CHAPTER 3

Political and Economic
Struggles: Reflections in
Dramatic Performances-1872-
1990
In any given society social and cultural changes are basically interlinked with economic and political struggles and changes. Such changes are more visible but their influences on social and culture changes may not be that easy to detect. However, an attempt has been made hereunder to chalk a broad outline of economic and political struggles and changes that took place between the period 1872-1990 in Bengal vis-a-vis India. Afterall these struggles were basically of all India nature and only the mode, character and intensity differed depending on the regional variety of development.

The dramatic performances and any change there of due to the influence of these struggles mentioned above have been specifically taken into account in relation to city of Calcutta which is the space for this study and the state of West Bengal of which Calcutta is the chief metropolis. Another point that has been taken into account is the juxtaposition of financial and political struggles, demands and changes, because in most of the cases these had occurred one after the other or even simultaneously. A financial demand invariably turned into a political battle whether it was lost or won.

For the convenience of analysis the period has been divided into two parts, namely pre-Independence, i.e. 1872-1947 and post-Independence, i.e. 1948-1990. With this backdrop in mind the following is an attempt to mark and denote the economic and political struggles and changes that occurred in the region influencing social and cultural changes. At the very outset it is to be noted that the pre-Independence period i.e. 1872-1947 was the period of freedom struggle. Be it a financial or civil rights demand or a demand for better public service - all ultimately led to a demand for political freedom from the yokes of British imperialism. For the sake of easy understanding and transperancy, the pre-Independence period has been sub-divided into three broad phases and these are; (i) the age of moderate nationalism; (ii) the age of militant nationalism; and (iii) the age of Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violence movement. Each of these phases had its own characteristics and each of these phases had a rationale behind the corresponding financial and political struggles and changes. It would be worthwhile to find out the influences if any, that these had over social and cultural changes particularly in the field of dramatic performances.
Age of moderate nationalism : 1872-1905

The age of moderate nationalism roughly covers the period 1872-1905. But for a genesis of the period one has to go back to 1857, when Sepoy Mutiny took place. This was said to be the first protest movement against British rule. The immediate influence of Sepoy Mutiny has a direct relevance to the present study. Emboldened by this resistance movement, the peasants of Bengal launched a heroic struggle against the Indigo-planter in 1860. The plight and misfortune of the peasants who were forced into indigo planting was the subject matter of the first professional theatre of this country. The play was 'Nildarpan' or the 'Indigo Mirror' and was penned by Dinabandhu Mitra. The play was first published in Dacca, now in Bangladesh in 1860 and subsequently staged in 1872 as a professional theatre in Calcutta. The impact and reaction of this play was tremendous upon the Bengali middle class intelligence. The noted actor Ardhendu Shekhar Moostafi enacted an European indigo planters role in 'Nildarpan'. His performance was so very natural and close to the truth that even a sedate personality like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in course of viewing became extremely agitated and threw his slipper onto the stage towards Ardhendu Shekar (Sengupta, 1978). This mood of defiance and indignation against British rule was something new to the Bengali character, though it was not at all uniform throughout the period. Rather the age of the moderates was basically of moderation and appeals, of petition and compassion to gain the sympathy and attention of the British ruling class. Two major political events of this period were the formation and establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885 and the anti-partition movement of 1905 against the proposed division of Bengal into two parts. Though this period has been defined by historians as the age of moderates, the achievements of this period was no less significant in relation to social change. First of all the attitude towards the ruling clique, i.e. the English administrators changed. They were no longer considered to be good or bad. Rather the moderate elites and the educated Bengali middle class by and large realised that they were facing rulers for whom the interest of Britain was supreme and for safe-keeping of that interest they would take recourse to any measure irrespective of the effect on the native population. This realisation led to the birth and consolidation of national spirit. "The openly reactionary and anti-Indian measures introduced under Lord Lytton's Viceroyalty from 1876 to 1880 quickened the pace of Indian nationalists activity" (Chandra et al, 1972). Against these measures there were protest movements all over India and "the new political mood among the young Indians was first noticed in Bengal" (Chandra et al, 1972).
In this background, the foundation of Indian National Congress at Bombay in 1885 was a significant event for the country. Though initiated by a retired British civil servant as "a safely valve or a safe outlet to the growing discontent among the educated Indians" (Chandra et al, 1972), the organisation in a short while, grew into an all India political organisation representing new social forces who became increasingly opposed to the exploitation of India by British imperialism. Though in the beginning militancy was not their creed, but through "hard-headed and penetrating analysis of the complex mechanism of modern imperialism" (Chandra et al, 1972), they exposed the true exploiting character of the British rule. In fact these early nationalist leaders, many of whom belonged to Bengal, were able to root deep in the minds of the average educated Indian the concept of a common nation and nationalism. This has been aptly summed up as "the period between 1858-1905 was the seed time of Indian nationalism and the early nationalists sowed the seeds well and deep" (Chandra et al, 1972). But the birth of this national spirit or nationalism was largely confined amongst the educated Indians including the Bengali educated middle-class. Practically there was no working class, neither there was any working class movements in this period. Rather from 1860 onwards, there were intensive peasant struggles for their rights and these protest movements had their own leaders arising out of their own community. The British rulers tried their best to wedge a drive between the disgruntled educated Indian and their conterpart, the discontented Indian peasants. They were successful until about 1857, the year of Sepoy Mutiny when particularly the educated Bengali were said to have felt shy of supporting actively this mutiny. But this attitude changed sharply during the period 1860 and onwards when the peasants rose unitedly against the forcible planting of indigo. The drama 'Nildarpan' thus was a classic example of Bengali educated intellgentia rising to the occasion and lending support to a peasant movement which had hitherto been neglected. The foundation of Indian National Congress assumed a greater significance in this background, because though moderate in its approach, it tried to bridge this gap between the peasantry and the educated to a large extent through forceful demands and appeals to the ruling British hierarchy.

But apart from the role of nationalism, a second aspect in relation to social change vis-a-vis the role of English education had to be examined particularly amongst the Bengali society at the prevailing period. In introduction and elsewhere, it had been argued that the establishment of Hindu Collee in 1817 and the subsequent 'Young Bengal Movement' of Henri Louis Vivian Derozio, made a great impact amongst the educated middle-class youth of Bengal. However, the subsequent social events proved that the fall out of the Young Bengal Movement in later
period gave rise to certain heterodoxical tendency which remained valid until about the middle of the nineteenth century. But for the period under discussion, this new equation between heterodoxy and an unorthodox education, namely the English education, began to subside and a new compromise arrived at between the traditional customs and usages of the age-old Hindu society and the unorthodox English education which might be termed as 'neo-conservatism'. (Sinha 1967). The term 'Neo conservatism' requires a further elaboration since it is very important to understand the psyche of the theatre makers of the period i.e. 1872-1905. It is needless to say that the 'Young Bengal' movement and the spread of unorthodox English education gave a severe jolt to the very roots of the traditional society. But even at the very early days of the 'Young Bengal' movement, amongst its pioneers "the dualism in the pattern of behaviour within and outside the family circle was noticed and commented upon ..." (Sinha, 1967). In plain simple language it means that the protagonists of the movement remained faithful in their public life to the unorthodox English education and in family life compromised with traditional customs and usages because the Bengali family life retained many of the traditional rural values inspite of being in the process of urbanisation in Calcutta. This dichotomy or the dualism of behaviour began to be more and more assertive as one begins to progress through the events of the 19th century in its closing period. By this time the English education was accepted by the Government for official purpose and judicial matters and gave it a respectibility which the middle class society or the educated 'Bhadralok' could not ignore. Gone were the days of orthodox Hindu society and in its place a society of compromise and homogenity began to assert its presence indicating social change.  

The dichotomy of behaviour in domestic public life, the adherence to the concept of Western education albeit English variety for professional foothold in the employment market were all indicative of social change and outlook that began to take concrete shape in this period. Traditional values of Hinduism had to undergo changes which hitherto were unknown. It gave birth to new ideas and new social forces indicating normative change of values. The position of the middle-class or the 'Bhadralok' in the Bengali society needs to be closely examined in this background. "In the peculiar social evolution of Bengal, 'Bhadralok' meant primarily the high caste Hindu gentry of Bengal and was applied to other sections of society, or rather to individuals and persons belonging to those sections, only by analogy" (Sinha, 1967). The basic social structure of this middle class was the joint family system which of course was the rural remnant that had been carried over to urban Calcutta as a form of traditional domestic value. However
the general pattern in urban Calcutta was the formation of smaller joint-family, to which a new dimension had been added in the form of unorthodox English education. This led to the birth of many new professions, theatre-making being one of these. Though comparatively, smaller in bulk but it was none the less, not too insignificant in shaping social thought and influence. This loyalty and adherence to traditional value albeit the joint-family system had been expressed even by Girish Chandra Ghosh, a prolific playwright of the period way back in 1866 (Sinha, 1967).

In summing up this period, i.e. 1872-1905 it may now be said that the dichotomy or dualism of traditional values in relation to domestic life and unorthodox English education shaping the public life co-existed and continued forcefully. But this characteristics might have another reason or unfulfilled desire behind it which a modern-day historian had succinctly pointed out. "In its encounter with the West, the educated Bengali community felt deep admiration for western achievements in the material and intellectual spheres. But the other side of his mind respected this Western superiority and sought for some compensatory phenomenon in Indian tradition that could, to some extent, match western superiority and encourage self-respect" (Sinha, 1967). This observation not only matches the events of the period, it will be subsequently seen to be the exact reflection of the Bengali mind untill on or about the achievement of Independence in 1947. However for the present contextual period it may be noted that the above observations amply explains the Bengali mind of the period and in a pointed sense demonstrates the rationale behind the theatre-makers mind of the period. As pointed out earlier, the political struggles gave birth to the concept of Nationalism and an aspiration for freedom which in turn was the off-shoot of western education. And on the other hand these were manifested in the indigenous forms of boycott of foreign goods and an adherence to Swadesi albeit Indian goods. The call for revivalism of Hindu culture, in fact was the direct fallout of adherence to traditionalism. The anti-partition movement was another off-shoot of this Hindu revivalism. Part of a protest movement, it was a symbol of self-respect which the educated Bengali middle-clas wanted to assert. But for the present treaty, the most important quality existed in the theatre world. In the introductory part, it has already been shown how Bengali theatre was born out of a culture contact with the English. But its subsequent development in the period under consideration matches admirably the dichotomy of attitude pointed out earlier. For example the plethora of historicals and mythologicals in this period numbering 71 (see Diagram A) in total is generally explained away as the reflection and resultant of national spirit. In the chapter titled ‘Trends’,
these productions have also been described in the same vain. But in addition to that the
dichotomy of attitude and the dual concept of adherence to English education as well as loyalty
to traditional values should be taken into consideration while evaluating the productions of this
period. Thus it may be assumed that not only the wrath of the English administration in the form
of the dramatic regulation act of 1876 was responsible for the switch over to mythological and
historical texts, but also the concept of "... Indian tradition that could, to some extent match
western superiority and encourage self-respect". (Sinha, 1967), was equally responsible for
this switch-over. By adopting topics of Indian history and mythology, the Bengali play-wrights
and play-makers of the period justified their claims as propagators of social change. While
analysing this period, it was generally felt to be an obstacle as to why such socio-political
drama like 'Nildarpan' had never been attempted to. The answer, probably, lies in the above
supposition of self-respect and Indian tradition matching the western superiority in terms of
thought and ideology.

