngman, enacted the role of Othello in Sans-Souci theatre (present St. Xaviers college) and earned the sobriquet, “real, unpainted nigger Othello” (Raha, 1978, Mukherjee, 1982). The productions of the English language theatre included such classics as Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Merchant of Venices, She stoops to Conquer, School for Scandal etc on the one hand and insignificants such as Honeymoon, The Weather-cock, the Sixty-Third Letter, the Poor Soldier, Rob Roy, The Peasant Boy etc (Raha, 1978). The play houses were feeble imitations of their counterparts in London. The Calcutta theatre thus popularly came to be known as Indian Drury and the Dumdum Theatre as Little Drury. Deceidedly the famous British actor-director-producer
David Garrick (1717-1779) had a profound influence on the English theatres of Calcutta (Mukherjee, 1982). Another important aspect of these theatres was the performance of the female artists. Two names stand out, that of Mrs. Emma Bristow (1789-90) and Mrs. Esther Leach (1826). The last lady was even nicknamed by the contemporary newspapers as the 'Indian Siddons' (Mukherjee, 1982). It is, therefore, no wonder that the newly English educated Bengali youth or the little educated 'Baboo's' along with their newly acquired riches would flock together and visit such play houses in search of new and exciting entertainment. In this regard also to be remembered that the traditional folk form of entertainment such as jatra, panchali, kabigan, half-aakhirai etc. were began to be vehemently ridiculed and rejected by this newly educated Bengali intelligentsia (Bandopadhyay, 1946).

The desire for an indigenous theatre and dramatic performances in their own language was an obvious off-shoot of this. The socio-economic background was equally conducive for that since the newly rich comprador bourgeoisie had enough money to spare and the middle class with varied exposition to English language and culture was dissatisfied with traditional entertainment, primarily because of its monotony on the one hand and indirect or partial influence of English culture on the other and were in constant search of new entertainment. Added to this were the gradual erosions of feudal production relations and the increasing urbanisation of Calcutta which gave birth to a new generation of middle class who acquired English education and were not averse to an alternative entertainment such as theatre in the British style.

\* \* \* \n
\*a) Jatra : An open-air village form of Bengali theatre performed on a raised platform. Traditionally, no women actresses were engaged even as late as the second quarter of the twentieth century and live concert music was a special feature.

b) Panchali : Another traditional village form of story-telling by a single singer-performer. Performed in verse form. Topics mainly from Indian mythology and epics.

c) Kabigan : A competition between two singer poets in an open arena, accompanied by live music and percussions. On the spot verses created instantaneously by both poets were a characteristic feature.

The pioneering efforts

Before a serious discussion regarding the genesis of Bengali theatre could begin, another incident again on the part of a foreigner should be mentioned. Gerasim Lebedoff (1789-1817), a Russian by birth, a globe trotter, a linguist and probably a fortune seeker came to Calcutta in 1787. Since he was a linguist, he began to learn Bengali from one Mr. Golok N. Das and while learning the language, he became keen to produce a Bengali drama. Thus with the help of his teacher, he translated into Bengali, two English plays - 'The Disguise' and 'Love is the best Doctor'. He took much liberty in translation and even incorporated a few Indian characters in it with the assurance that local actors and actresses would be available. Lebedoff erected a makeshift play house in Dometala (present Ezra Street), named it 'Bengali theatre' and decorated it in Bengali style. On 27th November, 1795 Lebedoff staged his play 'The Disguise'. The performance was repeated on 21st March, 1796. There were two hundred seats in the auditorium and all the tickets were priced. On both nights the house was packed to capacity (Bandopadhyay, 1946). However, Lebedoff was unable to continue his efforts and had to leave this country shortly afterwards, a completely dejected man (Dutta, 1993).

The next attempt of a theatre production by a Bengali producer had to wait for another forty years. Once more it was an adaptation. But this time from Sanskrit to English. The producer, Babu Prasanna Coomer Thakur of Pathuriaghata, the venue - his garden villa at Narikeldanga, the play - Uttar Rama Charit and its translator, Horace Heyman Wilson (1766-1864) - the famous indologist. Wilson probably even directed the play. It was performed on Wednesday the 28th December, 1831. The theatre itself was called 'The Hindu Theatre' (Bandopadhyay, 1946). Then on 6th October 1835 on the initiative of Babu Nabin Chandra Basu, a full-fledged Bengali drama was staged. Ray Gunakar Bharat Chandra’s ‘Vidyasundar’, kind of a verse play, was produced on a makeshift stage erected near present Shilambazar Tram Depot in 1835 (Bandopadhyay, 1946). With these two productions began the true journey of Bengali theatre. Two other theatre performances of this period need special mention. One was at the Tagore ancestral house in Jorasanko on 5th January, 1867 (Bandopadhyay, 1946), the brain behind that was Jyotirindranath (1849-1925) and Gunendranath (1847-1881), both elder cousin brothers of poet Tagore (1861-1941). And the second was at Belgachia theatre in Paikpara where a Bengali adaption of the sanskrit drama ‘Ratnabali’ by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna (1822-1886), the first Bengali playwright was performed on 31st July, 1858 (Bandopadhyay, 1946).
Another significant aspect of this performance was the involvement of Michael Madhusuden Dutta (1824-1873). He was requested to make an English translation of the play for the benefit of the European audience. Madhusudan did this gladly and in doing so became so much involved, that he himself began to write a play. This was ‘Sarmista’ which was performed at the same venue on 3rd September, 1859 (Bandopadhyay, 1946). But as has been pointed out earlier, it was not Madhusudan but Ramnarayan Tarkaratna (1822-1886) who should be rightly credited as the first established playwright of Bengali theatre. His ‘Kulín-Kūla Sarbaswa’ written in 1854 gave him that distinction. This was staged in March 1857, the year of ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ (Bandopadhyay, 1946).

