CHAPTER 2
Trends 1872-1990
In the backdrop it has been indicated in a chronological manner how Bengali drama passed through the phases of private theatre and then became a cultural phenomena initiated by professionalism. An effort has now been made in the present chapter to pinpoint the trends that occurred in these 118 years. For the convenience of classification, a diagram (Diagram A) has been enclosed showing the two sets of production, i.e. commercial theatre and group-theatre. It is also to be pointed out that in such a long span of time not all the drama texts can be taken into account. For the purpose of analysis, a cross-section of texts have been considered and that too only those texts which were actually staged. Even then it is almost a herculean task to go through all the texts referred in this treaty. However an effort has been made with the help of published chronological history of Bengali theatre. Some of these excellent workers were by Bandhopadhyay (1946), Basu (1973), Bhattacharya and Ghosh (1973), Bhattacharya (1982,1994,1996) Choudhury (1962), Dasgupta (1934) Das (1983), Dutta (1987), Gupta (1983), Mukherjee (1982), and Mukhopadhyay (1973). Since in many instances published drama-texts were not available, the present worker had to depend on the above chronological histories for reference and citation. But inspite of that, due to paucity of resources and non-availability of printed texts, a holistic approach could not be undertaken. Keeping in mind the above preamble, the present worker has been able to pin-point the following trends both in commercial theatre and group-theatre circuits. Content-wise there are twelve trends visible and these are : (1) Social, (2) Mythological, (3) Historical, (4) Political, (5) Socio-political, (6) Allegory, (7) Romance, (8) Musicals, (9) Satire, (10) Biographical, (11) Crime and detective, (12) Adults (social). It is to be understood that these divisions are purely the personal observation of the present worker either by consulting the forementioned textual references or where possible, by actual viewing. And in doing so basically the contents were analysed and only in two cases, namely Allegory and Musical, forms were taken into account. Another important consideration is the space factor which in present case is the city of Calcutta. Here in passing it must be mentioned that Calcutta is not only a colonial city, by definition it is also a heterogenous city (Redfield and Singer, 1956). Such being the case, it is not unusual to find various ideas such as nationalism, patriotism, communism, anti-castaism or even such heretic ideas like anarchism, anti-state, anti-people, free for all sex-oriented exhibitionism. Since these productions have all been performed in Calcutta, the city assumes a greater significance in terms of space. However, short details of trends mentioned above are placed below with Calcutta as the backdrop.

(1) Social: In this section those texts/scripts are included which dealt with subjects related to social relations amongst human beings. In the early productions of the commercial circuit, Bankim
Chatterjee’s novels were converted into dramatic texts and human relations were absorbing subject. Then Girish Chandra Ghosh contributed much. He wrote both tragedies and comedies with thumping success. In between, Tagore’s writings were attempted to, but with not much success in the early stage. Content-wise in the thirties, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s novels were in great demand. His subjects included both the rural and urban middle-class and their social relations. Without going into further details, it may be said that social texts of this nature even in the 1990’s were in great demand in the commercial circuit. It appears that the social dramas attracted general middle-class audience for these were thought to be entertaining, easily understandable and without any particular ideological thrust.

But, in the group-theatre productions, dramatic texts under this section were of a different genre. Here one finds these texts dealing with more serious problems of post-Independence era. Thus the influx of refugee problem, famines, communal riots, mass-superstition, anarchism, nihilist movement, middle-class drudgery, crumbling feudalism, and rise of the industrial bourgeoisie etc. were the subject matter of social texts. In short, not light entertainment, but serious thought provoking entertainment was presented. Another notable feature of the social texts attempted to by the group-theatres were translation/adaptation of European language texts. Ibsen, Chekov, Pirandello or Brecht texts were successfully attempted to by the group-theatres. In terms of time it may be said that the dramatic texts pertaining to social themes in the commercial circuit began to flourish from 1930 onwards and an upward mushrooming of these performances may be noticed between 1970 and 1990. On the other hand in the group-theatre arena social themes, as defined earlier, began to pick up the tempo from mid-fifties. It got boosted up in the middle sixties and continued to be performed more or less regularly during the period between 1970 and 1990. Thus in both streams of productions social themes were performed regularly between 1977 and 1990. But wherein the commercial theatre performances tend to pick up such themes which have very little social significance, the group-theatre performances picked up themes relating to complex human values. In fact out of a performed texts of 50 in number in the professional circuit between the period 1980 and 1990, only the noted film actor Soumitra Chatterjee stands out as a director who picked up themes not from the angle of entertainment only, but also from the angle of certain human values in accordance to the prevailing social norms. On the other hand, 31 texts performed by the group-theatre in the same period, are all related to deeper social problems plaguing the Bengali middle-class society. But it must also be admitted that while the commercial theatre circuit’s motto was
profit, the group-theatre’s motto was idealism. In this closing period, therefore, it was not surprising that the commercial theatre circuit did not venture to experiment. Rather, they stuck to the age-old path of easy entertainment of lighter vein. Group-theatres from their very origin did not choose this path. The contradiction therefore lies not only in the understanding of the social factors but also lies in two different approach and attitude towards the society. This is revealed more when the other varieties such as political and socio-political texts are analysed.

(2) Mythological: The term mythological is in itself self-explanatory. In this section themes were chosen mostly from the two epics, i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as the puranas or the myths. These mythological texts were mainly performed in the commercial theatre circuit. Altogether 78 such texts were analysed. But before we embark upon a discussion of themes, one important events must be pointed out. As earlier stated, the British Government passed a dramatic regulatory act in 1876. On hindsight it is now clear that by this act the Government wanted to stifle the rising spirit of Indian nationalism. In fact it all began with the staging of 'Nildarpan' in 1872. This particular drama was a scathing attack on the British Administration and there was a public uproar and protest when the textual publication was attempted to be proscribed. This unnerved the British administration and when ‘Gajadanada and the Yubaraj’ was staged bantering the Royal visit of Prince of Wales in January 1876, they decided to regulate the Bengali dramatic performances and the act was passed in 1876. Thus perhaps to circumvent this restriction, the Bengali dramatists as well as the producers embarked upon the mythological stream. And it became immensely successful and popular. A close analysis of this genere reveals that the themes were chosen invariably keeping in mind the concept of right and wrong. Those characters, be it in the epics or in the myths, against whom a wrong had been inflicted upon either by providence or by a royal decree or by class-conspiracy, got prominence in these texts. Most prolific writer/producer of this genere in the commercial circuit was Girish Chandra Ghosh. These themes, just like the historical texts, depicted the struggle, misfortune and attempts of fight back by the protagonist against wrong doing. The success of these dramas were due to the fact that the Bengali audience was basically religious and writer/producers were quite aware of this. But consciously or unconsciously while going back to the traditions, the success of these plays roused the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. In a veiled way, the wrong doing against the protagonists in these plays were symbolically attributed to the British rulers. And since it was impossible to fight back the British on a real plain, the audience enjoyed this imaginary battle on the stage. Thus in a single stroke, these texts fulfilled the patriotic
ambition of the people as well as satisfied their religiosity. The concept of religion and its application in Bengali professional theatre, particularly in the early stages has been further discussed in the chapter titled 'Financial and political struggle etc". In passing it may only be said that the question of self-respect and pride was equally related with this interpretation of religion. Between the period 1880-90 and 1924-32 a cluster of these texts were performed by the commercial theatre. But the trend began to dwindle by 1940 with the advent of the Second World War and practically went into oblivion in the late fifties. The significant downward trend after 1940 does have some particular reasons. With the advent of political upheavals, partition and of course an independence that did not usher in a state of peace and harmony, religion got a back-seat and people no longer wanted these traditional themes for spiritual upliftment and entertainment.