Curiously enough it also matches the anthropological concept of 'Sanskritisation' and
'Modernisation' (Srinivas, 1972), Whereby the concept of adherence to Indian tradition may
be equated with the subject matter of mythological and historical plays of the period, the dramatic
forms adopted may be equated with modernisation albeit western forms of theatre. This
adequately explains why a writer like Girish Chandra Ghosh, inspite of his versatile grasp and
command over Elisabethan theatre, chose to depict themes exclusively traditional. That his
endeavour succeeded was proved by his prolific pen and productions many of which ran for a
long period. This definitely had served the dual purpose of national spirit which was an off-
shoot of political struggle based on western concepts of freedom and justice, as well as the
concept of traditionalism based on self-respect and honour.

Professional theatres: 1872-1905

In this period i.e. 1872-1905, altogether 154 plays were staged (Diagram A) out of
which 38 were mythologicals and 33 were historicals. Amongst the remaining 83 plays, there
were 23 socials, 12 romances, 24 musicals, 21 satires/comedies, 2 biographies and a single
political play. The last-named had a direct relevance with the anti-partition movement of 1905.
Another interesting feature to note that in the section of historical plays no other Islamic ruler
and episode had been characterised save and except the 'Battle of Plassey' (1957) and its
tragic hero ‘Nabab Siraj-ud-Daula’. Whether it was intentional or not, the main thrust in this period was the revival of Hindu culture which suffered both in the hands of Muslim as well as British rulers. The same attitude appears to be dominant in the selection of themes in this period. Thus one finds only 5 productions in this period in the musical section that had touched secular themes and these were ‘Aladin’ (1881), ‘Alibaba’ (1897), ‘Hinda Hafeji’ (1898), ‘Julia’ (1899) and ‘Bedaura’ (1902). But neither in the section of mythology nor social, the two other dominant trends of the period a secular theme had been presented.

This conclusively proves the earlier hypothesis that this was a period of revival of Hindu traditional culture as well as Nationalism and National spirit as far as the educated Bengali middle-class was concerned. Theatre after all was catering to their needs and commensurate to their aspiration for self-respect, themes were selected to that end. But in this respect, theme-variation was also very noteworthy. Apart from mythology and historicals, musicals, socials, satires and romances had been attempted to, many of which ran for a considerable time. This indicates association and acceptance of the audience and thereafter influence on the thought process of this audience can not be ruled out. With this observation we now cross over to the next phase which is known as the age of militant nationalism covering the period 1905-1919.

**Age of militant nationalism : 1905-1919**

Untill about the early part of 1905, the moderate politicians occupied the centre-stage and their influence was still confined amongst the upper Hindu middle-class intellelgentia. However, the situation abruptly changed when by a declaration in July, 1905 the British Government declared that the partition of Bengal would take place from October 16, 1905 (Mukherjee, 1962). The instant reaction of Bengal was furious indignation and wide-spread protest. Born was a movement which could not be brushed aside as the ‘empty rhetoric of the Bengali Baboos’. It was a movement of great magnitude which had all sections of the Bengalis participating including the “zaminders, lawyers, merchants, the city poor, the workers and above all the students” (Chandra et al, 1972). And it also gave birth to a new genere of politicians who were no longer satisfied with the moderate approach of the older school of leaders belonging to Indian National Congress. They wanted more direct action against the British rule. There was thus a clarion call for boycott of all British goods, and adherence to everything that was ‘Swadeshi’ or indigenous. But more important was the involvement of general mass of people...
irrespective of caste and creed. It "activated new movements in the realm of culture also. A new type of nationalist poetry, prose and journalism, surcharged with passion and filled with idealism, was born" (Chandra et al, 1972).

This direct action against the British rule in the form of boycott, and the conversion of the anti-partition movement into a 'Swadesi' movement for 'Swaraj' or independence was the achievement of the new generations of leaders who were known as the 'extremists'. They in fact forcefully established, "... the Indian claim to freedom ... for the first time during those years (1905-1914) ... to the forefront of world political questions; and the seed of the aim of complete national liberation, and of determined struggle to achieve it, had been implanted in the political movement, and was destined in the subsequent years to stirke root in the masses of the people" (Dutta, 1972). But apart from awakening of national spirit and consciousness, the militant Nationalists were also responsible to some extent for the birth of terrorism in Bengal and elsewhere in the country. The reason behind that was probably the discontinuity of direct mass-action against the rulers and lack of mass-involvement in the movements to follow. Thus, "there was an element of despair in the involvement of students, clerks and teachers" (Chandra et al, 1977). And there were still certain old weaknesses noticable in the form of exclusion of the workers and the peasants from the main stream of national politics.

The despair and frustration in this background gave birth to a spate of terrorist movement in Bengal and Punjab whose main weapon was force against force. Secret societies were formed whose principal aim was to strike terror in the hearts of the British ruler by adopting violent methods such as individual killing of British tyrant administrators. The objective of this terrorist movement spanning between the period 1907-1912 was to rouse public opinion "... by means of newspapers, songs and literature, preaching secret meetings and associations. Unrest must be created. Welcome therefore unrest, whose historical name is revolt" (Mukherjee, 1962). However, the annulment of the partition of Bengal by the British Government in 1911 soothed the Bengali middle-class sentiment to a certain extent. And the advent of First World War in 1914 somewhat hampered the spirit of terrorist movement which resurfaced during the war period but again failed due to lack of proper communication amongst its leaders.

Meanwhile after the first worldwar, the rising mass discontent, soaring prices and the disillusionment of Indian Congress leaders, particularly of the militant section towards the British
negative attitude in regard to the Indian demands for even limited self-government spread tension all over the country and by 1919, there was a flurry of mass unrest all over India. And another important aspect was the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 which had a far-reaching effect on the intelligentsia of the whole country, and particularly over Bengal. From 1918 onwards the plight of the common man became worse. “Between 1914 and 1920, the index of whole-sale prices in Calcutta rose by over 100 per cent and prices of food grains rose by 93 per cent... and growing reduction of economic activity followed. Indian industries faced heavy losses and even closure” (Chandra et al, 1972). The British Government responded to such situation by following a policy of appeasement on the one hand and ruthless oppression on the other. Every political activity was dealt with severe repression and to this effect was enacted the Rowlatt Bill in March 1919 (Mukherjee, 1962). It dispensed with ordinary court procedure and authorised imprisonment without trial. There were widespread discontent, indignation and anger against the repressive measures.

It was in this background Mohandas Karamachand Gandhi entered the Indian political arena. With his common sense, wisdom and South African experiences, he could readily understand the mood of the masses and his nearness to the soil, his frugal and austere habits and his use of Indian languages in preference to English made him at once a leader of the masses. Against the ‘Rowlatt Act’, he began to organise ‘Satyagraha’ - a form of non-violent passive resistance movement at the beginning of 1919. Indian masses, including peasants and workers, joined enthusiastically all over the country. There were “mighty demonstrations, strikes, unrest, sometiems riotings and heroic resistance to violent repression in the face of heavy casualties” (Mukherjee, 1962). There were indiscrimanate police-firings on un-armed demonstrators all over the country including Calcutta. But the worst occurrence of repression happened in Jaliwanwalabagh on 13 April, 1919. There, in response to a call for a public meeting, presumably to protest against the inhuman repression let loose by the British administrations and in general to protest against the Rowlatt Act, a large number of unarmed Sikh population gathered. But under the physical presence of Sir Michale O’Dwyer, the then British Governor of Punjab, troops began to fire indiscrimantly “at about 100 yeards range upon a dense crowd, estimated by him (O’Dwyer) at 6000 and by others at 10,000 and more, but practically unarmed and all quite defenceless” (Majumdar, 1969). The brutality of this massacre practically stunned India. Known in the annals of Indian history as ‘Jaliwanwala Bag Massacre’, it even compelled the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore to renounce as a
gesture of protest and anguish, the Knighthood conferred upon him by the British Crown. The butchery of ‘Jaliwanwala Bagh’ created havoc in the Indian minds. It once more unmasked the ugly face of British imperilism. A floodgate of mass unrest began to engulf the country. All section of people including the muslim population shared this general unrest. However, in July 1919, Gandhiji called off his passive resistance movement for the time being. This was practically the end of militant nationalism, for thence-forward, the freedom struggle took up new forms of movement adopted by Gandhiji and Indian National Congress in 1920.

The period under consideration, i.e. 1905-1919 need now to be reviewed in relation to dramatic performances keeping in mind the forementioned political happenings. In comparison to the earlier period, there was a distinct growth of national awareness and a respect for traditional culture including Hindu religion. In fact Hindu religion had a special connotation in this period because the most prolific play-wright of the period, Girish Chandra Ghosh made abundant use of it in his historical and mythological plays. This point needs further elaboration.

It is a well known fact that from the third quarter of the nineteenth century, there was a revival of Hindu traditionalism as well as a spate of reforms which tried to correct the inherent imbalances of Hindu society. This resulted in such reform movements as anti-sati, anti-polygamy, widow remarriage etc. These were all, reform movements engulfing the Hindu traditional society and its traditional culture. The other noteworthy movement was the establishment of the ‘Brahmo-Samaj’ founded by Raja Rammohan Ray and thereafter continued by Debendra Nath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen. This was basically an anti-idolatry, monothesitic religious movement, which just like the unorthodox English education stuck, at the basic roots of traditional Hindu religion and culture. However, the inherent strength of the Hindu religion and culture survived this onslaught with the advent of Ramkrishna Paramhansa Dev (1836-1886). Said to be a man of little learning he preached in simple words the past glory of Hindu culture and religion. ‘... he came to the realisation that all faiths were like rivers which flowed eventually into one common ocean. He declared that there were as many paths to realization as there were ‘opinions’ or ‘philosophies’ (Bose, 1958). This was something of a regeneration of Hindu value system based on humanism and universal brotherhood. For the educated intellegentia of Bengal, it was adequate enough to match the western concepts of liberalism and humanism. And this was the value that was exactly championed by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) all over India and the world. As the principal disciple of Ramkrishna, he ‘like a valiant knight’, proclaimed the values
of the East as examplified in the life of his Master before the West. This rejuvenation of Hinduism and the use of ‘Dharma’ or Hindu religion was brilliantly used by him to rouse the youths of Bengal against British imperialism. It used to be said that ‘bomb in one hand and the gospels of Vivekananda in the other’, the Bengali youths submerged their identities in the stream of terrorism against the British. And the use of this ‘Dharma’ or the traditional Hindu religion in its new form and regeneration was equally brilliantly employed by Girish Chandra Ghosh who himself was a staunch disciple of Ramkrishna Paramhansa Dev and a close follower of Vivekananda. It is therefore not surprising that in this volatile era of ‘militant nationalism’ Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote historical and mythological plays. How much he was influenced by this religion, he himself expressed “... the national characteristics of India is its religion. Whatever be said about the welfare of this country, nothing can touch the soul of India. India is religious” (Ghosh, 1969). And again in the same article, elsewhere he emphatically observed”... Religion is in the heart and soul of Hindoosthan (India). If one has to write a drama touching this soul, he ought to depend on religion. No vicious foreign sword was ever able to destroy this religion implanted in the very soul of India” (Ghose, 1969). And in defence of his mythological plays based on Hindu myths and religion he was equally forthright and emphatic. Thus he observed “Every literary texts of quality of all the nations were written following the (national) mythological texts. Thus wrote Homer; Thus wrote Virgil; Milton wrote following the Christian mythology; and even Michale (Madhusudan Dutta) wrote in Bengali following the mythological texts” (Ghosh, 1969). And then he went on further in defence of his mythological plays”, those who hate mythologicals, because these are archaic, do not know the fact that whatever ideas there were in mythology, no national poet had ever dared to recreate such themes in their imaginations” (Ghosh, 1969). Withoug going into further details, it may now be said that in this period the rivival of Hindu religion under the influence of Ramkrishna Paramhansa Dev played a pivotal role in shaping the Bengali mind, the two glorious examples of which were Swami Vivekananda and Girish Chandra Ghosh. Both used religion in its new garb which a noted anthropologist defined as ‘Neo-Hinduism’ (Bose, 1958) agaisnt the so called ‘westernisation’ or ‘de-nationalisation’ preached skillfully alongwith Christianity by British Imperialism. (Dutta, 1983). While Vivekananda tried to rekindle the past glory and enthuse the social mind, Girish Chandra tried to uplift the cultural mind with the same use of ‘Dharma’. Both used this regenerated Hindu form of humanism as a tool against British rule. In fact the political movements of the period
such as the call for boycott of British goods and use of indigenous products, the anti-partition movement, the terrorist movement - all suggest a direct influence of this rekindled Hinduism. And the impact of this rejuvenation in the cultural field is equally perceptible. Elsewhere in this section, it has already been shown how in course of the anti-partition movement, a number of patriotic songs, poetry, journalistic pieces were written, sung and performed. In fact the contradiction in the social sphere albeit adherence to western education and culture in the public life and adherence to traditional values in the domestic life began to be resolved marginally in so far as the Bengali middle-class was concerned. The dichotomy in one's personal life remained, but the glorification of the past brought nearer home the concept of self-respect, the reflection of which could be seen in the rising national spirit. It would now be our endeavour to show these reflections and changes thereof in the dramatic performances of the period.