**The gestation period**

The period 1831 to 1871 thus was the gestation period of Bengali drama. The three important playwrights of the period were Tarkaratna, Madhusudan and Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873). Though Madhusudan was a great writer, it was Dinabandhu and his two plays ‘Nildarpan’ and ‘Sadhabar Ekadasi’ which made the newly emerging vernacular theatre a distinct possibility.

This journey began in 1868 when two young actors, Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) and Babu Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi (1850-1909) decided under the aegis of ‘Baghbazar Amature Theatre’ to stage a satire by Dinabandhu Mitra, ‘Sadhabar Ekadasi’. It’s success was a hall-mark which led to the belief that theatre could be a viable commercial proposition. The organisers of ‘Baghbazar Amature Theatre’, later known as ‘Shyambazar Natya Samaj’ rented the outer courtyard of Babu Madhusudan Sanyal at a rent of Rs. 40/- a month. The auditorium thus built was named ‘National Theatre’. In passing it may be mentioned that there was a raging controversy between Ardhandu Sekhar Mustafi and Girish Chandra Ghosh regarding the naming of the theatre ‘National’ (Bandopadhyay, 1946). Consequently, Girish Chandra disassociated himself from this effort. But in 1873, he rejoined National as an amateur actor. Dinabandhu’s ‘Nildarpan’ was the first bill of fare. There were press-advertisement, and the price of tickets were quite expensive - 1st class Re. 1/- and 2nd. class 1/2 a rupee, Inspite of an editorial threat in the powerful ‘The Englishman’ (now the Statesman), a spokesman of the Britishraj, ‘Nildarpan’ was performed on 7th and 14th December, 1872 (Bandopadhyay, 1946). Bengali theatre however, still remained in its amateur stage. From 1872 to 1886 the period was a mushrooming of such semi-professional teams as ‘Hindu National Theatre’, ‘The
Bengal Theatre’, ‘The Great National Theatre’ etc (Basu, 1973). Out of these ‘Great National’ deserves a special mention. The performances of this group invited state intervention. The first performance was of a satire named ‘Gajadananda and the Yubaraja’, a bantering indictment of the state visit of Prince of Walse in January 1876 and the second performance was of ‘Surendra Vinodini’ which was declared obscene. Both the charges, though being false, a regulatory measure restricting dramatic performances was enacted in 1876, (Bandopadhyay, 1946).

Emergence of Bengali Professional theatre

The next phase began in 1873. With the establishment of ‘Star’ and ‘Minerva’, the two play-houses, Bengali theatre entered its commercial phase. The boom lasted up to 1912, in other words, till the death of Girish Chandra Ghosh. In these forty years Bengali theatre grew out of its infancy and acquired a full grown status. The main credit must go to Girish Chandra Ghosh. It was his prolific pen which catered to the needs of the day. The task was difficult since the demand of the audience could neither be satiated with such historical adaptation of Bankim Chatterjee’s (1838-1894) novels ‘Chandrasekhar’, ‘Durgeshnandini’ or ‘Kapalkundala’, nor could be satisfied with such farcical plays as Jyotirindranath Tagore’s ‘Aleek Babu’ or ‘Hathath Nabab’ or even with such shallow musicals as was written by Manamohan Basu (1831-1912). So Girish Chandra began to write his own plays. Altogether he wrote about ninety plays, notable amongst them were such religious plays as ‘Chaitanya-Lila’, ‘Bilwamangal’, historical biographies such as ‘Asoka’, ‘Life of Buddha’, ‘Siraj-ud-daula’, social plays such as ‘Prafulla’ and ‘Balidan’, musical satires such as ‘Jaisaki-Taisa’ and ‘Abu Hussain’. Though he wrote for the audience, Girish Chandra Ghosh established a theatre language which went a long way in creating theatre consciousness amongst the Bengali population. Inspite of his shortcomings, since he wrote for the audience and the stage and the profit-orientation mentality of the hall-owners, one must admit that his contribution towards creating an indigenous theatre was outstanding. He exposed the Bengali theatre and its audience to true Elisabethan theatre as well as to a combination of such theatrical forms and traditional entertainments as jatra. Late Utpal Dutta’s candid comment is a resounding testimony of that, “Girish Ghosh, therefore tried to nullify the bourgeois naturalism and wanted to return to the fold of such poetic stage forms which were closer to the jatra form and the Shakespearean dramaturgy. All through his theatrical life he was engaged in an original and sensational experiment whether jatra and theatre could be combined in one form or not” (Dutta, 1993). By combining the form of British theatre and jatra he in fact was able to satisfy the cross-section of middle class audience.
His experimentation in form and language created an opening for later generation of Bengali theatre personalities. In fact, this may be construed as a classic combination of little tradition and great tradition. The tradition of British theatre had a long genesis and was an integral part of the great traditions of Europe. What Girish chandra attempted was a combination of this tradition with the indigenous folk form of jatra which was a part of 'little tradition' of Bengal.

The other notable playwrights of this period were Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinod (1863-1927), Dwijendrala Roy (1863-1913), Amritala Basu (1853-1929), Atul Krishna Mitra (1857-1912) and Amarendranath Dutta (1876-1916). Also special mention must be made of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) whose first full length play ‘Raja-O-Rani’ was composed and performed at the ‘Star theatre’ in 1889. Tagore had altogether different views regarding writing and producing a play. In fact his total systems related to ideology and operation were incompatible to a large extent with the contemporary artists (used in blanket term). For such a basic character Tagore should be treated as a special identity, beyond the amalgam of others of the same chronological pariod.