Mythological themes in group-theatre productions had a different connotation. These productions not only took themes from the Indian epics and myths but they also drew subjects freely from Greek mythology. The group-theatre producers and directors had a different conception regarding epics and myths. They neither advocated religion nor nationalism and patriotism. Rather in their depictions, complex human relations as well as a kind of social messages were found. These directors/producers chose their themes deliberately for a cause. Even a revival of Manmatha Roy's 'Karagar' in 1972, was perhaps to highlight the anarchic situation prevailing at the time and perhaps it attempted to draw a parallel with the tradition and with the fond hope of deliverance of freedom and a relief from the stifling, violent social atmosphere. Another significant contribution in this genre by the group-theatres were the two productions of Saonli Mitra (1983 and 1990). She drew her subjects from 'The Mahabharata' and very successfully depicted the plight of the Indian woman. However, the group-theatres, in general, did not contribute much to this trend and most of the mythological texts produced and performed by them were experimental. But even with experimentation, it must be admitted that these were done deliberately to highlight social injustic and most of the productions were staged between 1980-1990.

Historical: Historical plays were again the favourite themes of the commercial theatre. And from the time frame it could be seen that this trend, just like the mythological texts, took shape during the seventies of the nineteenth century, the reason being the same as told earlier. However, unlike the mythological texts, it got prominence and dominated the stage between 1900-1910.
Needless to say this was a period of great political turmoil, the proposed division of Bengal in 1905 and subsequent protest movement and repeal of the proposed act being an important event. The act was repealed in 1911. But surprisingly even in between 1942-1947, a number of historical plays were staged on board the commercial theatre. This, of course, was also a period of turmoil and unlike the mythological texts, these were not rejected by the audience. But then again the historical plays in the commercial circuit all along drew those themes which were by and large based on protest, heroism and patriotism. Thus Bankim Chatterjee’s historical novels, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Dwijendralal Roy plays and later on drama-texts of Sachin Sengupta and Mahenddra Gupta followed this tradition. In fact Girish Chandra Ghosh’s Siraj-ud-daula’ and ‘Mirkashim’, got prescribed because of its depiction of Indian nationalism and patriotic heroism. Commercial theatre in spite of all its shortcomings, in the historical section, could lay claim to be a great participant in Indian freedom movement against the British.

The attitude and perception of the Group-theatre production, in so far as the historical texts are concerned, are quite different from the attitude and perception of the commercial theatres. There were very few contributions in this genre and that too were aimed at experimentation and variety. Only late Utpal Dutta in his plays tried to depict the spirit of protest and glorification of the Indian tradition and exposed the hollowness of British rule. Most of the others texts were either adaptation or experimentation with form. Thus historical texts in the group-theatre circuit should be considered as insignificant and feeble without any social bearing.

Political: This is a trend where the commercial circuit’s contribution is practically nil. The scripts that have been included in the enclosed diagram (Diagram : A) are too small in number and the content part in these scripts appear to be shallow. By and large it seems that the audience of the commercial circuit did not appreciate these efforts, perhaps because of a dry didactic approach. Another reason for not attempting a political drama in the commercial circuit may have been the achievement of Independence in 1947. Once freedom was achieved, the producers of commercial theatre might have thought that this was the end of political struggle and therefore they chose not to involve themselves in the ensuing peoples’ movement. Whatever political dramas they produced before Independence were all aimed against the British rule and not of any other socio-political struggle involving direct political action. In the group-theatre circuit just the opposite may be seen in the political plays. The producer-directors of the group-theatres were essentially the products of the leftist political movement that emerged
in the state of West Bengal after Independence. Needless to say, the partition of Bengal threw the entire economy of the state into a doledrum. The influx of refugees from across the border overburdened the state and left oriented political struggles demanding their rehabilitation were order of the day. The producer-director-writers also chose such subjects as strike, famines, political rights, peasant movement, movement of the toiling-masses etc. Also produced were themes based on anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movement following a pattern prevailing in the third world countries.

From 1960 to 1990, many direct political theatres were produced which the group-theatre movement thought to be socially relevant. The most prolific writer of this kind of theatre was late Utpal Dutta, who thought theatre to be a weapon of political struggle and revolution. Though this trend persisted even in the eighties, the ideological virulence became somewhat subdued because of changed international situation vis-a-vis the internal contradiction happening in the Soviet Union. It perhaps gave a jolt to the orthodox marxist outlook. On the other hand a very stable United Front Government also posed a problem for these left oriented producers, directors and writers. The criticism hitherto against the state apparatus lost its venom for the state was now run by a leftist government friendly to the problems of the toiling masses. Even a strong criticism of the central power in Delhi lost its bearing because of the defeat of the so-called dictatorial forces at the hustings of 1977. And socially speaking, the middle-class audience who are the main viewers of the group-theatre, appear to be no longer interested in the political theatres. Thus in the eighties, it may be seen that the subjects in this section became wider with a tinge of self-criticism and an endeavour was made to make this kind of theatre more pragmatic, realistic and acceptable to the general audience. Neither the haunting trauma of emergency, nor the whole some praise and blind adherence to a leftist ideology were attempted to. Rather the contents of the political theatres began to search for such varied subjects as individual political freedom (Police, 1984), intrigues of state politics (Nil Sada Lal, 1988), the linguistic movement of Bangladesh (Ekuse February, 1989), human rights (Swet Santras, 1990) etc. In short, all aspects of politics including self-criticism irrespective of once-political bias or faith had been attempted to. It may, therefore, be said that the political theatres of the eighties in the group-theatres attained maturity and tried to depict, rather impartially, the flaws of a political ideology notwithstanding its initial grooming in that ideology itself.
Socio-Political: In this section altogether 78 texts are analysed out of which 8 were produced by the commercial theatre and 70 were produced by group-theatres. At hindsight it is now seen that the commercial theatre-producers did not show much interest in this trend inspite of the phenomenon success of ‘Nildarpan’, the first socio-political script on the professional stage. ‘Nildarpan’ was a typical socio-political text in the sense that it dealt with a social problem, i.e. the plight of the indigenous peasantry and forcible destruction of their vocation by the english planters with the active help of the British rulers. It highlighted a social problem and attacked the inherent political power which was responsible for its creation. ‘Nildarpan’ thus is a brilliant example of the socio-political trend. Apart from ‘Nildarpan’ (1872), the two other texts, namely ‘Dukhir Inam’ (1946) and ‘Natun Ihudi’ (1951) deserve special mention as socio-political texts in the commercial trend. But both these texts dealt with problems which rose out of emerging social order, i.e. the Indian Independence. In fact, these were exceptional texts and though performed in the commercial circuit, bore the unmistakable mark of the fast growing group-theatre ideology. This also strengthens the view, pointed out earlier that with the achievement of Indian Independence the commercial theatre producers did not consider it necessary to produce dramatic texts criticising the new political power, nor thought it worthwhile to highlight the rising social problems of unemployment, poverty, refugee settlement etc. Thus just like the political texts, very few socio-political texts were attempted to by the commercial theatre in this long span of 118 years.