Professional theatres: 1905-1919

Between 1905-1919 in the enclosed list (Diagram A), there were 107 plays which were staged under the banner of commercial theatre. Following is the break-up of those plays: 14 socials; 8 mythologicals, 37 historicals; 24 satires; 11 musicals; 7 romances; 4 biographies and 1 each of political and allegory. In this connection it is to be noted that the year 1905 being common in both periods i.e. 1872-1905 and 1905-1919 there were 10 texts that had been common due to overlapping of the year 1905. From the break-up, it will be seen that the most dominant trend was the historical plays. Considering the volatileness of the period and the influence of the militant nationalism as well as terrorism, this was but natural. If one adds to this the concept of neo-Hinduism and the glorification of the past, one can not but marvel and add that it was what it should have been. It has already been highlighted in the chapter ‘Trends’ how much the spirit of nationalism and patriotism had been generated by these historical plays. Apart from that, two other points need to be stressed upon in this section. Firstly, in some of these plays the concept of Hindu-Muslim unity had been fervently preached. To this extent ‘Siraj-ud-Daula’ of Girish Chandra Ghosh needs special mention. Staged on 9th September, 1905, on board the play house Minerva, it gave a clarion call for Hindu-Musalman unity against the English merchants who were invading Bengal. How much important was this call for unity amongst the Hindus and Muslims of the country in relation to National freedom struggle would be understood by the fact that "... 16th October (1905), when the partition was made effective ... was called a day of national mourning. There was a general hartal (strike). People fasted..."
and went bare-foot to take a bath in the Ganga (the river Ganges) shouting Bande Matram (hail the motherland) and singing patriotic songs. Hindus and Muslims tied ‘Rakhi’ (a symbol of brotherhood) to one another’s wrists as a symbol of the fraternity of all Bengalis” (Chandra et al, 1972). In terms of social change the realisation and need for communal harmony and a call to achieve that was extraordinary as well as visionery. “The possibility of politics of Bengal which in later days took a vicious turn towards communal politics by the joint conspiracy of selfish politicians and British imperialism was noticed much earlier by Girish (Chandra Ghosh) and his alikes. And through theatre, they directly launched a propaganda against it. Girish (Chandra Ghosh), thus wanted the Hindu and Muslims to be involved in a war against the imperialists because (he believed) war was the highest unifying force. Underneath the dialogues of Siraj, we discover Girish (Chandra Ghosh) as an active propagator and not as an ego-centric artist who kept himself aloof on an imaginary roof-top of dream” (Dutta, 1983).

The tradition and goal that was set by Girish Chandra Ghosh in his historical plays become exemplary for the later generation of playwrights, though the quality of writing was not always as high as that of Girish Chandra Ghosh. The influence of the play can be gauged by the fact that it was proscribed by the British administration in 1911 (Bhattacharyya, Roy et al, 1991). Apart from Hindu-Muslim unity, a second aspect which needs to be highlighted is the exposition of the ruthless economic plunder of the country by British imperialism in the name of commerce. Such a subject was absolutely uncommon for theatre, but again it was Girish Chandra Ghosh who was a pioneer in this field. In his ‘Mir Kasim’ (1906), we find a wholesome picture of this British plunder almost in every line. A noted critic, particularly of this play, has thus remarked, “... It is absolutely sensational that at a time like 1906 in the professional theatre, a play was staged which analysed history from an economic angle and did not consider patriotism to be a vague sentiment; rather it (patriotism) was seen in association with economic relations along with the survival of the Bengali (s)” (Dutta, 1983). It must have had a profound influence upon the contemporary social opinion, for just like ‘Siraj-ud-Daula’ it was also proscribed in 1911 by the British government (Dutta, 1983).

Due to paucity of space, we refrain from further detailed study of the historicals in this period. Suffice it to say that these plays, in the period under consideration, had amply fulfilled the twin objectives of rousing national spirit as well as patriotism. In course of doing so they had taken recourse to the historical characters who fought against tyranny, oppression and
humiliation. Many of these characters failed in their mission, but inspite of their failure and tragic end, the dramatists of the period glorified their battles to remind the audience of a glorious past. The objective thus was to rekindle the national pride. Thus it may be assumed that these historicals fulfilled the concept of self-respect admirably. Apart from the historicals, satire and farces occupy a major position in this period just like the previous one. The implication and influence of these has been amply discussed in the chapter titled ‘Trends’. However, outputwise though there were a considerable number of farces, socially speaking these were very insignificant and appear to be under no influence of economic and political struggles of the period. Even the two Tagore farces, namely ‘Goray-Galad’ (1910) and ‘Bini Paiser Bhoj’ (1912) were enable to impress. Only Girish Chandra Ghosh’s ‘Jaisa Ki Taisa’ (1907), which was an adaptation of Moliere’s (1622-1673) ‘L' Amour Medicin’ and Amritlal Basu’s, ‘Khasdakhal’ (1911) could lay claim to popularity. Incidentally it was Gerasim Lebedoff (1749-1817) who first retranslated the fore-mentioned Moliere play from English to Bengali although it was not staged (Bhattacharyya, Roy et al, 1991).

In comparison to the previous period i.e. 1872-1905 it would be seen that the number of mythologicals, socials and musicals have gone down considerably in number in the period under consideration. It may be due to the fact that the volatile political situation which shook the Bengali middle-class considerably demanded some direct-action-packed dramas. The historical themes fitted admirably to this situation. It is probably from this consideration, Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote such socials as ‘Balidan’ (1905) and ‘Shasti-ki-Shanti’ (1908). Both dealt with middle-class social problems. And in the same vein he wrote ‘Shankaracharyya’ (1910), a biography of an ancient Hindu philosopher, who interpreted the traditional Hindu scriptures. Girish Chandra Ghosh, through this biography, forcefully propagated the ideas of Swami Vivekananda. Though the mythologicals had come down considerably in this period, the adherence to Indian culture and tradition remained unchanged in this period also. The reason behind this had been discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Musicals of this period had followed the same tradition that was followed in the earlier period. The notable change and addition in this period was the staging of an allegory ‘Dada-O-Didi’ (1909). Written by Khirodeprasad Vidyabinode (1864-1927), it bantered the British and enjoyed a tremendous popularity. The play was banned in 1911 by the British administration along with three of the historical plays of Girish Chandra Ghosh in the same year.
We now come to the close of this period with one important observation. In the dramatic references above, it would be seen that most of the plays referred to were written by Girish Chandra Ghosh. This has been deliberately done because of the fact that till his death in 1912, Girish Chandra was the leading playwright of the day. And in his writings, one may find a keen reflection of the period between 1888 to 1912. Whether it was politics, economics or societal, Girish Chandra had a profound understanding of the problems of his period. His Bengali prose-writings bear ample testimony to that. In a sense he was a social marker who set a tradition that was followed by later generation of producers of Bengali theatre.

The next phase in the present scheme is the period between 1920-1947. Gandhiji’s entry into the arena of Indian politics in 1919 has already been indicated. Thereafter till independence in 1947, by and large, the protest movements and struggle for freedom were under the guidance of this man who acquired the stature of a supreme national leader. For the sake of better analysis and precision the period may therefore be compartmentalised into three sub-section, namely (a) 1920-1930. (b) 1931-1940; (c) 1941-1947-50.

Age of Gandhi : 1920-1930

The period between 1920-1930 witnessed two new forms of struggle introduced by Mahatma Gandhi in the body politic of India. The first was a ‘non-violent, non-cooperation movement’ and the second was a ‘civil dis-obedience movement’. Both had significant relevance in so far as the Bengali social fabric and urban Calcutta were concerned. The non-cooperation movement was primarily launched on 1st August, 1920 against what was known as the ‘Khilafat Wrongs’. But it was subsequently adopted by the Indian National Congress as a fullfledged demand for ‘Swaraj’ or self-rule (Majumdar, 1969). The characteristics of this movement was a call for complete boycott of foreign cloth and the promotion of ‘Swadeshi’ or the indigenous. “But the most exciting items of this movement were the boycott of legislature, law-courts and educational institutions” (Majumdar, 1969). The call for boycott of law-courts and educational institutions initially had a tremendous impact in Bengal and particularly in Calcutta. Eminent lawyers such as Motilal Neheru and Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925) renounced their profession and their example was followed by a large number of lawyers. Here, again the boycott was more spectacular than effective for the number of boycotting lawyers ... was not large enough in proportion to their total strength ...” (Majumdar, 1969).
"Similarly the programme of boycotting schools and colleges evoked a tremendous response at the initial stage. The greatest upheaval took place in Calcutta on 12th January, 1921, as a large number of students left their colleges and gathered in a meeting addressed by Congress leaders like Chittaranjan Das and Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932)” (Majumdar, 1969). But the same source indicates that the movement for strike (boycott) practically died down both in Calcutta and Lahore. "... on the whole, the movement for the boycott of schools and colleges proved a failure” (Majumdar, 1969). This observation appears to be a bit underestimation because a sense of national duty and responsibility emerged in this period resulting in youths in large number joining the national stream of politics. Thus even amongst the Bengali youth a sizeable number abandoning their studies joined the freedom struggle as full time workers. Added to this was the boycott of the visit of Prince of Wales on 17th November 1921. There was hartal (General strike) all over India and was very successful in Calcutta (Majumdar, 1969). Thus it will be seen that the boycott movement which was a part of the non-cooperation movement had great success in the city of Calcutta particularly amongst the youths. Of course the British Government was not sitting idle either. On the face of the onslaught of the movement, they arrested all the prominent leaders of the Khilafat and Congress organisation present in Calcutta and “to overawe people the British solders were posted in different quarters of the city (Calcutta)” (Majumdar, 1969). In fact the British Government tried two things. On the one hand they tried to negotiate with the Indian National Congress and on the other hand let loose a reign of terror all over the country. Both failed and on the face of continued state violence inflicted upon the people, particularly the volunteers of the non-cooperation movement, Gandhiji sort of issued an ultimatum to the then Viceroy through a historic letter written on 1st February, 1922. In it was incorporated the intention of organising the second form of yet another novel movement, the mass civil disobedience movement (Majumdar, 1969). However this movement did not take place, not at least in 1922, due to an orgy of mob violence at a village called Chaurichawara in retaliation to police firing on a procession. As a consequence of this, Gandhiji cried halt to this movement, presumably in response to an urgent appeal by some prominent leaders. With the end of the first phase of non-cooperation movement, a political lull descended upon the country the veil of which was lifted not before 1928.