The notable actors and actresses of this period were Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Amritalal Basu, Chunilal Deb, Amarendra Nath Dutta, Aparesh Mukherjee (1875-1934), Binondini Devi (1863-1941), Sukumari Dutta, and Tarasundari Devi (1878-1948). Another notable feature of this period was the adaptations. Molier was adapted by Jyotirindra Nath Tagore. Greek plays and Shakespear’s works were either translated or adapted by Girish Chandra Ghosh and Amarendranath Dutta. Significantly Manmohan Basu, another noted playwright of the period opted for western operas. These efforts were of course done to attract the audience. But in doing so Bengali theatre was still groping for its identity. In fact, a dichotomy began to assert itself. In subject and stage craft, the theatre remained west oriented while in acting and actor-orientation, it followed the style of indigenous jatra. So long Girish was alive, the balance between these two was unobtrusive. But after his demise, this gave birth to actor-dominated plays which became a depredation for the later generation of producers. Thus a new phase began when Girish Ghosh died in 1912 and it stretched upto 1921. All the critics are unanimous in declaring this period as to be unfertile and stagnant. Still one or two names stand out. One such name was Surendra Nath Ghosh or ‘Danibabu’ (1868-1932), as he was popularly known as the son of Girish Chandra Ghosh. ‘Dani Babu’ had one of the longest career in Bengali theatre. His is a brilliant example of actor-domination. It is said that even after the exceptional
debut of Sisir Bhaduri, Dani Babu’s name used to attract a sale of Rs. 1500 to 2200 per show. The other example was Tarasundari who played the title role in Rejia (1902), a historical play authored by Manmohan Roy. It was produced on 2nd May, 1902 at the Aurora theatre. From the very first night the performance of the actress attracted the attention of the learned and the laity. In passing it may be observed that such bold character portrayal was an indication of women strength and authority which the modern historians and critics described as symbolical contrast to Bengali males’ effeminate disposition. (Dasgupta, 1999). But these two apart, theatre by and large suffered depredation and it was apparent that without new thinking and a fresh approach Bengali theatre could not overcome this stagnation. On hindsight it appears, Bengali theatre lacked proper organisation and talented producers. Girish Chandra Ghosh for all practical purposes was a brilliant actor-director-writer and Ardhnendu Sekhar Mustafi, an excellent teacher. The first managerial acumen was possessed by Amarendranath Dutta (1876-1916) who wasted his efforts by needless gimmicks and cheap entertainments. Thus as a producer or manager he failed to live upto the initial expectation, although his efforts were of pioneering nature in drawing the attractions of the general audience through spectacles and stage-crafts. As a production manager, in the period, mention must be made of Aparesh Chandra Mukherjee (1875-1934), who survived the period and went on to the next by sheer perseverance, zeal and grass-root sense of reality. But these were not enough to lift Bengali theatre from its predicament after the demise of Girish Chandra Ghosh. Mercifully such new thinking and fresh approach was brought in the theatre by the genius of Sisir Kumar Bhadury (1889-1959). He was born in the year when Girish Ghosh wrote Prafulla and Tagore composed his first full-length ‘Raja-O-Rani’. Raised in an educated affluent middle class family, Sisir Kumar took his master’s degree in English from Presidency College. He taught English in Vidyasagar College from 1914 to 1921. From his college days he was fond of acting and his first role was Brutus in ‘Julie-Caesar’ during those days. In September 1911, he created sensation while doing the role of Chanakya in Dwijendralal Roy’s ‘Chandragupta’. But his wife’s premature death deterred him for some time. Then came a historic decision. Sisir Kumar resigned the gentleman’s profession of teaching and instead devoted his whole time to theatre. This was unthinkable at a time like 1921 (Bhattacharyya, 1993).

There were only three commercial play-houses at that time and these were ‘Star’, ‘Minerva’ and ‘Manmohan’. Bhaduri joined neither of them. Instead he joined a theatre of Sri J.F. Madan, a parsee gentleman who converted his cinema-house in north Calcutta into a play-
Kshirod Prasad Vidyabinod was then employed at ‘Star’ as a paid dramatist. Sisir Kumar requested him to write a historical play. This was ‘Alamgir’ which was performed on 10th December, 1921. It brought the whole house down on the very first night. Such acting was never witnessed before. It opened a new vista in the moribund theatre world of Bengal. Thus began a career which lasted almost 35 years. In this long span of time Sisir Kumar acted roughly about 80 roles. The most memorable of them were - ‘Rama’, ‘Raghubir’, ‘Chanakya’, ‘Alamgir’, ‘Nadirsha’, ‘Jibananda’ and ‘Nimchand’. The contribution of Sisir Bhaduri in rejuvenating the Bengali theatre is not in the scope of this treaty. Suffice it say that he was the first producer-director of the Bengali theatre. His profound knowledge of theatrical art and history made theatre viewing an intellectual exercise. Like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Sisir Kumar also had to work with weak scripts. While Girish Ghosh tried to circumvent it with his own pen, Sisir Bhadury used the deft techniques of editing, costume, make-up and lighting. The traits that he brought in though did not last long in the Bengali commercial theatre, it did help the later generation to learn the language of theatre. Thus it would not be wrong to declare that if Girish Ghosh laid the foundation of the Bengali theatre, then it was Sisir Kumar Bhaduri who gave it orientation, honour and social status. Theatre no longer could be brushed aside as an insignificant art form.