However, the picture is just the opposite in the group-theatre circuit. From the very first productions, i.e. ‘Nabanna’ (1944), a trend was set that tried to depict social problem which could only be solved politically by the state. In ‘Nabanna’ the devastation of a famine created by the on-going Second world war was shown in a meticulous manner. In rapid succession in the post-Independence era writers like Bijan Bhattacharyya, Digin Banerjee, Tulsi Lahiri, Manmatha Ray and Ritwik Ghatak wrote plays that pin-pointed the problem of partition and refugee re-settlement. In fact these plays may be termed as social documents of the period. But not only famine or refugee problems, the group-theatre dramatists took up the cudgel against the new Indian ruling class who they considered to be the rising Indian bourgeoisie with an anti-people outlook, continuing the British legacy and rule. Thus from 1960 to 1980, the socio-political trend rose to great height both in number and quality. Socially speaking it was a difficult period for the state of West Bengtal. There were protest movement such as ‘anti-tram fare rise movement’, ‘food movement’, peasant movement’, teacher’s movement, ‘worker’s movement’
etc for wages and rights and against closure of factories and mills. The group-theatre movement in this period dealt with all the social problems from the peasants 'plight to workers' cause. Though this was more prominent in the political theatres of the period, but writers such as Digin Banerjee, Bijon Bhattacharyya, Utpal Dutta, Mohit Chatterjee, Badal Sarkar and Manoj Mitra did not hesitate to dramatise the social problems from a political angle. Another significant political development was the naxalbari movement which began in 1967, the aftermath of which on the social front was no less significant. There were number of plays which dealt with this subject.

But the most significant political movement of the period was the coming into power of the United Front Government which gave the state a stable political government from 1977 onwards after unsuccessful attempts in 1967, 1969 and 1971. However, to achieve this, the state of West Bengal had to go through the bitter experience of blood-shed, lawlessness, police terror and an unleashing of counter-revolutionary white terror between 1967 and 1975 (Mitra, 1979). It must go to the credit of the forementioned writers and a host of emerging new dramatists such as Asit Basu, Debasish Mazumdar, Arun Mukherjee, Nilkantha Sengupta, Dwijen Banerjee and Chandan Sen, to name only a few, who wrote with zeal and gusto and brought into limelight the social problems for which the misgovernance of the state by the ruling political clique at the centre was responsible.

Thus from the enclosed figure (Diagram : A) it may be seen that a cluster of socio-political texts were produced between the period 1970 and 1980 by which time the political experiments of the United Front Government in the state of West Bengal had become stable. This stability perhaps led to a belief that a new era was shortly to be ushered in and the social fabric of West Bengal would change radically. This was an all round view shared also by the producer-director-writer-artists of the group-theatre movement following which there is a marked change visible in the socio-political texts in the group-theatre circuit. These texts were no longer the traditional depiction of the so-called downtrodden, seen only through a marxist ideological vision. The shift is towards universal human value not coloured by any ideology. Thus one finds adaptations and translations of Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar from Marathi as well as plays of Bertolt Bracht and Dario FO. The texts of Brecht and FO by no means can be termed as orthodox marxist literature. On the whole there appears to be an introspection and an alternative value judgment where the social reality no longer relates to only the mundane day to day problem.
and a solution invariably from the marxist angle. The hypothesis is also proved by the fact that between 1980 and 1990 and beyond, the staunchest followers of the marxist doctrine in the group-theatre movement are in search of alternative texts. Thus 'Theatre Workshop', 'Chetana' and 'Theatre Commune' in their productions in this period had to resort to experimentations with themes not always in conformity with the marxist view of social contradiction.

**Allegory**: Although it has been stated earlier, that the classification have been done mainly on the basis of themes, there are some exceptions where not only the content, the form has also been taken into account. The term 'allegory' here has been used in the dual sense, i.e. from the viewpoint of form as well as content. In this section, those dramas have been taken into consideration which either had a novel form sometime absolutely new on the Bengali stage and or portrayal of a theme which otherwise would have been flat and dull unless portrayed in the form of an allegory. By the term 'Allegory' it must be understood that it covers texts both under symbolism and absurd theatre. Needless to say these were experimentation and not always commercially viable. This is proved by the fact that in the long history of commercial theatre only two scripts had been attempted to by the commercial theatre producers. Out of which Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode's (Dada-O-Didi, 1909) might also be included in the satire section because of its hilarious bantering of the British. The play was proscribed in 1911 presumably for this reason. Inspite of it being a crowd puller, the producers did not attempt any of its kind subsequently, probably because of its form. And the second text in this category that had been attempted to was Tagore's 'Biswarjan' (1924) by no less a stalwart than Sri Sisir Bhadury. But as has already been seen in the social section, the Tagore text, perhaps was well ahead of time and in the commercial circuit, inspire of Sisir Bhadury's genius, failed to attract the audience. Thus the spirit of experimentation appear to be abhorred by the commercial theatre producers in so far as the allegorical texts were concerned.

The group-theatre on the contrary took up this challenge and unlike the commercial theatre producers, they did not hesitate to experiment with form and theme. And surprisingly it was Tagore and not any European dramatists whose allegorical scripts were attempted to. Tagore's 'Raktakarabi' (1954), 'Dak Ghar' (1957) and 'Muktadhara' (19590 were staged by 'Bohurupee' and directed by Sambhu Mitra. What commercial theatre failed to do, the group-theatre did. All three plays were allegorical and in spite of that, Tagore was made communicable and acceptable to the Bengali theatre audience. And not only that 'Biswarjan' which failed in the...
commercial circuit was successfully presented by the same group, i.e. 'Bohurupee' in 1961. However from 1960 onwards, there also rose a trend in this section following the European school of absurd dramas. Two dramatists who followed this school were Mohit Chatterjee and Partha Pratim Chowdhury. However the most outstanding dramatist, apart from Tagore in this category is Badal Sarkar. His ‘Ebang Indrajit’ (1965) created a sensation. It is a simple story depicting middle-class drudgery, but portrayed absolutely in a new form mixing verse and lyrical language as dialogue hitherto unknown. Since indepth study of contents are not very important in this section, suffice it to say that all major group theatre dramatists experimented with this form sometimes with success, sometimes without, but the spirit of experimentation continued. To this were added translated scripts of Pirandello (Six characters in search of a playwright, 1961) already included in the social section for its themes, Eugene Ionesco (The Rhino, 1972). Jean Paul Sartre (The Flies, 1981) and Bertolt Brecht (The Caucasian Chalk Circle, 1982). And experimentation with Tagore also continued. In short, dramatic scripts in this section particularly between the period 1960-1980 were varied and extraordinary.

Now a question may arise as to why such recourse to allegorical scripts were attempted to. What was the social compulsion for an alternative form and how relevant these were to the particular social context. The following is a brief attempt to find answers to these queries.

The period between 1950-60 was a period when the trauma of partition and the glory of independence both began to fade. But it was also a period when people began to look back to their own heritage as well as look forward for new vision, hope and modernisation. This was the background that perhaps motivated an actor-producer-director like Sambhu Mitra to stage the two Tagore plays mentioned earlier. It was an attempt towards modernisation and also an attempt to rekindle the past heritage. The Tagore allegorical scripts served the purpose more than admirably and the acceptance and the response of the audience was overwhelming. In fact, it led the way to more experimentation and dramatists began to search for more complex forms. This is evident during the period 1961 to 1970.