But in between this period, there were certain other incidents happenings and trends that ought to be mentioned specially. First of all the Hindu-Muslim amity that was witnessed in 1919 was soon found to be an artificial one and with the passage of time, the discord between
the two communities began to grow sharper day by day. The causes behind this though being of political, social and religious nature, the main reason was mutual distrust and suspicion. And one of the worst communal riots broke out in Calcutta in May 1923” (Majumdar, 1969). This was a negative aspect of the period which was a direct fall-out of political inaction. But side by side a positive aspect was the rousing consciousness of the workers and peasants in this period. It has already been mentioned elsewhere that the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 had a profound influence on the Bengali intelleligentia, some of whom from 1920 onwards began to organise movements following the footsteps of the ‘Bolsheviks’ in the newly established ‘Soviet Russia’ As a result of this the idea of socialism and communism began to spread all over India including Bengal. Trade union organisations began to be born. Many of which were essentially strike-committees. But the situation began to change rapidly by 1924. Though still weak, communist literatures were published and by way of communication gave birth to left-wing politics based on socialist ideas. “By 1926-27 socialist ideas were spreading widely. Working class and socialist organisation began to appear in the workers and peasants parties, which sprang up and united militant elements in the trade-union movement and left elements in the National Congress. The first Workers and Peasants Party was formed in Bengal in February 1926; ...” (Dutta, 1979). And in 1928, there were political strikes and demonstrations against the arrival of Simon Commission; the response of the working-class to these strikes were over-whelming in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The growing influence of socialist and communist ideas were distinctly visible even amongst the nationalist leaders of the freedom movement. The most important among them were Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) and Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-?) both of whom were general secretaries of Indian National Congress in 1927. “Jawaharlal Nehru even wrote a book on his Soviet visit and when he came back did a good deal to popularise Soviet ideals and achievements” (Mukherjee, 1962). As for Subhash Chandra, his inclination towards the radical ideas of the left had a far reaching effect on the Bengali minds, particularly the youths in the later periods of freedom struggle.

However, the rising influence of socialist and communist ideals reached its zenith in 1929, when the British Government arrested thirty-one communists and trade-unionists and took them to Meerut (Uttar Pradesh) to be tried on the charge of “having engaged in a conspiracy to deprive the King-Emperor of his sovereignty over India” (Overstreet et al. 1961). Known in history as the ‘Meerat Conspiracy Case’, it generated tremendous public interest and in defence of their action, whatever arguments these communist leaders made, had a profound influence
on the future course of action of the Bengali youth. Though small in number, there were as many as nine defendants who were Bengalis in the Meerat conspiracy case, out of a total of thirty-one defendants (Dutta, 1979).

Side by side with the rise of the working class movement and socialist/marxist ideals, the terrorist movement resurfaced first on the soils of Bengal in 1924 and then elsewhere in India. A series of terrorist activities occurred between the period 1928-1933. Thus “a considerable stir was created in the political circles by the murder of Mr. Saunders, an assistant superintendent of police, Lahore (1928)... throwing of bombs (by Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta) in the Assembly Hall at Delhi (1929), Lahore conspiracy case leading to a hunger strike and the martyrdom of Jatin Das (1929), the Chittagong Armoury Raid (led by Surya Sen) and fight at Jalalabad Hills (1930), hanging of Bhagat Singh and his two comrades (1931), and murder or attempted murder of a large number of officials, both Indians and Europeans” (Majumdar, 1969). That the terrorist movement in this period had a far-reaching influence on the national political movements would be seen in the later analysis of the period 1942-47. Suffice it to say that this movement brought into the forefront the central question of using force and violence in the form of ‘direct action’ as against the Gandhian concept of non-violence, non-cooperation and passive resistance (Satyagraha). For the present discourse, it is worthwhile to quote from an official report which was quoted verbatim by the forementioned source in the following manner: “To sum up, terrorism has its birth in Bengal and where it has shown its head in other provinces, it can almost invariably be traced to Bengali influences. It is at all events true to say that in no province but Bengal is there that widespread and deep-rooted terrorist mentality which is essential for its development” (Majumdar, 1969).

Coming back to the period under present consideration the years between 1928-30 were noteworthy in so far as the national politics was concerned. It has already been shown how against the arrival of Simon Commission in 1928, general strikes were observed all over the country. The success of these strikes and demonstrations gave a new impetus to the freedom struggle all over the country including Bengal. Throughout 1929 and 1930, the terrorist activities remained in the centre stage of politics for ‘national ardour and enthusiasm’. Noteworthy was the participation of a large number of women, young girls and young boys in this movement, particularly in Bengal. And on 12th March, 1930 Gandhiji began his famous Dandi march to break the infamous Salt law which hitherto prevented the Indians to prepare their own salt.
This was the beginning of the Civil disobedience movement which in a short while spread like a prairie fire all over the country. Thus in summing up the period i.e. 1920-30, it may be seen that on the positive side were the novel introduction of political struggles namely non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement, a strong cross current of militancy in the form of terrorism and the rising working-class and peasant movements with socialism/marxism as ideology. The more and more active participation of youths, workers, peasants and women in all these political and economic struggles was another notable feature of the period. But on the negative side, there was also the ever-increasing disharmony between the Hindus and the Muslims which was disturbing the political fabric of the country to a large extent. It is quite but natural that in all the above mentioned struggles and trends, Bengal and Bengalis took an active part. Though may be due to the inherent faith of the Bengali middle class on unorthodox English education, there was limited success in the boycott of legal professions and title denouncements and/or the boycott of schools and colleges based on western principle of education, the youth-participation and their sacrifices in movements of the period were amazing by any standard. It definitely indicates shift and change in the social out-look. It would now be our endeavour to see how far this social out-look of radicalism along with the concept of self sacrifice and commitment to a cause namely the freedom of the mother land, was reflected in the dramatic performances of the period.

Professional theatre: 1920-30

From the enclosed list (Diagram A) it would be seen that there were altogether 68 drama-texts that had been taken into account as representative of the period between 1920-30. Out of these, there were 9 socials, 14 mythologicals, 17 historicals, 9 satires, 7 musicals, 6 romances, 3 biographies and 1 each of political, socio-political and allegorical variety. It is therefore not difficult to conclude that the tradition of historicals and mythologicals continued even in this period. However, due to weak dramatic texts, the contents were not always as communicative to the target audience as was in the previous period. Elsewhere it has already been pointed out the degeneration that set in the professional stage after the demise of Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1912. But what was lacking in the writings, was admirably salvaged by the genius of Sisir Kumar Bhadury who joined the Bengali stage in 1921. In fact, this was the period which could be termed as 'Bhadury era.' His stage application, directorial acumen, detailing and superlative acting - all brought in a fresh whiff of modernity in the moribund Bengali professional stage.
Thus, with weak texts, deft editing and subtle interpretations, Sisir Bhadury could popularise historical plays like Alamgir (1921), Raghbir (1922) and Digbijoyee (1928) in a masterly fashion. Commensurate with the period’s volatileness, the messages in these plays were to fight back. But unlike the historicals of the previous period, the protagonists here were not always the ‘tragic heroes’ who lost, rather these were characters with inner contradiction, sometimes suffering from bewilderment and fallacy just like the political leaders of the period. At hindsight it now appears that Sisir Bhadury was projecting a period telescopically and objectively. And with the same vain he produced such mythologicals as Sita (1924), Naras-Narayan (1926) and Karagar (1931). In fact Manmatha Ray’s ‘Karagar’ was produced and directed by ‘Danibabu’, son of legendery Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1930. But the more authentic interpretation of the play was done by Sisir Bhadury in 1931. And that interpretation was so relevant and close to the political situation prevailing at the time that it was immediately banned by the British Government on 4th February 1931. Even in the biographical section he produced ‘Nadir Shah’ (1921), a controversial character, perhaps to highlight the Englishmen’s loot and plunder in a symbolic way. It would be justified to say that from a negative angle or rather from an opposite direction, Sisir Bhadury drew the attention of his audience into the true character of the period which concurrently witnessed the resurfacing of terrorism, the vacillation of the political leadership as well as the rise of communalism.

In so far as Bengali theatre was concerned this was therefore a period when modernisation both in form and substance as well as experimentation began to take place. New playwrights such as Manmatta Ray, and Sachindra Nath Sengupta began to write with much flair, the last named playwright’s historical play ‘Gairik Pataka’ (1929) or the life of the Maratha leader Shivaji was a thumping success. From the older school, Aparesh Chandra Mukherjee must also be mentioned for his prolific pen as well as gorgeous stage scenes and stage-tricks (Mukherjee, 1991). He should also be remembered as a pioneer in theatre recording on gramophone discs, (Mukherjee, 1991). This was in fact a novel way of using a new communication media by which Bengali theatre in the audio-form began to be popularised.

But the most remarkable experimentation and modernisation of the period was the adoption of Tagore texts. Out a total of 68 plays 10 were from the writings of the great poet. Elsewhere in the chapter ‘Trends’ we have already discussed the success and failrues of the Tagore plays in the pre-Independent period. However, in the period under consideration, it was again Sisir
Bhadury who discovered Tagore anew and began to assertively produce these plays. But his success in producing the Tagore plays was limited. But an allegorical play like 'Bisarjan' in 1924 must be admitted to be a courageous as well as ambitious act on the part of Sisir Kumar as a producer and director. Among the 10 texts of Tagore, 3 were socials, 1 historical, 3 satires and 1 each of allegory, romance and musical which by any standard would indicate variety. Due to space restriction and none too significant for the present purpose, the rest of the trends in this period are not discussed.