But one single genius, be he even a giant amongst the dwarfs could not save a situation which was beyond control. Commercial theatre was unable to gauge its social responsibilities. When Sisir Bhaduri went over to Sri-Rangam (present Biswarupa) the year was 1941 and Second World War was in its full-swing. In rapid succession occurred the ‘Quit India’ movement of ’42, famine in 1943, communal riots in 1946 and Independence in 1947. None of these events had any reflection on commercial theatre which went on merrily with its age-old historicals, socials and farces. In such situation of disasters and total change over, it was expected that a shift would occur in two directions. First, the contemporary episodes would reflect in the thematic part of Bengali theatre. And Secondly, the movements of this kind might influence the audience to react psychologically resulting in their decrease in number. But strangely enough no impacts were observed. On the basis of the same observations it may be pointed out that Bengali theatre made a deep penetration inside the psyche of the target audience. It was so deep-rooted that the producer-directors of Bengali professional theatre did not care to make any attempt towards any major change over or shift. Or may be inspite of being aware of the social reality, did not venture to chart a path hitherto unknown to the traditionalists of the Bengali professional theatre.
Not that there were lack of good actors and actresses. Durgadas Banerjee (1893-1943), Nirmalendu Lahiri (1881-1950), Ahindra Chowdhury (1895-1974), Chhabi Biswas (1900-1962), Mahendra Gupta (1910-1984), Prabha Devi (1908-1952), Kankabati (1903-1939), Sarajubala (1912-1994) were all products of this period. Even there were playwrights such as Manmatha Roy (1899-1988), Sachindranath Sengupta (1899-1961) and Bidhayak Bhattacharyya (1907-1986). But the commercial theatre, like an ostrich, rooted itself in the quicksand of imaginary romanticism and meaningless farces. Sisir Kumar of course was aware of the problem. He knew that the Bengali theatre was rootless and a shallow imitation of the western concept and was also suffering from an identity crisis. But in his own production of the later periods, he was unable to bring about such changes which could justify his theatrical wisdom. Once more old age and frustration got the better of the genius and once more Bengali theatre had to look elsewhere for sustainance and progress.

But before an analysis of that revival is undertaken mention must be made of Rabindranath Tagore, as a dramatist, His contribution to public stage needs further elaboration. Tagore, as is well known, died in 1941. During the period 1886 to 1936, on board the public stage a number of Tagore novels and stories had been attempted to as theatres. Two of his dance dramas, ‘Chitrangada’ and ‘Shyama’ had also been attempted to, apart from his original theatre-pieces such as ‘Raja-O-Rani’, ‘Chirakumar Sabha’, ‘Shesh Raksha’ and ‘Tapati’ which was a rewritten version of ‘Raja-O-Rani’ at the request of Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. Of these only ‘Tapati’, done by Sisir Kumar in 1929, ‘Griha Prabesh’ and ‘Chirakumar Sabha’ on board the ‘Star’ in 1925 need special mention. But even these productions did not get the public acclaim as they deserved. Only in later period it was realised that the fault neither lied with the plays, nor with the writer. It was entirely the fault of the producers who neither understood the merit of these pieces nor were able to interpret meaninfully.

It was realised much later that the Tagore plays were way ahead of the time. Like Sisir Kumar, Rabindranath believed that the commercial theatre was rootless. To survive it must find its identity following the Indian traditions, a tradition that did not believe in conflict, a tradition that nurtured co-existence and universality. His theatrical dreams thus could only be realised by a later generation. ‘Raktakarabi’, ‘Raja’ or ‘Dakghar’ therefore had to wait for decades before they could be properly evaluated or presented. It was a blot which even Sisir Bhaduri had to admit” ... had there been a close relationship between Bengali stage and Rabindranath,
we could have got brilliant and rich dramatic literature. Such relation could then have successfully led to the establishment of a theatre with national characteristics and a real communication between such theatre and society would have been physically possible” (Bhattacharyya, 1970).

The beginning of a new age: Group-theatre

The other theatre which broke the convention and brought a whiff of fresh air, owes its beginning to Indian Peoples Theatre Association or IPTA in short. It was a cultural organisation of undivided communist party. The first important play under IPTA’s banner was ‘Nabanna’ written by Bijon Bhattacharyya (1917-1978) and jointly directed by him and young Sambhu Mitra (1915-1997). In October and November 1944 ‘Nabanna’ was played on board the ‘Srirangam’ (present Biswarupa) for seven consecutive nights drawing each time a full house. It would have continued much longer; but scared by its success, the commercial management of Srirangam refused permission for further staging (Dutta, 1987). IPTA, thereafter, took the play to make-shift stages where more and more people flocked to see it. The man-made famine of 1943 and the havoc that it played upon the peasant life of Bengal was its content. The play ended in a note of hope for collective life. The importance of ‘Nabanna’ was that it broke all traditional convention of the commercial theatre. The subject was down to earth reality, the stage-craft was simple but elegant, the acting style was introvert and it was a director’s theatre where all the parts, big or small were acted upon in utmost details. There was no gimmick, no stunt and no emphasis on a particular actor’s name and fame. This was something new in Bengali theatre. At a distance of 50 years, ‘Nabanna’ may now appear to be weak in construction. But at the time it was unique and exceptional. The success of ‘Nabanna’ threw overboard all the established theatrical do’s and don’ts. Now came forward such writers as Tulsi Lahiri (1896-1959), Digin Bandhopadhyay (1908-1990), Ritwick Ghatak, Bidhyak Bhattacharyya and Salil Sen. Even commercial theatre gained from this success.