However, socially speaking this was a period when frustration got the better of the middle-class intellectuals. Texts by Partha Pratim Chowdhury and Mohit Chatterjee bear ample testimony to that. As in literature, so also in the allegorical dramaturgy of this period, the influence of European school of 'Absurd Drama' is quite visible. One need not repeat here the birth and
genesis of ‘Absured Drama’ in the European theatres. Suffice it to say that social decadence, cultural frustration, middle-class monotony and a desire to express forcefully, in short, social indignation prompted the dramatists of this period to take recourse to the allegorical form now and then. But most of these scripts did not get much audience response and thus their success was limited. Surprisingly even in this period of limited success, the Tagore play ‘Raja’ (1964) staged by ‘Bohurupee’ and directed by Sri Sambhu Mitra got a rousing response from the audience. The other notable success was of course Badal Sarkar’s ‘Ebang Indrajit’ (1965) staged by ‘Shouvanik’.

However, between the period 1970-80 the allegorical scripts were of different form. Even a staunch follower like Mohit Chatterjee of the ‘Absurd school’ began to write plays that had little resemblance to his earlier dramas in so far as form was concerned. In this period the forms were more down to earth, less complex and easily communicable to the audience. Kumar Ray’s ‘Kimbadanti’ (1970), Arun Mukherjee’s ‘Marich Sambad’ (1972), Mohit Chatterjee’s ‘Mahakalir Bachha’ (1978), Manoj Mitra’s ‘Mesh O Rakshas’ (1980), Badal Sarkar’s ‘Gondi’ (1982), an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s Caucasian Chalk Circle, Rudraprasad Sengupta’s ‘Mananiya Bicharak Mondali’ (An adaptation from the Japanese film ‘Rashoman’, 1985) are good examples of the forementioned hypothesis. The reason of course is not very difficult to surmise. This was a period when some kind of ‘Political stability’ began to materialise in the state. Though expectations were not fulfilled as it should have been, no longer there was political chaos, anarchy and disorder in the public life. Relieved from tension, uncertainty and destabilisation, the group-theatre producers could now concentrate to stage plays of different genres. So even in the allegory section one could come across scripts more lyrical and of plain entertainment based on universal human values. In fact in no other earlier period Tagore’s prose text like ‘Se’ (1985) or ‘Malini’ (1986) would have been dared to be attempted to. The allegorical scripts, thus can be said to have achieved a point of openness which is socially significant. It highlights a distinct cultural shift and a changing normative value judgement amongst the middleclass the social significance of which is intimately related with social change.

Romance: This is a trend which is predominantly found only in the commercial circuit. Out of a total of 40 plays, only 4 belong to the group-theatres. Before going into the reasons for such predominance, a brief analysis of the texts is attempted hereunder.
The first two texts in this section were by Dinabandhu Mitra who wrote ‘Nildarpan’. These two texts were produced in January 1873 by National Theatre as commercial production. No doubt these were love stories but very weak in structural composition and artificial in character portrayal. One reason perhaps could have been that in a structured orthodox Bengali society where romance or love between man and woman before any conjugal bond was a taboo, any portrayal of such love was bound to be artificial. Hence these texts took umbrage to farce and laughter, the language of which was also very crude even sometimes bordering to vulgarity. Set to this trend, the later texts followed the same pattern until up to 1890 when suddenly Tagore’s ‘Raja-O-Rani’ (1890) was produced by Emereld Art Theatre later known as ‘Star Theatre’. But this production was an exception and presumably failed at the box-office. Between 1890 and 1900, it is found that two texts of Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode, who was a prominent playwright of the Bengali stage were produced. And interestingly Tagore’s ‘Chitrangada’ (1895), a verse play was attempted to by the same ‘Emereld Theatre’. ‘Emereld’ was also the producer of Kshirod Prasad Vidyabinode’s ‘Phulosajja’ (1895). But apart from these two or three exception, plays based on romance between 1873 and 1900 were of very little significance and followed the pattern mentioned at the beginning of this section. Eight texts were consulted between the period 1901-1920. Again except Bankim Chatterjee’s historical romance ‘Durgesh Nandini’ (1906) ably scripted by Girish Chandra and the immortal romance of ‘Sirin Farhad’ (1906) adapted by Atul K. Mitra, the rest were of little significance. Both plays were staged at the Minerva Theatre. There were only eight scripts that could be termed as romance between the period 1921-1940. But of these the story of ‘Laila-Majnu’ (1921), ‘Irpan Rani’ (based on Oscar Wild’s ‘The Queen of Padua’, (1923), Tagore’s ‘Tapati’ (a new version of ‘Raja-O-Rani’, 1929) and Manmatha Ray’s ‘Raj Nati’ (1937) deserve special mention. The first two were directed by Aparaesh Chandra Mookherjee, who was innovative as well as quite sensitive towards his approach to a romance based play. Tagore’s ‘Tapati’ was produced and directed by Sisir Kumar Bhadury and inspite of his modern outlook and stagecraft, the production failed to attract the common audience, just like other Tagore plays in the pre-Independence period. Comparatively Manmatha Ray’s ‘Raj Nati’ was a better success for its admirable plot. Between 1941-60, there were only three plays. Out of these Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s ‘Parineeta’ (1955) was a grand success. A good love story, acceptable to the average Bengali audience, it somewhat paved the way for more modern approach towards romance. There were six plays between the period 1961-90. In so far as audience acceptability was concerned, ‘Tapasi’ (1963) based on a novel by Nihar Ranjan Gupta, an eminent suspense
thriller writer of vernacular language and 'Mallika' (1973) again based on a story by a very powerful Bengali writer 'Jarasandha' could lay claim to success. Surprisingly neither the revival of such old play as 'Vidyasundar' (1874, revived production 1969) nor the powerful writings of Samaresh Basu, 'Kothai Pabo Tare', (1971) and Sarat Chatterjee's 'Kamal Lata' (1977) or the staging of a Kalidas classic such as 'Shakuntala' (1982) could lay claim to such success. Thus romance as a trend even in the commercial circuit did not seem to have achieved any phenomenal success.

It has already been pointed out at the opening of this section, that very few romances had been attempted to by the group-theatre producers. Between a period of twenty-two years, i.e. 1967-89, only four romances were attempted to and surprisingly all of these were either adaptations or a translation. 'After the Fall', a play by Arthur Miller was adapted by Sadhan Maitra-'Pataner Par' (1967) and was a very feeble production. And Bertolt Brecht's 'Three-Penny-Opera' was adapted by Ajitesh Banerjee, ('Teen Paiser Pala', 1969). 'Three-Penny-Opera' was a thumping success and in fact restored the longlost tradition of live singing on stage. However, this play although included in the section under discussion as a romance, might also be included in the socio-political section since the story though revolving round a love story, in reality dealt with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. The other two plays were translation of 'Shudrak's' Sanskrit classic 'Mrichhakatik' (the clay chariot 1979,1989). In short, the group-theatre producers, it appears were not very keen to stage a true romance. Not that these producers by-passed the relationship between man and woman based on love. Production like Tagore's 'Char Adhya' (Bohurupee, 1951) and 'Ghare Baire' (Bohurupee, 1974) or Bibash Chakraborty's 'Madhab-Malancha Koinya' bear ample testimony to that. The first two were included in the social section because they depicted social problems which were larger than the latent love-story. And the last named is put into the musical section for its predominantly music form. Therefore, it would not be unfair to draw a conclusion that a true romance like Shakespear's 'Romeo-Juliet' could not be found in the Bengali group-theatre circuit.