**Freedom struggle: 1931-1940**

The next phase to be considered is the period between 1931-1940. As had already been stated, the civil-disobedience movement spread all over the country like a prairie fire. It was temporarily discontinued when the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed on 5th March, 1931. But thereafter it again gained momentum due to the ruthless repression let loose by the administration throughout 1932. The situation continued even in 1933. A special mention in this context must be made of Calcutta, where on 31st March, 1933, in spite of the ban inflicted upon congress organisation, a thousand delegates met at the annual session of the Indian National Congress. There was repeated lathi-charge on the delegates by the police, but the session was held under the presidency of Mrs. J.M. Sengupta (Majumdar, 1969). However, inexplicably, even at the height of the mass civil dis-obedience movement, it was called off at least for six weeks and then for six months in 1933 and then abandoned totally in 1934 obedience to Gandhiji’s request. Though puzzled and demoralised by this sudden abject surrender, the Indian masses, particularly the workers, the peasant, and youths were now offered the alternative option for continuing their struggle against the British rule and repression from other quarters. In the previous section it has already been pointed out the growth of socialist/marxists ideas in the arena of Indian politics. In the ensuing period, i.e. 1935-1939, the influence of socialist ideology particularly in its extreme form, communism began to assert itself more vigourously in Bombay and Bengal. As a result of this approach, “there emerged a centralised All India Peasants Organisation, called the All India Kishan Sabha, ... All India Student’s Federation... All India Trade Union Congress... under a joint leadership representing all shades of opinion, both right and left” (Majumdar, 1969). But not only this rising unity of the workers-peasants-youths were shaped mainly through socialist ideology, even inside the Congress party, the presence of this new creed of socialism could be felt. Thus was born the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934 as
a party within the party and the notable radical leaders were Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. But the main thrust came from the Communist party of India which though small in number began to influence a large section of students and factory workers. That the British Government did take these influences seriously was proved by the fact that the Communist Party was banned in July 1934, all over the country (Mukherjee, 1962). Not only the party, but its trade-union organisation "the Red Flag Trade Union Federation" was also banned in late 1934" (Chandra et al, 1972). But inspite of the prolonged under-trial detention and drastic sentences awarded in the Meerut conspiracy case which ended in 1933 and followed up by the above bans inflicted upon them, the communist influence and ideology could not be checked. One of the reason behind this was perhaps the loss of faith on revolutionary terrorism based on individual terror which no longer appealed the students and youth particularly in Bengal. The other reason was the absence of any centralised political struggle such as the civil dis-obedience movement. The rise of working-class movement in this period was phenomenon. "The sweep and intensity of the wave could be seen from this that while in 1933 there were 146 strikes ... in 1934 there were 159 strikes. In 1937, the number of strikes reached 379 or the highest number since 1921, ... In 45 per cent of the strikes, the workers were successful in securing concession" (Dutta, 1979). What was noticable in these strike movements was the rising militancy of the working class inspite of Government repression and brutality on the whole. But in a sense the social condition also was gradually becoming favourable. As per the provision of the India Government Act, 1935, general elections were held for limited state-Power in 1936-37. The Indian National Congress had absolute majority in five provinces and was the single largest party in four others. Thus there were ministries whose members were from different Indian political parties. These ministries were in a sense favourable to the mass movements and though banned, the communist party could act clandestinely in a less restricted breathing space. It naturally led to the forementioned strike-wave, most of which had radical leaders both from socialist and communist blocks. And not only in the trade union front, the communists did a good job amongst the peasantry also. Thus "the long-suffering Kishans (cultivetors) ... organised themselves in huge parties, and, unfurling the red flag of hammer and sickle, marched hundreds of miles through villages, uttering communist slogans and creating new energy and enthusiasm" (Majumdar, 1969).

We now come to the concluding part of this period i.e. 1931-1940. The year 1938, saw the unanimous election of Subhash Chandra Bose, as President of Indian National Congress.
But his election, "was a distinct pointer to the growing influence of the younger section whose socialist creed was not in tune with the orthodox Congress views of which Gandhi was the most typical representative" (Majumdar, 1969). In fact this contradiction between the right and the left inside the congress came to a bitter end when Subhash Chandra Bose sought a re-election as Congress President in 1939. But as has been pointed out in the opening section of this chapter, the period between 1920-1948 being the 'Gandhian Era', no decision could have been taken as final, let alone an alternative path of transparent democracy. Therefore inspite of being re-elected as Congress-President, Subhash Chandra had to resign and he was unceremoniously "disqualified as President of the Bengal provincial Congress Committee and to be a member of any elective Congress Committee for three years as from August 1939" (Majumdar, 1969). Subhash Chandra Bose immediately retaliated by forming a party of his own and called it the "Forward Block". "with a view to rallying the entire left wing under one banner" (Majumdar, 1969). The rest of Subhash Chandra Bose's efforts to organise a national army after fleeing from this country and the role of that Indian National Army fighting the British Imperialism for the freedom of the mother land had become a legend in the annals of Indian History which might not be recounted here in details. Suffice it say that in Bengal, the sympathies towards Subhash Chandra Bose and his ignominious ouster from the main stream of Indian politics had a resounding effect on the youths and Bengali educated people alike.

In summation of the period, it may now be said that main ideological thrust was the rise of socialism as a new creed. Particularly in Bengal, the failure of revolutionary terrorism in the individual level, gave birth to more radical ideas such as communism. The working class, the peasantry and the youth thus began to be more militantly assertive and inspite of bans and restrictions imposed upon the communist party and its frontal organisations, the ideology of class struggle, armed revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat-the three cardinal principles of marxism, competed equally with the principles of Gandhian non-violence. That the hypothesis was more pronounced in the subsequent period, i.e. 1940-1950 would be seen in the next section. But before such an endeavour is undertaken it would be worthwhile to go through the dramatic performances of the period between 1931-1940 quickly.

**Professional theatre: 1931-1940**

From the enclosed list (Diagram A) it will be seen that there were altogether 64 plays that have been taken into consideration as representative of the period between 1931-1940. In
The number of plays written and performed in this period might have been greater (Gupta, 1983). But the trends reflected were more or less the same. Thus there were 28 socials, 14 mythologicals, 7 historicals, 3 each of biographies, detectives and musicals and then 2 each of satires and romances and 1 each of political and socio-political plays. In comparison to the two earlier periods, it will be seen that the social plays are on the ascent and historicals and farces/satires are in sharp decline. Surprisingly mythological plays have more or less retained their position. All other trends have gone down considerably or remained as it was in the previous periods. The only new inclusion in the period was the crime and detective plays. From the aspect of form it would be seen that in the social section 13 plays were dramatised from the novels of such established male and female writers as Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Anurupa Debi and Prabhabati Debi Saraswati respectively. Though this was nothing new at the early stages of Bengali theatre, but resurfacing of this tendency in this period might indicate lack of original writing of dramatic texts. Another noteworthy feature of the social plays was the non-reflection of current political ideas in these texts. From the social point of view Tagore’s ‘Gora’ (1936) and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s ‘Pather Dabi’ (1939) deserve special mention. While the former dealt with the contradiction between traditional Hindu-religion, Brahmoism and western education, the latter dealt with the subject of terrorism which already had passed its prime. But inspite of the lack of a direct political influence on these plays, particularly the rising socialist ideology, more down to earth realism could be found in these texts in relation to Bengali domestic life and the women. As many as 14 plays or 50% of the social texts dealt with women’s plight and problems which might indicate the growing consciousness amongst the producer/directors of the period about their social surroundings. It may be noted that there were more and more women participation in the political struggles of the period. Though still confined within the precinct of middle-class/lower middle-class syndrome, a change is visibly perceptible in the realm of social awareness in so far as women were concerned. This of course was more pronounced in the literary works of the period and perhaps that was the reason behind the conversion of such works into dramatic texts. Thus the new socialist ideas which championed the causes of the down-trodden including the women might have been no less responsible for subject selection, though albeit indirectly. Incidentally from the middle of the thirties there were a number of literary pieces in the form of poetry, fiction as well as prose writings in Bengali and other Indian languages which might be termed as ‘progressive writings’ and such organisations as All India Progressive Writers Association (1936) and ‘The Youth Cultural Institute (1940-42) were established to this effect.
Thus there was a distinct possibility of alternate culture in which many young radical writers of Bengal felt interested. One such example was the rebel poet Kaji Najrul Islam (1899-1964) who was a staunch radical and was closely associated with the Bengali professional stage. In fact Najrul wrote innumerable theatre songs and tuned them himself. His famous opera ‘Aleya’, a musical play was staged on 19th December 1931 and was directed by Satu Sen, the technocrat who returned from America with many novel ideas regarding stagecraft and lighting. It was due to his technical innovation, the first revolving stage of Calcutta was built on board the Rangmahal theatre on 17th April, 1933. He also introduced a new technique of stage-lighting. (Gupta, 1983). Another noted musical play of the period was Rajnati (1937), directed by Madhu Bose, a later day renowned film-director well known for his penchant for music. Thus in the realm of theatrical music, a lot of traditionalism was broken by these new entrants. Najrul also was the musical director of such mythologicals as ‘Sabriti’ (1931) and ‘Sati’ (1937). Both plays were written by Manmatha Roy of ‘Karagar’ fame.

However, content-wise neither the mythologicals nor the historicals of the period could lay claim to any exceptionality. Even a genius like Sisir Kumar Bhadury could not check the rising growth of degeneration that set in the Bengali professional theatre, not withstanding the technological innovation and modern techniques of music rendition. True, there was a rising group of playwrights, directors, actor-actresses, music directors, in short people who were totally involved in theatre-making. But what was eluding them was the stark reality of social conflicts that was brewing around. Exceptions were there like the playwright Manmatha Ray or the poet Najrul. But the demand of the day was a new kind of theatre, a theatre that would not hesitate to depict social reality courageously and that too not in the traditional form of social, historical and mythological plays. And the situation became more complicated with the break of Second World War in 1939.

Struggle for Independence : 1941-1950

The next period in the present scheme, 1941-50 was the most traumatic phase in the history of Indian freedom struggle. The major happenings of the period have already been highlighted in the chapter titled ‘backdrop’ though in a brief manner. For transparency of analysis a little more elaboration is required. This was a period at the beginning of which second world war was in full swing. The major political struggle was the ‘Quit India’ movement launched by
the Indian National Congress in 1942. The backdrop of this movement was the failure of Crisp Mission which arrived in India on 23rd March, 1942 to negotiate with the Indian leaders for settlement of the Indian problem which the British Government was forced to review after the fall of Singapore and Rangoon earlier in the year. However, the Crisp Mission failed and Sir Stafford Crips left India on 10th April, 1942 (Majumdar, 1969). One need not go into the details of this failure for it is widely known in the general history. But suffice it say that the main reason behind the failure of this negotiations in brief was firstly the general suspicion and mistrust against any British offer couched in diplomatic language. Secondly the Crisp proposals contained a clause that would have surely led to a partition of India, which to every shade of Indian political opinion was unacceptable except the Muslim League. And thirdly the ongoing war was a battle for the imperialist survival of Britain, and in such a war India was unnecessarily dragged in without any fault of hers.

With the failure of the Crisp Mission, Indian National Congress under the resumed leadership of Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch a mass-movement all over the India. This was the ‘Quit India’ movement, the main slogan of which was ‘Karange Ye Morenge’ (Do or Die). After the Congress passed its ‘Quite India Resolution’ at Bombay on 8th August 1942, Gandhiji declared “Every one of you from this moment onwards consider yourself a free man or woman and act as if you are free ... I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom. We shall do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt” (Majumdar, 1969). Though the declared policy of this mass movement was non-violence, but soon it took the shape of a very violent movement. One of this reason might have been the large scale arrest of all the eminent leaders of the Indian National Congress, as well as everyone who mattered in the Congress Organisation within a week of the commencement of this movement. Thus from August 1942 to February 1943, India witnessed a tremendous spontaneous mass upsurge which did not hesitate to take violent recourse in the form of attacking railways, post-offices, police-stations, government buildings etc. In this unequal battle, the British Government also took recourse to indiscriminate lathi charge, police firing, machine-gunning, and dropping of bombs from air on practically unarmed masses. Though the movement was almost leaderless, an interesting sidelight was the underground leadership provided by Congress socialist Party and led by Sri Jayprakash Narayan. It must be remembered that Sri Narayan was a prominent leader, who though admired by Gandhiji, was a staunch socialist. And therefore the creed of violence that had been witnessed in the ‘Quit India’ movement was neither surprising nor
accidental. Rather it proved the fact that terrorism and militancy was always "an active political force running parallel to the non-violent policy of Gandhi" (Majumdar, 1969).

The violent outburst of the masses particularly the youths and the students took a concrete shape in Calcutta where "Schools and Colleges were abstained.... roads and streets were blocked with logs of wood and bullock carts etc; and tram cars were burnt ... However, it was in Midnapur that the situation took a serious turn... and there was a deliberate challenge thrown out to the government ... -A parallel government, called 'Tamaralipta-Jatiya-Sarkar (Tamluk National Government) was set up on 17th December, 1942... (This) was dissolved on 1st September, 1944 due to Gandhi’s statement regarding the nature of the movement published after his release” (Majumdar, 1969).