But soon with the success came a rift. IPTA being a party-organisation it tried to implement its party dictum. There rose a great debate and as a result of this debate the Bengal branch of IPTA underwent fragmentation. Shambhu Mitra came out of IPTA along with his talented wife Tripti Mitra (1925-1989) and founded the well known group ‘Bohurupee’. Both pioneered a movement which later came to be known as Group-Theatre movement. However, as a pioneer, mention also must be made of Utpal Dutta. (1929-1993), who believed in political theatre for
the masses. He too was associated with IPTA. But in his individual capacity he began to write his own plays and produced these professionally on board the ‘Minerva theatre’ which he rented for eleven years from 1955 to 1970. His theatre group known as Little Theatre Group or LTG functioned independently and established the political genre of theatres in the group-theatre stream. He believed in spectacle and mass acting. Three out of his four major plays in this phase bore ample testimony to that. ‘Angar’ (1959), ‘Titash ekti nadir naam’ (1963), and ‘Kallol’ (1967) were thumping successes. His technological innovations were marvellous and common people in sizable numbers came to see these gorgeous shows. His success forced the commercial theatre to go in for innovation. Thus one came to see ‘Setu’ (1959) and ‘Downtown’ (1950), two spectacular productions incorporating the magic of light in commercial theatre circuit. Dutta should also be credited with such documentary political plays as ‘Teer’ (1967), ‘Manusher Adhikary’ (1968), ‘Leniner Dak’ (1969) and ‘Duswapner Nagari’ (1974). He was also a much skilled artist of poster plays. ‘Dinbadaler Pala’, in the late sixties is a glorious example of that. But perhaps his finest productions were ‘Tiner Talower’ (1971) and ‘Barricade’ (1971). In these productions for the first time he mellowed a little and did justice to his versatile theatrical ability. It was Dutta who shaped mass-acting and introduced much innovative technical stage-craft. Such stage-craft in ‘Barricade’ would always remain awe-inspiring. Two names must be mentioned in association with Utpal Dutta. Mrs. Sobha Sen and Satya Banerjee, two reputed actor-actress of the Bengali stage who remained ever loyal to Sri Dutta till his last days. It is perhaps Satya Banerjee who has very aptly summed up Utpal Dutta’s dilectical method of acting and production in a recent compilation of articles (Bandopadhyay, 1994).

Shambhu Mitra entered into the fold of Bengali theatre a little earlier than Utpal Dutta. The former believed in a theatre which liked to delve deep in the human relations. Thus his theatres became poignant dramas of human values. He discovered Rabindra Nath for the educated middle class audience of Bengali theatre. His ‘Char Addya’ (1951), ‘Raktakarabi’ (1954), ‘Dakhar’ (1957), ‘Bisarjan’ (1961) and ‘Raja’ (1964) demonstrated what indigenous theatre could achieve. Shambhu Mitra dedicated himself to a theatre which at once was mellow, sympathetic and of soft hue. His visions were extraordinary in the sense that he never preached loudly, but still his theatre conveyed a meaningful value, a value that Tagore himself cherished as universal. His productions of Ibsen’s ‘Enemy of the People’ (1952) and ‘A Doll’s House’ (1958) in Bengali adaptations took everybody by surprise. The surprise continued in ‘Raja Oedipus’ (1964) and ‘Baki Itihas’ (1967). Shambhu Mitra’s acting style is based on tradition
and heritage. He searched deep into a tradition which was almost forgotten. He practically 
reinstated the heritage of vocal and gesticular acting style. Another important aspect of his 
contribution is the stress on details. Probably the first time in a Bengali theatre was seen a 
perfect mis-'n-scene in ‘Raktakarabi’ and ‘Putul-Khela’ (Doll’s House). This was perhaps 
what Sisir Bhadhuri dramt of but was unable to achieve. Sri Mitra in his achievement was ably 
assisted by his wife Smt. Tripti Mitra, a brilliant product of the group-theatre movement. Such 
other stalwarts like Tulsi Lahiri, Monoranjan Bhattacharyya (1889-1954), Gangapada Bose 
(1910-1971) and Amar Ganguly ably contributed to the efforts of Sri Shambhu Mitra; the 
tradition still continues with Sri Kumar Ray, the present producer-director of Bohurupee plays.

Thus the movement that commenced in the fifties began to flourish rapidly in the sixty’s 
and it continued until about early seventies. The participants in this movement called themselves 
non-professionals since they were unpaid and amateurs. The movement itself became an ideology. 
Role of plain entertainment now took a back seat and there began an era of experimentation.

Sri Ajitesh Bandhopadhyay (1933-1983), a tallstately-built actor-director with a deep 
booming voice began to storm the scene. His group ‘Nandikar’ set a new trend of adaptation 
of European plays. In rapid succession he did Bengali adaptations of Pirandello’s ‘Six characters 
in search of a playwright’, Chekov’s ‘The Cherry-Orchard’, Arnold Wesker’s ‘Roots’ and 
Bertolt Breeht’s ‘Three-penny-Opera’ and ‘The Good Person of Szechwan’. He had a good 
team comprising of such actors and actresses as Bibhash Chakraborti, Rudra Prasad Sengupta, 
Maya Ghosh, Keya Chakraborti etc.