But it is also true that such endeavour was also not found amongst the commercial theatre producers. However, the commercial theatre producers might have an excuse in the sense that the social condition did not allow them to portrait such romances, particularly in the pre-Independence period when the puritan morality in relation to sex, love, extra-marital relationship,
even public showing of conjugal love was prohibited. Thus right from Dinabandhu Mitra, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode, Atul K. Mitra, Amarendra Nath Dutta, Aparesh Mukherjee to later day playwrights such as Sachin Sengupta, Bidhayak Bhattacharyya or of more recent times such as Debnarayan Gupta did not dare to cross this threshold of puritan morality. Even in the adult theatre section which is to be discussed later, the portrayal of a pure love story is absent. Producers of the pre-Independence era circumvented this weakness by scripting some of the Bankim Chatterjee novels. But due to latent social problems inherent in these productions they have been incorporated in the social sections. But even in modesty it must be admitted that in spite of the fear of social rejection, the commercial theatre producers tried to keep this trend alive albeit rather weakly.

The non-acceptance of romantic themes in case of the group-theatre has perhaps their reasons. The birth of group-theatre, was from a stark reality of war, famine and devastation of public life. Thus group-theatre began its journey by depicting problems faced by the society, particularly the down-trodden people. And in this struggle, their main weapon was marxian ideology. This probably lead to a belief that romance and love has no role in this struggle. And even if it had, it must wait until times changed. This doctrinaire attitude somewhat coloured the visionaries of the group-theatre movement. And though Macbeth (1975) was attempted to, a Romeo-Juliet had never been. This section is now summed up with the hope that since value judgement and social norms have undergone radical changes, at least group-theatre producers may attempt, even by way of experimentation, the tender subject of romance.

**Musical**: This again is a trend which is based on form. The term 'Musical' here means that the script is basically music oriented and actors and actresses whenever necessary sing on stage live with the help of the accompanists who of course remain back-stage. Thus it will be seen that very few plays both in commercial and group-theatre circuit after the fifties have been included in this section due to the fact that taped music and play-back singing had been introduced by then and the basic charm of live singing on stage abandoned. Some of these scripts such as 'Swaralipi' (1986) may lay claim to be musical, but due to the criteria set above, these have not been placed in this section. With this preamble in mind, a periodwise analysis of the musical scripts is attempted below.
The musical scripts are predominantly produced by the commercial theatre circuit. There are namely two reasons for that: one the performers and second, the resource. For live musical performance on stage, the commercial theatres had always good performers, particularly the women actresses who were extremely proficient in live singing and dancing. There is also a good reason for that which has been discussed in the introductory chapter. Here it may only be mentioned that in the beginning actresses were picked up from the red-light area because for average Bengali woman, theatre-participation was a taboo. This was a boon in disguise in the sense that a girl-child born in the redlight area was invariably taught singing and dancing very early, perhaps to be used later in the profession. And later on when some of them took to the career of acting, this basic teaching enabled them to perform elegantly and efficiently under the supervision of able and competent music directors and dance teachers. This factor encouraged enormously a producer director-writer like Girish Chandra Ghosh to write musical plays. In fact, he wrote eleven plays between the period 1877-till his death in 1912. The other notable contributors in this period were Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode and Atul Krishna Mitra, two very notable Bengali play-wrights.

The significance of resource needs no elaboration and right from the pre-Independence period the commercial theatre always enjoyed the patronage of moneyed producers. Thus the commercial theatre directors could engage paid artists who were competent performers. Though it was meagre in comparison to presentday situation, but still enough to attract talented artists. This was not the case with the performers of the group-theatre circuit in the post-Independence period. And since live-musical performances need professional skill, the group-theatre directors could never engage such professional artists who could deliver their goods i.e., live singing and dancing. The situation of course changed much, when Television programmes gave an opportunity to the group-theatre artists to embrace a better career. But still even, this betterment was not reflected in the musicals produced by group-theatres. In fact, between the period 1873-1975 whereas 50 musicals were produced on board the commercial circuit, there were only 5 musicals produced by the group-theatre and that too between the period 1974 and 1988. Thus it can be seen that there is a clear apathy towards the musicals in so far as the group-theatre movement is concerned. And apart from the two reasons cited above, the group-theatre might have suffered from the malady of so-called serious theatre under which perlance perhaps the indigenous Bengali musicals were thought to be of little significance.
Before concluding this section, a little analysis of the themes involved is necessary. Since musicals are predominantly performed by the commercial theatres circuit, it would also help to understand the cultural shift and religious bias. Out of the 50 scripts, produced by the commercial producers in the period under study almost 15 scripts or approximately 33% were based on religious themes. Two major writers, i.e. Girish Chandra Ghosh and Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode drew freely from the Indian mythology and religious festivals. And the tradition of depicting religiosity continued up to 1930. In between though, subjects were drawn from such folk tales as 'Arabian Nights', 'Middle East Romances', Turko-Chinese Opera', 'Indian history' 'Indian folk-tales' etc. However, the bulk of the musicals were done between 1873-1931. In this period Tagore’s ‘Chirakumar Sabha’ (1925) was also produced. And Kaji Nazrul Islam wrote a musical ‘Aleya’ (1931) which was directed by Satu Sen and produced on board the ‘Natyaniketan’. And another Bengali literary giant Tarashankar Bandhopadhyay's ‘Kabi’ (1957, revived on 1974) was also attempted to. However, the last three plays were exceptional and not indicative of the general pattern of themes stated earlier. In fact musicals even in the commercial circuit began to dwindle and only 8 scripts were produced between the period 1931-1975. And all of these eight scripts had subjects of different hue and colour. History, folk tales, biographies - all were attempted to. Perhaps, musicals were produced in this period as a variety.

The five musicals produced in the period, i.e. 1974-1988 by group-theatre were equally varied in nature and two of them were revivals. Amritalal Basu’s ‘Bapikya Biday’ (1926) was revived in 1974 by Sabitabrata Dutta, a versatile actor-singer-director. And Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s ‘Alibaba’ (1897, Classic theatre) was remodelled by Mohit Chatterjee in 1988 and produced by Theatre Workshop as an experiment. But the most successful musical in the group-theatre circuit was ‘Madhab-Malancha-Koinya’ (1988). In fact it ran into full houses whenever it was staged. Based on a simple folk-tale known as ‘Mymensingh Gitika’, it brought in a fresh whiff of air in the group-theatre movement.

In concluding this section, it may now be said that the musicals as a trend flourished between the period 1873-1930. As many as 42 plays were produced in this period by the commercial theatre producers and many of these enjoyed enormous audience support. Not all of these were thematically stable, but the singing and dancing were of top quality and reflected the emotional attraction of the Bengali audience. All the writers of earlier period, namely Girish
Chandra Ghosh, Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode, Atul K. Mitra, Amritalal Basu, Dwijendra Lal Roy and Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote innumerable songs for theatre. And needless to say Tagore in this regard was an institution by himself. But the musicals of the period under study had a special significance too. It was fun, entertainment and a relief from the daily monotony of hard struggle for livelihood. The commercial theatres of post-Independence period were sometimes charged with frivolity and social insignificance. This can not be said of the musicals produced in the pre-Independence period. The indigenous music, performed dexterously by skilled artists, brought in a taste of culture which apart from being entertaining, reminded the people of their glorious tradition. The magic of this music was the contribution of the musicals to the cultural ethos of the Bengalis. And naturally this contribution can not be and should not be termed as insignificant whatever be their folly in the post-Independence period.