The ‘Quit India’ movement that operated in the open was practically crushed by the British within two months of its inception. And even the underground operation led by the socialists was over by 1943. In fact this signalled the end of struggle for freedom within India, and the independence she achieved was more by constitutional means and external pressure including armed battle fought outside the frontier of India. This struggle was momentously fought by Subhash Chandra Bose, popularly known in Bengal and abroad as ‘Netaji’. The role of the ‘Azad Hind Fauj’ (Indian National Army) and its patriotic fighting for free India made a stirring impression on the Indian population as a whole and the Bengali middle-class in general. Thus though the Indian National Army lost the battle, its fighting spirit, supreme sacrifice and patriotism became a household legend in the province of Bengal. But apart from emotional outbursts, the role of INA and its C-in-C, Subhash Chandra Bose gave an awakening jolt to the British perception in so far as the Indian reality was concerned. “The universal sympathy expressed all over India for the I.N.A. officers, when they were tried for treason in the Red Fort at Delhi, gave a rude shock to the British, inasmuch as it clearly demonstrated that Indians of all shades of opinion put a premium on the disloyalty of the Indian troops to their foreign masters and looked upon it as a true and welcome sign of nationalism. ...” (Majumdar, 1969). The trial of this I.N.A. officers had a special connotation for the city of Calcutta. “For three consecutive days in November 1945, there was no existence of the Government of His Britanic Majesty... It was to demand the release of these prisoners that on November 19th Calcutta Students staged a demonstration and were marching peacably enough towards Dalhousie Square (present Binoy-Badal-Dinesh Bagh), an area which to bureaucratic eyes was sacrosanct on
account of the proximity of Government House and the Secretariat buildings. They were stopped on the way by armed police; they squatted on the street, determined to establish the elementary civic right of taking a peaceful procession to wherever it was intended. The agents of law and order however, had no patience for that sort of thing and as the coroner’s verdict showed, showered bullets on the crowd even without real provocation. That was the signal for a massive upsurge of the people for two successive days, all Calcutta was on the streets, demonstrating against the power that be and there were tussles, resulting in many casualties “ (Mukherjee, 1962). This proves the hypothesis that the Bengali mind, irrespective of the international nuances regarding imperialism and fascism, stuck to the concept of individual heroism and armed rebellion in contrast to the Gandhian principles of non-violence. But before embarking upon further analysis of the period, an appraisal of the marxian ideology and the role of Communist Party needs to be attempted to.

At the break of the Second World War in 1939, the Communist ideologues in India and abroad termed this war as an imperislist war. “But as soon as Germany declared war against Russia on 22nd June, 1941: (Majumdar, 1969), the situation changed. To the communists and their fellow-travellers, the war became a people’s war. Literary it meant a whole-hearted support to the British war-efforts to defeat the fascist forces of the axis-power. Thus it would be seen that a difference of perception in relation to the characters of Second World War cropped up between the leaders of INC and the Communist Party of India. This had a direct relevance in so far as the Indian Freedom struggle was concerned. While the Indian National Congress was rather reluctant to involve the Indian people in the war efforts of the British until the question of Indian freedom was resolved, the communists wanted to cooperate with that very war-efforts following their international line of defeating the fascist forces all-over the world. This led to the lifting of ban imposed on the Communist Party in July, 1942 and the Government began releasing the communists from jail (Overstreet, et al., 1960). It permitted the CPI to progress rapidly in the organisational fronts. Two of these organisations and their activities were very important for the growth and spread of marxist cultural activities in the province of Bengal. Mention has already been made of the All India Progressive Writers Association which held its first conference in Lucknow in 1935. It’s “second national conference took place in Calcutta in December 1938 with Rabindranath Tagore presiding. But shortly thereafter, the organisation disintegrated. The movement was resusciated in Bengal in April 1942 when the ‘Anti Fascist Writers and Artists Union’ was formed at a meeting presided over by Ramananda
Chatterjee, doyen of Indian journalism” (Overstreet et al, 1960). This was an important organisation in so far as Bengal was concerned. Many noted writers-poets-essayist either joined or had indirect sympathy towards this anti-fascist organisation. It helped in a lot to spread marxist/socialist ideas amongst the Bengali middle-class intelligentsia as well as the masses. Very many songs, poems, essays, polemics etc were written under the banner of this organisation. The second important organisation of this nature was the Indian People’s Theatre Organisation or in short the IPTA which was organised in Bombay in May, 1943. (Overstreet et al, 1960). It had travelling drama and dance troupes who performed all-over India with marxian and national themes. The IPTA branch of Bengal had under its banner all the young prominent playwrights, directors and theatre actors and actresses of the day who pioneered an alternative theatre movement aimed towards the upliftment of the toiling masses. Under its active guidence were produced such alternate amateur theatres as “Bijon Bhattacharyya’s ‘Agun’ and Benoy Ghosh’s ‘Laboratory’ (Both 1943), Manoranjan Bhattacharyya’s ‘Homoeopathy and again Bijon Bhattacharyya’s ‘Jabanbandi’ and ‘Nabanna’ (all in 1944)” (Majumdar, 1988). Both organisation were alive to the stark social reality of the period. Thus inspite of the failure of the ‘Quit India’ movement of 1942, a sizeable section of the Bengali middle class intelligentsia as well as the workers-peasants-students of the society could take recourse to a parallel ideology preaching fascism’s defeat and peace. However, the Bengali society in itself was reeling under the impact of war and on top of it occurred the viscious famine of 1943. The nature and consequences of this famine was the subject matter of many progressive writers and dramatists of the period. Coming back to the main events of the period, the second world war ended in August 1945. Between 1942 and 1945, there was scarcely any political activity in the country save an except the trial of INA officers in 1945 mentioned earlier and the Naval Mutiny in February 1946. Both had tremendous repercussions in Calcutta (Majumdar, 1969). But the worse situation occurred in Calcutta in August 1946. A communal riot broke out between Muslims and Hindus that lasted for three days. The holocaust of communalism thus overshadowed the impending expectation of Indian freedom which was ultimately granted to her by the British rulers on 15th August, 1947. But the price of that freedom was the partition of the country. The Indian sub-continent was divided into two parts, namely India and Pakistan. The immediate fallout of this partition was the influx of refugees which particularly for a province like Bengal became almost unbearoble. A large portion of the province with majority Muslim population was given away to Pakistan and the province of Bengal in a truncated form began to be known as West Bengal. But the most unfortunate event of this partition was the sharp rise of
communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims on either side of the border. As a result of this Bengal and Punjab - the two important provinces that were divided - had to undergo insufferable loss of men and property. The influx of Hindu refugee was so great in West Bengal that it practically shattered its economy. The overpopulated Calcutta metropolis began to burst at the seams. The exact impact of this refugee influx could be fully assessed only in later years. Here only in passing it may be said that the massive bulk of Hindu population which entered West Bengal were practically homeless and destitutes. The rehabilitation of such mammoth population posed innumerable problems and obstacles in West Bengal for decades to follow. It singularly altered the demography of the state giving rise to social havoc and tensions. The partition of Bengal thus created a negative attitude towards the central Congress policy and as a result of which leftist activities in the trade-union and kishan fronts as well as in the sphere of culture began to pick up. In fact at the end of war in 1945, the communists became an isolated force in the country apart from the two regions, i.e. Bengal and Andhra including Telegana. Two important kishan movements in this period need special mention. One was the Tebhaga movement that began in 1946 in Bengal for the peasants demand of larger share of crops and lasted up to the fall of 1947 when it was called off to give the new (Congress) Government “an opportunity of fulfilling the promises through legal channels” (Overstreet, et al 1960). It gained a great momentum and many ballads, poems and non-conventional dramas were written in the Bengali radical literature relevant to the present study. Equally important was the Telengana movement which was launched by Teleguspeaking peasants of the Telengana region which was then under the princly-state of Hyderabad ruled by the Nizam. The leadership of this movement was also in the hands of the communist party. “By mid-1946 this movement assumed the proportions of active revolt in scattered localities, as armed volunteer village brigades began to form for resistance against the authority of the Nizam” (Overstreet et al, 1960). It ultimately took the shape of intensive armed battle which was put down by the Indian Army in 1948. However, the impact of these two peasant struggles on the cultural milieu of Bengal was tremendous. In fact such militancy provoked the central Government to act against the communists and presumably at their behest” on 26th March (1948), under the Public Safety Act, the Government of West Bengal banned the Party (Communist Party) in the state of West Bengal ... During the following week the party was declared illegal in Mysore, Indore, Bhopal and Chandernagore... The official newspapers of the West Bengal, Kerala and Andhra party committees were suppressed” (Overstreet et al 1960). Thus it would be seen that a new contradiction began to arise in which on one side was the central congress leadership enjoying
the newly acquired central power and ruling the country according to their programme and plan and on the other side was the rising force of communist party who championed the causes of the toiling masses following the guiding principles of their international line. This contradiction began to assume greater and greater significance throughout the post-Independence period as would be seen in the later developments of the Indian society including West Bengal.

Thus in the period between 1941-50, there were many twists and turns' in the social fabric of Bengal. And Independence though rejoiced, could not fulfill the desired requirement of welfare. There were discontent, anger, frustration and very little hope. One has to evaluate the dramatic performances of the period under this background. And also to be noted that an alternative theatre began to take shape in this period whose main thrust was the portrayal of the actual social life prevailing in the society. To the left radicals this became a bounden duty in consonance to their faithfulness towards the ideals of socialism and marxism. But many of their efforts were all the more significant because in these efforts were reflected the social reality which were not unnecessarily coloured by an adherence to any dogmatic ideology. The professional theatre hopelessly failed to assess the social reality which notwithstanding the newly acquired Independence, was full of misery, pain, hunger and deprevation. The veracity of the above hypothesis may now be tested by going through the dramatic performances between the period 1941-1950.

**Professional theatre : 1941-1950**

During the forementioned period, there were 39 drama-texts which have been taken into consideration under the aegis of professional theatre and another 7 from the newly emerging group theatre movement (Diagram :A). Though the term group theatre was a later day nomenclature but in reality with the formal establishment of the group "Bohurupee" on 1st May 1950, the group theatre movement began. But before one embarks upon a detailed analysis of this alternate theatre-stream, a close examination of the traditional Bengali theatre in the professional stage is necessary.

Out of the 39 productions on board the professional stage, there were 14 socials, three mythologicals, 11 historicals, 2 each of political, socio-political and satire, 1 romance and 4 biographies. The texts consulted were of course representative and cross-sectional, the actual
number might have been larger (Gupta, 1983). The period shows the dominance of socials, followed by historicals as trend setters. A quick glance through the socials would reveal the fact that there were 5 novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and 4 novels of Tarashankar Bandhopadhyay which were dramatised. No doubt both these writers were powerful storytellers. But the themes in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's writing were in general the orthodox Bengali middle-class families, suffering from the urban rural/feudal syndrome which in no way reflected the plight of the down-trodden masses suffering from the onslaughts of Second World War. Rather in many ways his writings reflected a kind of tragic helplessness, an inner contradiction of Bengali conservatism towards man and woman relation and many orthodox superstitions and taboos still followed by joint-families. Out of his five novels converted into drama in this period three deserve a special mention in this regard and these were 'Debdas' (1943), Bipradas (1943) and Kashinath (1947). And in Baikunther Will (1944) he touched the complex Hindu property rights and its effects in a semi-rural set up. In comparison, Tarashankar Bandhyopadhyay appear to be more sensitive to the rural society and its feudal contradictions. Specially his two novels, dramatised in this period, namely 'Kalindi' (1941) and 'Dui Purush' (1942) dealt with the crumbling feudal order and these were more closer to the social reality. But in no way, the productions reflected the rising mood of anger, frustration and despair of the period. This mood, however, was reflected to some extent in the historicals and biographis of the period though in an insignificant manner. And of the two politicals, only 'Delhi Chalo' (1949) had a relevance since the title was an exact replica of the slogan introduced by Subhash Chandra Bose to enthuse the 'Ajad Hind Fauj' (Indian National Army) at its very inception. An interesting sidelight of the period was staging of the socio-political play, "Dukhir Iman" (1946). This play, as it has already been shown elsewhere, was more in tune with the 'group theatre' movement though staged on board the commercial theatre. The play was a genuine reflection of the period and in professional theatre it was more of an exception than the rule. The rest of the professional theatre production in the period were none too worthwhile for the present purpose.