It can now be said safely that jsut after the fifties till on or about the early part of the 
eighties, group-theatre movement rotated round the three stalwarts, namely Sambhu Mitra, 
Utpal Dutta and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay. They established certain credentials and trends which 
one way or other had influenced all the group-theatre activities of the later generation (Chaudhury, 
1990) In an anthropological sense, this may be construed as a part of great tradition established 
by Girish Ch. Ghosh and Sisir Kumar Bhadury in relation to Bengali theatre. For lack of space 
further analysis of contemporary theatre is not attempted to. However, a general survey shows 
that the age-old problem of good playwright is still a common feature. Groups like ‘Chetana’, 
after ‘Marich Sambad’ (1972) and ‘Jaggannath’ (1977) was unable to produce anything 
noteworthy. A director like Rudra Prasad Sengupta is yet to produce a play like ‘Putul Khela'.
Opera’ (1969). Amongst the old hands only Bibash Chakrebori and Manoj Mitra are able to do something praiseworthy. Of the two, Bibhas Chakraborty as a producer-director-actor has achieved extraordinary success. His folk based opera ‘Madhab Malancha Kaynna’ (1988) attracted immediate attention of all. He appears to have found a path of blending between the foreign and the indigenous. Manoj Mitra on the other hand is perhaps the only dramatist who is writing and producing such original plays as ‘Alakanandar Putrakanyya’ (1989), ‘Shovajatra’ (1991), ‘Darpane Sarat Shashi’ (1992) or ‘Galpa Hekim Saheb’ (1994). He has an easy understandable style with a special flourish for humour. Another notable writer of the older vintage is Mohit Chatterjee. But sadly enough his writings are more form-oriented and less appealing to the ordinary spectator. Of late he is experimenting with old classics. Notable among them are ‘Alibaba’ and ‘Mrichhakatik’ (both 1988). The veterans apart, a new generation of young producer-writer-director and actors and actresses have come up in the exapnding horizon of group-theatres. Of the producer-directors, two names stand out, that of Meghnad Bhattacharyya and Ramaprasad Banik. Right from the beginning Bhattacharyya is a socially committed artist and of late in ‘Daibaddha’ and ‘Bashbhumi’ has achieved outstanding success. Banik on the other hand, trained in Bohurupee school, attempted to produce and direct plays concerning human values. His latest ‘Trata’ (1994) is a stringent criticism of the modern times where the middle class is held in ransom for their cowardice and compromise with the establishment. Banik has also worked for commercial theatre with limited success. The two worth while dramatists of the period (1977-94) are Chandan Sen and Indrashish Lahiri. While Sen wrote original plays of left ideology, Lahiri did adaptation as well plays of human values. The important actors and actresses of the period are once again Kumar Ray, Rudra Prasad Sengupta, Manoj Mitra, Bibhas Chakraborti, Pankaj Munshi, Meghnad Bhattacharyya among the males and Swatilekha Sengupta, Seema Mukherjee, Urmimala Basu and the redoubtable Saonly Mitra among the females. The last named, daughter of the legendary Sambhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra, is not only a good actress, but a brilliant producer as well. Her two productions, ‘Nathbati Anathbat’ (1983) and ‘Katha Amritisasaman’ (1990) under the banner of ‘Pancham Baidik’ has been aptly described by eminent critics as ‘phenomena’. Like her father, she has blended the Indian tradition successfully with the modern western concepts of theatre. In fact, along with her, a galaxy of women director-producers, have stormed into the Bengali group-theatre scene. Sohag Sen, Jayati Basu, Seema Mukherjee followed the footsteps of Smt. Tripti Mitra and have already earned a well deserved success. Mention must also be made of Smt. Usha Ganguly, another outstanding name in the field as actress-director-producer, but since
she produces mostly in a language other than Bengali, it is outside the compass of the present work. Thus in group-theatre movement the gestation period seemed to be the fifties, the sixties are a period of political dramas which continued right up to the mid-seventies. But from mid-seventies to the present time is a period of consolidation and rise. In fact the closing period of the present study (1990) has observed a boom whereby a number of theatre groups are born with innumerable productions of variety and verve. Due to lack of space and time, only the major trends and a cross-section of performances have been highlighted above. Of course such expansion has only been possible due to the active participation and financial assistance given by the West Bengal Government. The Government has encouraged the group-theatre movement by building new stages at different places of Calcutta and suburbs and has also established a West Bengal Natya Academy which is rendering yeomen service to this kind of theatre propagation.

The age of post-Independence in commercial theatre

However, this overview would remain incomplete unless a picture of the commercial theatre in the post-Independence period is brought into view. With the production of ‘Nabanna’ (1944), the commercial theatre was made to sit up. But that did not deter the producers to go in a merry way on to the path of insignificant socials and so-called farces and satires. This stagnation and slumber were marginally broken when from mid-fifties and onwards productions such as ‘Arogyniketan’ (1956), ‘Kshuda’ (1957), ‘Setu’ (1959), ‘Downtrain’ (1959) etc were produced. These productions were a bit uncommon and were ably assisted by new stagecrafts and lighting. Inspite of such known dramatists and producers like Manmatha Roy, Debnarayan Gupta, Mahendra Gupta or Bidhayak Bhattacharyya, the public stage continued to produce petty doldrums. In fact it faced a crisis but tried to riggle out of that through professionally competent actors and actresses. In doing so they began to look for subjects in Bengali novels of Sarat Chatterjee (1876-1938), Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971), Samarendra Basu, Bimal Mitra, Ashapurna Devi, Shankar etc. All these writers are well-known to the Bengalis (even to target readers outside Bengal), penetrating down to the middle-class, both men and women. They generally dealt with subjects pertaining to Bengali middle-class. Converted into theatre, these topics attracted a large number of easy-going middle-class audience in search of general entertainment. This dramatisation efforts were sometimes good and sometimes insignificant. The other paths resorted to were engagements of reputed film personalities as paid

31
directors as well as actors and actresses. Thus on public stage appeared such well-known film personalities as Ahindra Chaudhury, Jahar Ganguly, Chhabi Biswas, Uttam Kumar, Tarun Kumar, Soumitra Chatterjee, Jahar Roy, Bhanu Banerjee, Dilip Roy, Rabi Ghosh, Anup Kumar, Subhendu Chatterjee, Molina Devi, Chhaya Devi, Sabitri Chatterjee, Madhabi Mukherjee, Aparna Sen, Sandhyay Roy, Supriya Devi, Basabi Nandi and a host of minor actors and actresses of Bengali cinema. This move appears to have clicked particularly in the case of Soumitra Chatterjee, who from his very first production 'Nam Jiban' (1979), brought in a fresh whiff of air in the otherwise stagnant commercial theatre. Chatterjee's film-experience, political wisdom as well as keen sense of audience expectation paid handsomely in all his subsequent four productions. Another notable feature of commercial theatre particularly from the early seventies is the take-over of the hall management as well as the over-all theatre productions by the hall-owners. Thus Rashbehari Sarkar (Biswarupa), Ranjitmal Kankaria (Star), Ganesh Mukherjee (Rangana), Amar Ghosh (Circarina) or Satya Banerjee (Tapan theatre) produced and directed their own plays. Needless to say these were measures to control cost-factors as well to minimise the rising importance of director-producers. However, the choice of the subjects and the pattern of production remained the same; either plain social themes or slapstick comedies or farces. And on board the commercial play houses, mainly located in the northern part of Calcutta, these productions were persisted. A bill of fare once introduced irrespective of its quality, has to be pushed through media publicity - that seemed to be the thinking of the commercial hall-owner-producer combine. Thus one characteristic of these productions particularly in the major halls, appear to be the bill of fare-running for a long time which not always reflected the quality of the play.

of a commercial theatre is high since all concerned are salaried people. But the bill of fares show little variation. Compared to the earlier period, i.e. the pre-Independence era, there are surprisingly no mythological, historical or biographical plays.