**Satire and comedy**: Apart from the social plays, the only other trend which attracted both producers of the commercial and group-theatre equally were the satires and the comedies. The following is a brief analysis of that trend.

Between the period 1872-1990, altogether there were 127 plays staged, out of which commercial theatre produced 86 plays and 41 plays were produced by the group-theatres. Although the commercial theatre produced more than double, it must also be noted that the group-theatres' first satirical production ‘Swargiya Prahasan’ (Tagore, 1955) was staged only in 1955 by ‘Bohurupee’, again a pioneer in Tagore production. And unlike the trends of romance and musicals, the group-theatres practically matched the output of the commercial circuit inspite of the latter’s vast and formidable resource mobility. Periodwise, in the commercial circuit it may be seen that 57 plays were produced between the period 1872-1977 and 29 plays were staged between 1964-1990. And there is a distinct shift of attitude noticable in the two sets though produced under the same banner of commercial circuit. Many of the scripts in the first set, i.e. produced between the period 1872-1944 had mocked and bantered certain social problems and customs. Thus we find farces and satires through laughter and fun portraying the bad practice of permanent keeping of the bridgegroom in the bride’s house, (Jamai Barik, 1872), old age marriage (Biye Pagla Budo, 1873), adverse influence of english education (Ekei ki bale Sabhyta ? 1873) and taunting the odd custom of married womans lunar fasting (Sadhabar Ekadasi, 1873), mocking the British Royal family (Gajadananda O Yubaraj, 1876, the play was prescribed by the British Government) and the vain imitations of so-called western civilization
(Sabhyatar Panda, 1894, Babu, 1894). Even fanaticism towards religion was not spared (Lat Gauranga). On the other hand the boycott of foreign articles and the swedishi movement also became a subject (Bravo Bengali, 1905). Added to these were the Tagore satires (Gorai Galad, 1910, Bini Paisa Bhoj, 1912, Seshraksha, 1927, Muktir Upai, 1930 and Baikhunthor Khata, 1930) and Moliere adaptations (Aleek Babu 1900 and 1926, Jaisa Ka Taysa, 1907, ‘Tufani’, 1908 and ‘Dambaj’, 1909).

From the above it may be seen that the writer-director-producers of satire and comedies in this period were not only conscious about the social shortcomings, but also tried to deliver a message to overcome these without being didactic. They chose satire and comedy for this very purpose since while enjoying fun and laughter people might also take note of the problems underneath. But the same can not be said of the later set of period, i.e. 1964-1990. Barring a very few plays like ‘Takar Rang Kalo’ (1965), ‘Subarna Golak’ (1972), ‘Hatat Nawab’ (1979), ‘Nabalok Baba’ (1984) and ‘Ghatak Biday’ (1990) none of the productions had any social message nor social awareness. Practically, in this later period, the satire and farces were attempted to only as slap-stick entertainments of shallow quality.

The group-theatre, of course in their inimitable style staged comedies, satires and farces from the angle of social awareness. Here not only laughter and fun were taken care of but there always had been an attempt towards modernisation and polished entertainment in comparison to the later set of commercial theatre productions. The plays of Badal Sarkar (Bada Pisima, 1960; Kabikahini, 1967, Ballavpurer Rupkatha, 1970, Jadi Aar Ekbar, 1976), Utpal Dutta (Handi Phatibe, 1969 and Dainik Bazari Patrika, 1989), Mohit Chatterjee (Swadesi Naksa, 1979, Totaram, 1986) and Monoj Mitra (Narak Guljar, 1976, Raj Darshan, 1982; Naisa Bhoj 1986; Knmu Kaharer Theatar, 1988 and Kenaram Becharam, 1989) bear ample testimony to that. And in the same period added to these were adaptation/translation from Chekhov (Nana Ranger Din, 1961 and Prastab 1961), Moliere (Hatat Nawab 1963), Bertolt Brecht (Pantu Laha, 1975) and William Shakespear (Chaitali Rater Swapna, 1989) as well as scripts based on stories written by such socially conscious writers as Samaresh Basu (Chhutir Phande, 1972, Nater Guru, 1979 and Ram Nam Keb|lam, 1985) and Bimal Kar (Ghughu, 1980 and Brischik, 1986). These, it may be said, are ample additional proof in favour of the forementioned hypothesis of modernisation and polished entertainment. Without going into further details the section may be concluded with the following observations.
The trend of satires and comedies is quite indicative of gradual value change and social awareness. However, this is not uniform and the unequal development is more pronounced in the commercial circuit. Thus it can be seen that the satires and comedies produced between the period 1872-1944 in this circuit were alive to social problems and within the limitation of social orthodoxy and traditionalism tried to project certain moral values through laughter and fun. In hindsight, it may now appear to be coarse and outdated, but in its defense one must admit that the social structure was practically semi-feudal, the spread of education thin and Calcutta as a whole was still in the incomplete stage of secondary urbanisation. Thus in a semi-feudal atmosphere and under the yoke of a foreign power, the commercial circuit perhaps did it best in terms of projecting forward values and social change. It is unfortunate that the same can not be said of the plays produced by the commercial circuit producers between the period 1964-90. The stage and the playhouses adopted modern techniques but the themes remained shallow and insignificant. But more important is the fact that socially these plays projected the same kind of old feudal values which in a changing society were nothing but anachronisms. That the writer-producer-directors of the commercial circuit were unable to adjust to the post-Independence period was amply evident from the fact that between 1944-64 not a single satire or farce was produced by them. This yawning gap is indicative of the fact that social adjustment and value judgement of the post-Independence period was beyond the grasp of these producers who perhaps were yet to understand the changing facade of a growing urban population. And thus they stuck to their old formula of semi-feudal entertainment even in the period 1964-1990.

However, just the opposite had happened in the group-theatre circuit. Right from the beginning, the satires and comedies were attempted to with a motive of more modern outlook and taste, and interestingly without any political inhibition or doctrinaire approach. The earlier analysis of the group-theatre satires and comedies, barring a very few exceptions, corroborates this fact. In fact the projections clearly reveal a shift of cultural values towards urban entertainment commensurate with the growing stature of Calcutta as a metropolitan city. Some may choose to undermine it as elite entertainment but the fact remains that what the commercial circuit attempted to between the period 1877-1944 within its limitations in so far as the moral values were concerned, the group-theatres achieved a phenomenal success in projecting more modern and contemporary values. The themes, directorial approach, acting, costumes, make-up and stage-craft etc all bear ample testimony to that. But since there were experiments at all
level of theatre production, even in this section of satires and comedies, sometimes mis-
communication occurred which perhaps led to the aforementioned charge of elitism. But in
retrospect one need to admit that the satires and comedies produced in the group-theatre
circuit between the period 1955-90 are quite indicative of the changes taking place in the
contemporary urban society with all its social and cultural connotation. Notwithstanding the
charge of elitism, the significance of this can neither be ignored nor undermined.