**Group theatre: 1941-1950**

Though outputwise very small in number, the contribution of the group theatre circuit, in this period, socially was very significant. Out of 7 dramatic performances taken note of, 5 were socio-politicals and two were socials. Of the socio-politicals 'Nabanna' (1944 and 1948) was the pioneer in the field and the play and its performances had already been discussed in the
chapter titled ‘Backdrop’. The other 4 in this section, namely ‘Bastuvita’ (1947), ‘Taranga’ (1947), ‘Chhenra Taar’ (1950) and ‘Moquabilla’ (1950) followed the footsteps of ‘Nabanna’ and depicted a true picture of the period. Of these productions ‘Chhenra Taar’ (1950), deserves a special mention. Set in an underdeveloped semi-tribal peasant community in the remotest corner of North Bengal, a muslim couple was the central character of this play. It’s novelty was its stark reality and the struggle for survival in the background of famine and war. In itself uncommon for its character selection and language, for it had its dialogue set in a dialect which was absolutely unusual in the prevailing theatre set-up, ‘Chhenra Taar’ exposed that poverty and exploitation of the peasant did not depend on his religion. Such exploitation was equal and ruthless irrespective of the peasant being Hindu or Muslim. Though tragic in the end, the play was a bold attempt both in content and form. In fact the tradition that was set by ‘Nabanna’ i.e. a typical social problem, simplicity in production, a collective effort and a minute detailing of the characters were the hall-mark of all the productions in this period, be it social or socio-political. Of the dramatists, Tulsi Lahiri and Digin Bandhopadhayay were already established names in the professional theatre. But the interesting fact to note was their re-orientation to this alternative form of theatre which neither had the resources nor had the repertoire of experienced actors-actresses as well as director. But the ideological thrust provided by the radical philosophy of social justice goaded these efforts to attain remarkable success. Mention must be made of young Shambu Mitra, who directed the two socials, namely ‘Pathik’ (1949), and ‘Ulukhagra’ (1950) the lastnamed being also authored by him and the 2 socio-politicals, namely ‘Nabanna’ (1944) and ‘Chhenra Taar’ (1950). Another noteworthy point was the facet that apart from ‘Nabanna’, the other plays were performed on different make-shift stages inspite of very many odds. Thus the concept of traditional theatre making was completely broken on both grounds of form and content. This uncommonness and novelty stood its ground firmly because it believed in the concept of theatre being a tool of social change. Just like a dedicated political worker of the twenties, thirties or the forties, it shouldered the mantle of social responsibility and inspite of political bickerings and bitter schisms, stuck to its role of raising social problems without being didactic. The pre-independence period may now be concluded with the following observations. The period between 1870-1920 saw an early rise of nationalism, hindu revivalism and terrorism. As an off-shoot of which, in the dramatic field, a number of historicals and mythologicals were produced. On the social fabric, the concept of ‘unorthodox english education’ took a deep-root in the Bengali middle-class mind for a professional foot-hold in the employment market. The personalities in the Bengali theatre world were no exceptions to that. Side-by side
the concept of joint-families were also followed in the metropolis of Calcutta in spite of the process of urbanisation and western education. The impact of all these events was quite visible in the dramatic field which created a sort of network (Redfield, 1956) and traditions which might be summed up as western in form but indigenous in content. The period between 1921-1950 was a period of consolidation of freedom movement as well as its achievement. Though termed as ‘Gandhian era’ and an age of non-violence, there arose also the concept of militancy, individual terrorism, violence and armed rebellion. This affected the social fabric enormously and particularly the Bengali youth who were still latched to the concept of joint-family system and English education. Also ideology of socialism began to assert itself outwardly on a section of Bengali intelligentsia. It became deep-rooted in the period between 1940-1950. This brought in many new changes in the social field (Barnes, 1954) of drama and though the ‘network’ in the professional field remained intact as before, there were wider interaction between the concept of socialism and the alternate-theatre which took a concrete shape in this period opening a new horizon and a new social ‘network’. On the social fabric the famine of 1943, the communal riot in 1946 and the partition of Bengal in 1947 created havoc. The significance of these events had very little impact on the professional theatre which was unable to break the shackles of traditionalism in spite of technological innovations and vast talent available to them. In contrast, the alternate theatre based on the concept of equality and social justice became more modern and socially conscious in its outlook. Thus the problems of refugee rehabilitation, Hindu-Muslim unity, hollowness of the prevailing congress-political concepts and the nexus between power and corruption and misuse of public funds were all taken up as subject matter by this alternative theatre which in later years came to be known as group theatre movement. And this movement, from its very inception, did not confine itself within the precincts of metropolis Calcutta. In the interest of gaining larger audience, it spread far and wide in the state of West Bengal and was a major source of mass-communication in the later years. This one will be discussed in details in the next chapter. Thus we may sum-up the pre-independence period as quite indicative of structural change particularly in the field of politics and economics in an institutional way as indicated in the definition of social change (Moore, 1968). And according to the same definition, there were many culturally meaningful symbols which were produced both in the realm of professional theatre as well as the group theatre of this period. With this the section on pre-Independence is concluded. It will now be followed by the phase of post-Independence.
The post-Independence Era: 1948-1990

For the purpose of the present study, the post-independence time frame has been confined between the period 1951-1990. Elsewhere in the chapter 'Backdrop' it has already been briefly compartmentalised into three phases, vis-a-vis the group theatre movement and these were the period of 'gestation' (1951-1960), the period of 'politicalisation' (1961-1977) and the period of 'rise and stability' (1977-1990). Though these division were made to identify the developmental process of the group theatre movement, it would also hold good equally for the general understanding and analysis of the period including political and economic struggle as well as the total spectrum of dramatic performances staged in both professional and group theatre circuit. But before one goes on to analyse the period, a few general observations are necessary in relation to the political and social characteristics of the period.

The basic characteristics of the post-independence period was the transfer of political power in the central governance of the country. The Indian National Congress, which was hitherto the main opposition party in prison, occupied the central-seat of power in New Delhi from 15th August, 1947 after the declaration of Independence. And in the same vein, the Muslim League, which was the second largest party voicing the Muslim community, shifted its power base to the newly created state of Pakistan. Thus the undivided Communist Party of India or the CPI had golden opportunity to become the second best opposition party in the prevailing Indian situation. It was made more convenient for the party whereas by a verdict of the Calcutta High Court, the illegal status of the party was rescinded on 27th February, 1950 (Basu, J. 1998). Though not reflected in the hustings of 1952 and 1957, the CPI did succeed, particularly in West Bengal, Kerala and Andhra in assuming the role of chief opposition party and voicing the grievances of the toiling masses, particularly the peasants, the workers, the youths and a section of the middle-class. Meanwhile it also scaled down its policy of militancy and violence and adhered to a more sedate policy of 'constitutional communism'. For the present study, the most significant point to note was the new political alignments in which the policies of the central government was challenged by the communists and though minority in nature, the state of West Bengal became a hotbed of political contention for championing the grievances of the toiling masses. Thus it will be seen that a contradiction developed between the central powers in Delhi and the states where the opposition was chiefly led by the undivided communist party of India. The congress policies after Independence, as is well known, were based on a mixed...
economy of public and private sectors and generally followed the parliamentary-democracy in
the British tradition; but in letter and spirit, a socialist pattern of society was also pledged.
However, for a state-like West Bengal which was suffering from the trauma of partition,
unemployment, population over-growth due to the refugee influx, very little industrial progress,
mass illiteracy and an uncounted number of unspecified problems faced by the working class and
the peasantry - these policies were neither concrete nor adequate. Hence it will be seen that in
a short while after Independence, a basic contradiction was born between the two camps of
congress policy makers and the marxist ideologues. As a result of which, gradually, a strong
current of mass discontent began to grow which day by day became sharper and ultimately led
the congress down-fall in the state of West Bengal in 1967.

The second characteristics of the period was the rising growth of left radicalism and anti-
establishment attitude particularly amongst the working class as well as the youths of West
Bengal. Both on the political front as well as the cultural front, the marxist ideology gained an
enormous ground and a sharp rise of mass-militancy in varied forms became the order of the
day in the state. These militant struggles were mostly held under the leadership of the Communist
Party of India (Marxist) as they came to be known after the great split that divided the Communist
Party of India in two sections in relation to their perception towards armed revolution. There
was an international debate on the question of armed revolution which began in 1960 between
the Communist Party of China which stood for the path of armed revolution and the Communist
party of Soviet Russia which stood for the path of peaceful co-existance and gradual sharing of
power through Parliamentary democracy. In the Indian situation, the undivided Communist party
of India opted out for the path of peaceful co-existence and thereafter it came to be simply
known as CPI; while the other faction, whose intention basically was to follow the Chinese
path, came to be known as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), after it was established in
1964. In the state of West Bengal, CPI(M) ultimately became the dominant political party in
the post-Independence era and was the principal organiser of forementioned mass militancy.
Socially speaking, the growth of militancy was neither unusual nor surprising, considering the
past political history of Bengal. However, the social tensions thus generated also gave birth to
an alternate culture which highlighted the degrading plight of the common people. It
systematically exposed the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist mode of production
and the peasantry by the money lender and the jodtars (big landholders) in the villages. A large
number of students and youths took part in shaping this alternate culture which began to be
known as peoples culture and theatre-making, particularly the group-theatre variety became an integral part of it. These activities rose to great heights in the sixties which was why the decade had been termed as the period of 'politicalisation'. Another important factor was the role of Calcutta in the sphere of mass-militancy. The city became a focal point of power-politics between the CPI(M) and INC. Every tea-shop, coffe-house, college-canteen, middle-class/lower middle class shop and establishment—in short every conceivable place of meeting in Calcutta became agog with political discussions. It was not unusual that the central congress leadership and their spokesman, the Prime Minister declared Calcutta as a 'city of procession'. Even in the haydays of anti-communism which began in 1962 after the border conflict between India and China occurred and which forced the communist leadership to go underground for the next two years, the influence of marxian ideology remained intact in the city of Calcutta as well as in West Bengal.

Thus one may sum up the post-Independence period in the following manner: The basic characteristics of the period was two fold in nature. Firstly it was anti-establishment till on or about 1977 when a stable non-congress government was formed in the state in 1977. Secondly there arose an upsurge of mass-militancy because of the bitter power-strenggle between the two camps of congress politics and communist politics or to be more precise between the creed of so called Gandhian non-violence and the marxist doctrine of armed rebellion. The second characteristics surprisingly also began to change on or about 1977, the reason for which if necessary, would be discussed in the appropriate section covering the period 1977-1990. With the above background and hypothesis in mind one may now embark upon the analysis of the dramatic performances of the phase termed 'gestation period' i.e. 1951-1960.