But a new feature in the form of adult theatres has come into being in the stream of commercial theatres. The trend began with the introduction of ‘Barbadhu’ at Pratap Memorial Hall in 1972 which went on to register a record run of over 2200 nights. Elated by the success, there followed a number of adult theatres with sex and cabaret dance being prominently advertised. Apart from Ashim Chakraborty of ‘Barbadhu’ fame, prominent producer-director of this trend appear to be Samar Mukherjee, Sumit Das, Parthasarathi Dey etc. Adult theatre flourished up to the mid-eighties and then it took a nose-dive. But it re-surfaced in 1990 and is still doing good business inspite of social stigmas. Finally public pressure associated with political parties made an attempt to stop such shows of ‘vulgarism and sex’. It is important to note that in such case the public protest also acted as a triggering effect. In passing it must be noted that among the major halls, Minerva appear to have persisted its patronage towards this kind of entertainment. But it also flourished in such small halls as ‘Boys Own Library Hall’, ‘Rammohan Mancha’, ‘Shyamaprasad Mancha’, ‘Pratap Memorial’ etc (Choudhury, 1990). Accommodationwise, these halls cater to a very limited number of people. But a steady clientele, although meagre in number, has permitted this trend to continue. Before conclusion of this section another important aspect, again a feature of the seventies, must be pointed out. Many a time a successful production has been shifted from one hall to another. Such re-runs of course occurred at a time gap. Thus ‘Nahabat’ (1972) after a stint at Tapan Theatre was revived at Rangmahal’ in 1990. ‘Aghatan’ (1976) went on from Kashi Biswanath to Rangana (1983), ‘Amarkantak’ (1981) from Rangmahal to Sujata Sadan (1985) and then back to Rangmahal (1989), ‘Sujata’ (1986) from Kashi Biswanath to Biswarupa (1989), just to name a few. However, re-runs or revivals are not an uncommon feature in Bengali theatre. But in the older days only the dramatic script used to be taken over by the director and the producer and then it was done according to the production schemes of that particular play house. But the present re-runs are only switching of the play-house, the production scheme, the director, even sometimes the actors and the actresses remained the same. Needless to say the producers at present do not want to take unnecessary risk and so they are opting out only for established productions instead of experimentation. The success of the re-runs, of course, can not be denied. But then again theatre is just not simply a money making industry. It also has certain social
obligations. Be that as it may, in concluding this overview, a few words regarding the general pattern of production including content, stage-craft, music, light and such other allied subjects covering both, i.e. commercial and group-theatres, may not be out of place. From the analysis it is clear that dramaturgy as a literary art is quite neglected in Bengali theatre. Playwrights such as Madhusudan, Dinabandhu, Girish or of the calibre of Bijon Bhattacharyya, Tulsi Lahiri, Ritwick Ghatak, Digin Banerjee, Manmatha Roy or even Badal Sarkar and Utpal Dutta are rare. And from the very beginning the subjects were not always chosen in keeping with social reality. If a historical made a success, then there would be a flurry of such historicals irrespective of their worth. However the trends that have been observed may be categorised in the following manner: (a) Initially there were historicals and mythologicals with a tinge of patriotism along with musicals and farces and large number of socials. The characters were by and large exalted and detached from day to day reality, particularity in case of historicals and the mythologicals. This trend persisted until about the Second World War in the professional circuit. There were no takers of Tagore dramas. (b) The trend changed with ‘Nabanna’ (1944) when emphasis was laid on the plight of common men. (c) Then Tagore was discovered anew by the group-theatres whereby stress was shifted to serious theatre. (d) The next phase was a time of experimentation with political theatres. Side by side an effort was on to look forward to world drama and a host of foreign adaptations were attempted to. (e) Late sixties and early seventies were again devoted to political subjects but a distinct shift to sociopolitical themes was quite visible. (f) The trend of political drama began to dwindle in the late seventies. Instead, stress and cluster is quite visible with regard to sociopolitical themes, satires, farces and comedies. The trend also includes musicals as a form. The content part therefore is no longer dependent only on the plight of the masses. Rather anything dramatic and theatrical, perhaps with a tinge of self-criticism is now welcomed by the Bengali theatre. But the theatre and the trends set above in (b) to (f) are only seen in the group-theatre circuit. In no way they are reflections or trends visible in commercial theatre circuit. The only point of meeting is perhaps the socials and the comedies or the satires though the perceptions in the two camps, i.e. professional theatre and group-theatre are quite divergent. Here also the question of social consciousness divides the two streams in diametrically two opposite directions. However, the dearth of good dramatic scripts and playwrights are common to both.