Biography: In the scheme of analysis, the next trend is Biography. Altogether 38 scripts/
plays have been looked into, out of which 24 belong to the commercial circuit and 14 belong to
the group-theatre. For both circuit though it appears to be a minor trend, some interesting
social sidelights are observable.

For example, out of the 24 plays in the commercial circuit, 9 biographies are related to
the lives of religious leaders and the cult of devotion. Thus we find ‘Buddhadev Charit’ (1885),
Sri Bishnupriya’ (1931), ‘Sri Gauranga’ (1931), ‘Paramhansa Sri Sri Ramkrishna’ (1960) and
‘Sri Krishna Chaitanya’ (1982) portraying the lives of religious leaders. Six plays are related
to poets, poetry and songs. These are ‘Joydeb’ (1912), ‘Chandidas’ (1926), ‘Kabi Kalidas’
related to historical characters such as ‘Nadir Shah’ (1921), ‘Ranjit Singh’ (1940), ‘Jeejabai’
(1952) and ‘Mahanayak Sasanka’ (1955). And surprisingly only 2 are based on the lives of
such great patriots as ‘Deshbandhu’ (1942), and ‘Kshudiram’ (1947). From the above analysis
it may be seen that the lives of the religious leaders appear to be more attractive to the
commercial circuit producers than such social thinkers as ‘Raja Rammohan’, ‘Henri Derozio’
or even ‘Vidyasagar’. And next to this were the lives of the poets and their poetry. However,
even one can observe that the lives of poet ‘Joydev’ and ‘Chandidas’ were more related to
religion since their poetry grew out of the devotional scriptures of the Hindu religion. The life of
Michael Madhusudan Dutta was an exception to this. But Michael’s life attracted both the
commercial and group-theatres producers because of his controversial chequered character.
And the most surprising were the historical biographies in this section. It is true that many of
the historical characters and their lives and events had been the subjects matter of the historical
plays as pointed out earlier. But India being a vast country, in the biographical section there
could have been more significant productions based on the lives of historical characters.
However, unlike the commercial circuit, the group-theatres paid no attention to religion. Only one script 'Kabir' (1976) was attempted to, but that too as the life of a social thinker and reformer and not as a religious preacher. But both Michael (Danrao Pathikbar, 1980) and 'Binodini' (Nati Binodini, 1972) attracted their attention just like their counterparts in the commercial circuit but for a different reason. Here these lives were interpreted as pioneers and path-finders.

In summing up the analysis of the biographical plays, the following observations may be noted:

The number of biographical texts attempted to by both commercial and group-theatres show that the trend was not much popular.

The biographies produced by the commercial theatre show a distinct leaning towards religion, namely the Hindu religion and the cult of devotion or 'vaktibad'. The reason behind this is discussed in details in a later chapter on 'Financial and political struggles etc'.

The commercial theatre productions of this trend do not indicate any understanding of social reality after the attainment of Independence. Thus the productions attempted to bear no social significance. No attempt had been made by the producers of the commercial theatres to portray lives of great social thinkers, reformers or national heroes in the light of the newly emerging post-Independence society.

The biographies attempted to by the group-theatres were also very few in number. But a distinct interpretive thinking is percivable in so far as the choice of theme is concerned. The lives thus projected were of high ideals. Michael was seen as a pathfinder in Bengali verse and poetry and Vinodini was seen as a woman who tried to break the social barriers of conservatism. In short, the biographies attempted to by the group-theatre, in one way or other, were either rebels in terms of socio-economic condition (Titumir 1978), Nazurl (1980), 'Aaj Juddha Ghosonar Din' (1989) and 'Birsamundar Gaan' (1989) or great pathfinders and social reformers in their own fields such as 'Shakespeare' (1972), 'Nati Binodini' (1972), 'Kabir' (1976), 'Galeleor Jiban' (1980), 'Danrao Pathikbar' (1980), 'Socrates' (1989) and 'Nabin Dutta' (1990). Though very few in number, it indicated a modern approach towards social history, religion and political outlook. Thus the biographies attempted to by the group-theatre, had a purpose, a purpose to grasp the changing social reality of a more modern era. In this sense these biographical productions by the group-theatres may be termed as social markers.
Crime and detective: The next trend in the present scheme of analysis is crime and detective plays. This again is a very minor trend since only 8 plays were staged by the commercial theatre producers between the period 1937 to 1980 and 4 plays were staged by the group-theatres between the period 1959-90. From the above, it is clearly seen that this might have been an unpopuar trend. There could be two reasons for that: one, the productions were not very well-made and thus failed to attract the audience. And second, the social reality was not conducive for the appreciation of a crime drama which usually was of plain entertainment nature.

The first point has a fallacy, particularly in the group-theatre circuit in the sense that out of the 4 productions 2 were Bengali remakes of the famous ‘Mouse Trap’ by the renowned crime literature writer Agatha Christie, the scripted play of which ran more than 2 years in London theatre and the Bengali adaptation (‘Indur Kal’ 1981) was produced by the group ‘Shouvanik’ whose productions of other trends were remarkably competent and smart. The same logic is also applicable to the first crime-thriller play in the group-theatre circuit, namely ‘Finger Print’ (1959) which again was a Bengali adaptation of a successful english film ‘To chase a Crooked Shadow’ (1957) and was produced by Sundaram, a leading Bengali group-theatre. And it will also be a very harsh criticism if the commercial theatre circuit is charged with inefficient and inept production. Rather the first three crime-plays in this circuit bear no testimony to that. ‘Detective’ (1937), ‘Tatinir Bichar’ (1938), and ‘Makarsar Jal’ (1939) were rapidly produced in three consequitive years and had these been not well-made, the commercial theatre producers would have altogether abandoned this trend. In fact, ‘Tatinir Bichar’ was a thumping success and enjoyed a considerable popular support. And amongst the later productions, ‘Ulka’ (1954) and ‘Ek Peyala Coffee’ (1959) were very well-made and earned the praise of the critics as well as the public. Thus inspite of being meagre in number, the apprehensions that these crime plays both by the group-theatres and the commercial theatres were not well-made, do not seem to be correct.

This brings one to the second hypothesis of social reality being not conducive for the appreciation of a crime-drama. As has been already pointed out, the first venture of a crime play in the commercial circuit was ‘Detective’ (1939) - a play based on the story of a famous Bengali crime story writer, Saradindu Banerjee. The next two plays were ‘Tatinir Bichar’ (1938) and ‘Makarsar Jal’ (1939). Then there was a long gap of 14 years when ‘Khuner badi’ (1953), a play by the noted dramatist Manmatha Ray was staged. The gap appears to be logical in the
sense that in between these years occurred the Second World War, partition of India, Independence and the first General Election of 1952 and the mood of the audience could not have been favourable for such light entertainment as crime drama. This kind of gap is again visible between the year 1961-1980 when only two crime play were staged, namely ‘Chakra’ (1961) and ‘Beni Samhar’ (1980). Again the period between 1961-1980 was politically eventful when the wars with China and Pakistan (1962, 1965), the rise of United Front Government’ (1967-77), the birth of Bangladesh (1971) and a counter productive Naxalbari Movement (1967) took place. Certainly not a very conducive social atomosphere for crime plays. But the point of fallacy against this hypothesis is the period between 1981-90, when even in a better and stable period no crime-drama was staged in the commercial circuit.