Language is another field which requires a close analysis. Before the advent of Bengali theatre, jatra held a prime position in the Bengali cultural milieu. It has a language of its own
which for the communication purpose was loud and full of bombast. When Bengali theatre began its journey, the language of jatra influenced the theatrical language. This was quite obvious because the producers felt that a sudden cut-off would destabilise the traditional elements whereby the audience might feel isolated from the main stream of tradition. But as Bengali theatre progressed, the situation changed with the passage of time. The combination of modern and grotesque may be seen in Dinabandhu’s ‘Nildarpan’ and ‘Sadhabar Ekadasi’ and Madhusudan Dutta’s two farces, namely ‘Buro Shaliker Gare Ron’ and ‘Ekai Ki Bale Sabhyata’. The experimentation was continued by Girish Ghosh, who like Madhusudan, established his own language form. But inspite of all the efforts it may now be said that the Bengali theatre language was by and large followed, an exalted style which was neither the language of the common man nor the language of the educated middle-class. Only Tagore could claim the rare distinction of going against his time. But in his life time, he could not see the desired theatrical language fit for communication with the audience. Then with the production of ‘Nabanna’ a new style of language emerged which reminded the saucyness of Dinabandhu’s ‘Sadhabar Ekadasi’ or the Madhusudan farces. In fact ‘Nabanna’ showed what language can do. Later on Utpal Dutta’s ‘Tiner Talwar’ and Badal Sarkar’s ‘Ebong Indrajit’ showed how brilliantly communicating could be a theatre language. The former is an example of post-Girish Ghosh era and the latter shows the form after Rabindranath. Theatre language has definitely become man oriented and it has also achieved a degree of freedom which is conducive for good theatre. Surprisingly language in commercial theatre particularly from the late sixties had adhered to this down to earth syndrome. One of the reasons for its so-called success and survival may have been due to this adherence to the common man’s tongue and usage. The same thing is applicable to stage-craft. When Lebedoff built his stage, he decorated it in the traditinal Bengali style. But there after an imitation of the European concept of flat painted scenery and built-in set have been resorted to which looked unreal and pathetic. It was Amarendranath Dutta of ‘Star theatre’ who brought in certain stage reforms. Then came Sisir Bhaduri, who with the help of Satu Sen, introduced revolving stage whereby time was saved between two scenes. Incidentally, Satu Sen, a techno-craft trained in the United States of America must be credited with the first innovative ideas of stage craft in Bengali theatre. However, a misc-’n-scene and a proper stage-craft with built-in sets was brilliantly demonstrated by Khaled Chowdhury for the first time in Bahurupee’s ‘Raktakarabi’ (1954). This was a turning point in stage craft, both for commercial and group-theatres. And then Utpal Dutta’s ‘Angar’, ‘Kallol’, ‘Tiner Talwar’ and ‘Barricade’ showed what spectacular sets can be erected on stage. Credit for these must go to
Nirmal Guharay (1934-1993) and Suresh and Manu Dutta, the two other living artists of stage-craft.

Another aspect which went a full circle was music. From live concert of flute, harmonium, clarionette, violin and tabla, an age of taped music began. The use of such music many a times had robbed the stage of its colour. This practice was rampant in the group-theatres till Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay showed what live-music could do in his ‘Tin Paiser Pala’ (Three penny opera, 1969). But live-music needs expertise in singing as well as playing. This is a field where one need to learn much from the jatra productions. However, the group-theatres were forced to adopt taped music due to lack of money-resources and expertise.

Surprisingly, even the commercial theatres have resorted to taped music and pre-recorded songs. They, of course, tried to strike a balance by using such well known music directors as Satinath Mukherjee, Hemanta Mukherjee, Jatileswar Mukherjee etc. And due to high professional skill of their artists, background singings have almsot become at par with films. A brilliant example is ‘Swaralipi’ (1986) where the noted film artist Aparna Sen synchronised her lip movements flawlessly with the taped background song. With regard to live music, a perceptable change has been noticed of late. The well known group ‘Bohurupee’ has tried to utilise this form in ‘KINU KAHARER THEATRE’ (1988). Bibhas Chakraborty’s ‘Madhabi Malancha Koinya’ (1988) is also a serious effort using such live music. In the other departments of sound and light, there had been much development. Utpal Dutta’s ‘Angar’ (1989) was again a brilliant example of both sound and light. In all three departments of music (Rabi Shankar), stage-craft (Nirmal Guharay) and light (Tapas Sen), it created sensation.

In fact in the field of light, Tapas Sen, an one time associate of the famous Indian dancer Uday Shankar, made innumerable innovations. His ‘Setu’ (1959), ‘Down train’ (1959), ‘Titas Ekti Nadir Nam’ (1963) and ‘Kallol’ (1967) are all landmarks in the history of schematic lighting in Bengali theatre. No wonder that from gaslight to side light, masked frontlighting, dimmer and spot-light and onto the zonal lighting of mood and colour, Bengali theatre has progressed much and without the assistance of a good light-schemer, no good theatre is possible today.

The backdrop is now concluded with a few words regarding the composition of the audience. Theatrical performance always needs an audience. From 1795 to 1941, commercial
theatres attracted a multitude of people who were a combination of both literate and uneducated section of the society; but they basically belonged to the middle-class community in blanket sense of the term. Theatre had to cater according to their taste. No producer, not even Sisir Bhadhuri could ignore this fact. But too much stress on this type of target audience led this theatre to an unreal world of romanticism and false traditionalism. It is still unknown why the producer or the director or both did not venture even as test cases to select a variation of more down to earth themes. After all variation in any form is an essential need. This was revealed from a break through made in ‘Nabanna’. The success of ‘Nabanna’ broke the stereotyped ideas of theatre contents. An effort was on to discover the grass-root reality of the masses with the directors’ active interest of the theme concerned with social realities. The birth of this theatre led to the belief that theatre as social art should also shoulder the responsibility of mass education and awkenning. Utpal Dutta or the political theatres of the later periods - all believed in this kind of mass education. This attitude has seldom been scrutinised with the application of appropriate methodology

The commercial theatre and the jatras of today, on the other hand, believe in mass entertainment and since both are dependent on money investment and profit, use of any means is welcome to them. But the group-theatre, in other words the ‘alternate theatre, at present faces a dilemma: which audience to attract-the vast illeterate/unconscious or the semi-literate/little conscious or the insignificant number of middle-class conscious literates who are proud of their western intellectual bearings. The answer to that is yet to be formulated; but then again it is a problem that needs further analysis with a suitable methodology.