Equally, in the group-theatre circuit the period between 1960 and 1980 remained unproductive in so far as the crime plays were concerned. This is exactly the period mentioned above and the argument in favour of social reality not being conducive stands valid. But then again between the stable period 1981-90, only 4 plays, namely the two versions of ‘The mouse Trap’ (1981, 1982), ‘Mojrge Ratribas’ (1989) and ‘Ek Tukro Kagaj’ (1990) were staged. The fallacy, therefore, remains unresolved. However, in conclusion, it may be summed up that as a trend crime plays were generally rather insignificant, irrespective of whether these were competently produced or the social climate being not conducive for their acceptance.

**Adult plays:** The last trend in the scheme of analysis is the adult plays. This trend is exclusively visible in the commercial circuit and it all began with the staging of ‘Barbadhu’ (1972), a story by Subodh Ghosh and scripted by Asim Chakraborty, who also was the director of the play. The play almost ran uninterrupted for 4 years., It may be termed as a trend-setter after its first staging. Altogether 58 adult plays were staged between the period 1972-1990 in the commercial circuit.

However, the main success of these plays appear not to be the general story line but the overt and covert sex that had been dealt with audiovisually on stage. Many of the initial scripts were based on stories or novels written by such literary giants as Subodh Ghosh, Samaresh Basu, Shankar and even Bimal Mitra.
Between the period 1971-83, there were 3 adult plays based on Subodh Ghosh's stories, such as 'Barbadhu' (1972), 'Jua' (1979) and 'Piu Kanha' (1979), 4 plays based on stories/novels written by Shankar - 'Chowringhee' (1972), 'Jana-Aranya' (1974), 'Samrat-O-Sundari' (1979), 'Nagar Nandini' (1980), yet another 4 plays based on Samaresh Bose novels 'Bibar' (1973), 'Prajapati' (1974), 'Aslil' (1975) and 'Rangini' (1983) and one play based on a Bimal Mitra fiction 'Parastree' (1976). But the point to be noted here is the fact that while the writers depicted their themes in the aforesaid stories, their aim was to pen-picture certain social maladies, be it prostitution as in Subodh Ghosh story, or the rootless middle-class youth straying to degenerated culture as in the Samaresh Bose stories or the cruel urban culture pushing the lower middle-class innocent into the vortex of earning his or her livelihood by any means, honest or evil. As a literary artist Smaresh Basu was perhaps the strongest pen amongst the abovementioned writers. He picked up a language in his triology of 'Bibar'-'Prajapati'-'Aslil' which was raw but penetrating and hammered the reader mercilessly to be aware of the metropolitan culture which was growing up challenging all barriers of conservatism. Thus a hypothesis may be formed that these writers had a social purpose, a purpose to make people aware of the changing urban reality. In their stories, sex came as a by-product and not as an end result. But the plays based on these stories appear to have a different purpose. The themes had inherent sex content, but on stage the implicit became explicit and an exhibitionism of overt and covert sex became rampant.

Socially speaking, this of course did not come suddenly. From the sixties onward a gradual change in the value judgement of the middle-class Bengali society was visible. The effect of co-education, the change in man-women relationship, women coming out more and more in the working arena, were changes in the positive direction. But side by side, rising unemployment, political uncertainty, border wars and the failed naxalbari movement played havoc on the routine life of the Bengali middle/lower-middle class youth. Added to this was the rising slum culture which began to assert itself in the body-politic itself. On top of this was the onslaught of Hindi film culture which perhaps goaded the slum youths and girls to think aloud the obscene. The street language that has been used in Samaresh Basu trilogy was actually the language of these youths and girls, the social reality of which could never be ignored.

This was the social backdrop on the canvas of which the first adult play 'Barbadhu' was staged. The timing of the play was also very significant. The year was 1972, a great traumatic
year when violence, street-murder and lawlessness rose to its zenith. However, the timing could have been incidental, but its success made some of the producers of the commercial theatre to think otherwise. This was how the trend was born. But initially even these producers were reluctant to break the age-old tradition of Bengali theatre. They, therefore as a beginning, chose the stories of such eminent writers as mentioned above and tried to gauge the reactions of the audience. But the success of some of these plays like 'Chowringhee' (1972), 'Bibar' (1973), 'Prajapati' (1974) etc made them more ambitious. Thus began a spate of non-descript plays whose sole purpose became titillation. It is surprising that out of 58 adult plays only 12 were based on the stories of established writers. The reason behind this of course is not difficult to understand. Once the traditional barriers and social taboo on sex was crossed through these literary pieces, all caution was thrown overboard and a spate of non-descript, sex-based exhibitionism began to assert this trend.

But the clientele also began to change and dwindle. Out of the 12 plays based on literary pieces only two were performed on such non-traditional theatre halls as 'Pratap Memorial' and 'Bidhan Mancha'. The remaining ten were played in such traditional play-houses as Biswarupa, Minerva, Rangmahal, and Circarina. On the contrary, out of the remaining 46 plays, only 16 were staged in the traditional play-houses like Star, Minerva, Biswarupa, Rangmahal and Circarina. The rest were played in small play houses like 'Boys Own Hall', 'Sanskrit Parishad Mancha', 'Kashi Biswanath Mancha', 'Shyamaprasad Mancha', 'Rammohan Mancha', 'Sujata Sadan', 'Bidhan Mancha' etc. All those last named houses are non-traditional and audience accommodation varies from two hundred to four hundred seats. In plain language, inspite of mushrooming in the eighties, these productions were unable to attract large number of traditional theatre lovers for this kind of sex oriented shows.

Another interesting point is to note that these plays were advertised with a marking of 'A' just like the censored films of adult certification, though no such censorship, nor any censor board existed for certification of theatre in the state of West Bengal. It means that these were self-styled certificates to attract the audiences. Another feature was the drumming of advertisement with the names of female dancers who in effect were floor dancers of the very cheap cabaret type. The still photograph of a half-clad female dancer displayed on the billboards of the forementioned small non-traditional theatre-halls was a routine affair.
However, the trend got restrained when some of the frontal organisation of a leftist party demonstrated against such obscenity and vulgarism. These demonstration however were staged after 1990 and therefore were not taken into account by the present worker. Suffice it to say that these protests were indeed able to curb such propensity towards vulgarism to a large extent. But the adult theatre as a trend can not be wished away since it indicates a kind of social orientation towards moral and ethical values. That it strayed to vulgarism and obscenety was due to the fact of cheap commercialisation and blatant ignorance on the part of their commercial producers, very many of whom were unsuccessful in their attempts of theatre making in the main stream of commercial theatre.

Another significant point is the attitude of the group-theatres who between 1944-90 staged only one so-called adult play and that too an adaptation of the very famous ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf’ (Malater Rang Muhurtta, 1970) which by no means of imagination could be termed as an adult play. It is true that the plays staged on the commercial circuit with the credentials of adult entertainments were nothing but mockery of truth. It was expected that the group-theatre with their social understanding and commitment would dare to expose this mockery. But perhaps a doctrinaire approach and ultra-sensitivity towards such delicate subject as sex clouded their vision and the group-theatres, by and large, restrained themselves and lost the opportunity, particularly in the eighties, to explore a hitherto uncharted path.