Gestation period ^1951 - 1960^  

This was a period which was close at the heels of Independence and the expectations of the people of West Bengal were very high. But the congress politices belied this expectation. However, the mass of the people refrained from ventilating their frustrations in the two general elections of 1952 and 1957 and thus the Congress Party could retain their power base in the state of West Bengal. The states Chief Minister was Dr. B.C. Ray, who was a veteran of congress politics and was much respected in West Bengal for his administrative ability. But inspite of his persistent efforts, industrialisation of the state remained snail-paced. Another
frustrating event was the rehabilitation of the East Bengal hindu refugees whose plight was
deplorable. The apathy and the negligence on the part of the government officials in this regard
was absolutely inhuman. In fact, it was comparable with the attitude of the British colonial
citizens, the legacy of which was inherited by the Indian citizens who now served their new
Indian masters. The plight of these refugees and the failure of their proper rehabilitation in the
Bengali society was the subject matter of too many literary works, including drama, in this
period and the period prior to this. Added to this was the problem of unemployment which was
very severe, particularly for the educated middle-class youths. But in spite of all these problems,
the early couple of years of the period were by and large peaceful. The first major movement
of the period was the 'Anti-Tram-Fare' movement that began in July 1953. 'The Calcutta Tram
Company' was a wholly owned British Company who wanted to raise the existing tramfare by
a single paise at all stages. Though the rise was very insignificant in today's standards, it was
resisted tooth and nail by the common people of Calcutta and Howrah. There was a call for
boycott of the tramways as a means of transport and soon it took a political turn and became
an anti-imperialist movement because of the British ownership of the company. The movement
lasted for one month and in spite of the strong backing of the congress-ministry of the state, the
proposed fare increase had to be withdrawn. (Basu, J. 1998). But not only the common people,
the policies of the congress government affected even the educated middle-class severely. Thus
on 10th February, 1954, the All Bengal Teachers' Association organised a strike in support of
their economic demands as well as for corrective measures to be undertaken in the school-
level education system. In support of these demands the left parties of the state called a general
strike on 12th Feb, 1954 which was enthusiastically observed. In retaliation, the congress state
government and its police indiscriminately lathi charged, tear-gassed and even fired at the
unarmed procession of secondary teachers in front of the Assembly House on 16th February
1954 resulting in 6 deaths and 157 wounded. The movement of the teachers subsided by 21st
February, 1954 when the government was forced to accept many of the demands of this
movement; (Basu, J. 1998). But by far the most virulent protest movement of the period was
the 'Food-Movement' of 1959. It was organised jointly by the "Anti-pricerise and famine-
resistance committee", the Trade Union-Congress and the West Bengal Krishak (Peasant)
Sabha—all of which generally belonged to the left parties. This was a movement that engulfed
whole of West Bengal, the epi-centre was of course the city of Calcutta. It was organised
against the food-policy of the congress state government and began in the month of May 1959
and continued right upto September 1959. There were general strikes, student strikes,
innumerable processions and meetings where sometimes even more than 3 lacs of people gathered. The congress government again retaliated by indiscriminate lathi charge, teargas shelling and shooting, killing more than 80 general people and 8 students as well as wounding and maiming innumerable mass of the people. Inspite of large scale arrest of the leftist leaders in August 1959, the spirit of the movement could not be broken. In fact it became a legend in the later period and many of the victims became martyers in the eyes of the people, (Basu, J. 1998). The last significant movement of the period was the country-wide strike by the central government employees in July 1960 which even the Prime Minister of the country was forced to declare as 'Mass Upsurge' (Sen, 1995). It will thus be seen that inspite of being in power, the congress policies began to give birth to large-scale discontent amongst all section of masses and as soon as the euphoria of Independence began to fade, the protest against these policies became pronounced, particularly in the state of West Bengal and the left politicians successfully channelised this discontent into militant mass-movements. For the later political developments this was truely and surely a gestation period. Though not yet quite overwhelming, but a sizable section of the middle-class, as well as workers, peasants and the student community of West Bengal began to rally behind the left-parties notwithstanding the great impending debate amongst the marxian ideologies regarding the nature of the Indian state and its new rulers, the congress party. While evaluating the period, one has to remember that the congress still enjoyed the support of a large number of population who believed in the Gandhian principles of non-violence and the politics of the ‘Khadi’ which meant support to the indegenous products and self-sufficiency in all spheres of life. But sadly enough though being in power, the infiltration of vested interests, particularly in the rural areas into the body-politik of congress, resulting in non-implementation of proper land distribution, destroyed these principles. This gave birth to large scale corruption, bribery, black-marketing and mal-practices in the functioning of the adminsitration. The protest movements such as the ‘Food Movement of 1959’ was a direct fall out of this kind of mal-administration and had shaken the faith of the people towards congress policies in the state.

One may now examine the dramatic performances of the period both in the professional and group-theatre circuit in this background. From the professional stage as many as 42 dramatic texts have been taken into account for the propose of analysis though the actual number of plays performed, according to a noted professional director/producer might have been more than 60 (Gupta, 1983). In comparison to this, there were as many as 32 dramatic texts that had been taken into account as performed in the group-theatre circuit during the period.
The breakup of trends in the professional theatre was 23 socials, 5 historicals, 4 biographies and 2 each of mythologicals, socio-politicals, romances, musicals and detectives (Diagram A). The corresponding break-up in the group-theatre circuit was 13 socials, 8 socio-politicals, 6 allegories, 2 each of satires and politicals and 1 detective (Diagram A). Thus in both streams, the dominating trend was the socials. But there was wide divergence in the two streams as far as the content part of these texts were concerned. In the professional circuit there were as many as 7 Sarat Chatterjee novels such as ‘Niskriti’ (1951), ‘Shoroshi’ (1951), ‘Chandranath’ (1951), ‘Panditmasai’ (1951), ‘Ramer Sumati’ (1951), ‘Srikanta’ (1957) and ‘Rajlakshmi’ (1958) that were converted into dramatic texts for performance. These were no doubt outstanding stories criticising the age-old middle-class syndrome of superstition, taboos and traditionalism, but were nowhere near the stark social reality of the period. But an undercurrent of sympathy was visible in general productions towards the plight of woman which was more pronouncedly visible in the play ‘Shyamali’ (1953). This was a story by a less known woman novelist, Nirupama Debi and dramatised by the eminent play-wright/producer/director Debanarayan Gupta. The central character was a deaf and dumb young woman whose love, passion and yearnings for a better life was the theme of the play. The uncommonness of the subject-matter, as well as the performances of Uttamkumar, the matinee idol of the Bengali screen and Sabitri Chatterjee, another noted film personality created a sensation in the professional theatre world of West Bengal. However, the success of this play in the box office led to another four offbeat subject selections and these were ‘Arogyaniketan’ (1956), a story by Tarasankar Bandopadhyay, ‘Kshuda’ (1957), an original play by Bidhak Bhattacharyya noted for his left radicalism, ‘Setu’ (1959), again an original play by Kiron Maitra who later experimented in the group theatre circuit with the absurdist drama-form and ‘Down-train’ (1959), yet another original play by Salil Sen, an upcoming dramatist who believed in the concept of radicalism through theatre. All the four productions were exceptional in the sense that the modern concepts of lighting and stage-craft made these production memorable. The technological innovation that was introduced by Satu Sen and Sisir Bhadury earlier, somewhat came into fulfillment in these productions. But the uncommonness of the contents in the professional theatre was a direct fall-out of the success of ‘Nabanna’. But the most notable performance in the professional circuit was the staging of the play ‘Anger’ (1959). Written and directed by Utpal Dutta, it depicted the life and tragedy of a number of coal-miners trapped inside the coal-mine.
It’s musical score was by Rabishankar, the eminent classical sitarist, songs rendered live on stage were by the well-known folksinger Nirmalendu Chaudhury, and lighting by Tapas Sen. The production was exceptional by any standards. This definitely was a direct outcome of the leftist movements and Dutta doing justice to his political obligations produced a play which immediately highlighted the plight of the coal-miners in the Asansol colliery belt. Therefore, though the professional theatre circuit was not directly influenced by the political movements of the period, an indirect influence particularly in the theme selection and content part could not be ruled out. In fact, theme variation in all other trends of this period was a pointer that the professional theatre was forced to think anew while catering entertainment to the audience. Thus one finds a crime-story like ‘Ulka’ (1954), probably based on Victor Hugo’s ‘Les Miserable’ or a musical like ‘Kabi’ (1959) and a socio-political like ‘Natun Ihudi’ were attempted to. Infact ‘Natun Ihudi’ or the ‘new-jew’ was an apt coinage by the dramatist Salil Sen who described the plight of the East bengal hindu-refugees in this play. Another point to note is the fact that apart from the socials, all other trends were diminishing in this period. It indicates gradual change of choices and tastes of the audience who probably were more impressed by the newly emerging alternate theatre and their package of good, clean and socially conscious theatre. Thus the professional theatre was forced to re-organise themselves and in all departments of theatre-making, whether lighting, stage-craft, background music or make-up and costumes, they had to take recourse to modernity. In the department of stage-lighting, Tapas Sen worked brilliantly in ‘Ulka’ (1954), Arogyaniketan (1956) Kshuda (1957) ‘Setu’ (1959), Down-train (1959) and Anger (1959). Out of these his innovative experiments in ‘Setu’ and ‘Anger’ became legendary in the annals of Bengali theatre. The pressure of modernisation was so acute that even a traditional theatre hall like ‘Star’ had to be renovated with modern air-conditioning system in 1957 (Gupta, 1983). Another important factor behind this modernisation was the courageous challenge thrown up by Utpal Dutta. Noted for his keen radicalism, he learned his basic theatre under the tutelage of Jeoffrey Kendal of ‘Shakespereana’ fame. In 1947 Utpal Dutta established his own group ‘The Little Theatre Group’ or the LTG which staged a few of the ‘Shakespeare’ as well as ‘Bernard Shaw’ plays. But by this time his political grooming under the banner of IPTA, was complete and he decided to take the challenge of the professional theatre head long. As a result of this he took lease of ‘Minarva’ theatre hall where his notable productions were ‘Ferari Fauj’ and ‘Anger’ which brought him immediate success, Thereafter for 11 years he wrote, directed and produced a number of brilliant political, socio-political and documentary theatre and staged these in this hall as a parallel stream of professional theatre.
Thus it will be seen that though being a pioneer in establishing the group theatre movement, Utpal Dutta shook the very basic concept of the professional theatre by being completely different in his socio-political outlook based on marxism. The success of such theatres as ‘Anger’ and their likes in the alternate theatre stream shortly to be discussed, made the professional theatre makers sit up for existence and continuity. In this sense the term ‘gestation period’ was equally applicable to the professional circuit.

Group theatre: 1951-1960

Now coming back to the group-theatre circuit it is found that out of the 13 socials staged in this period, 4 were ‘Bohurupee’ productions and these were ‘Charadhyaya’ (1951), ‘Dasachakra’ (1952), ‘Aangsidar’ (1955) and ‘Putulkhela’ (1958). Apart from ‘Anagsidar’, the rest were directed by Shambhu Mitra. This was a period when Tagore was re-discovered through Shambhu Mitra and his group ‘Bohurupee’. ‘Chhar Adhyay’ was the initial attempt to that effect. Dramatised by Shambhu Mitra, this Tagore novelette dealt with the question of individual terrorism and its application. Revolved round an episode of love this was an uncommon theme dramatised by Shambhu Mitra which initially received luke-warm response from the audience. But later on in the seventies when the play was revived, it became more acceptable to the audience due to its political relevance towards that period. The two other productions, namely ‘Dasachakra’ and ‘Putulkhela’ were adaptation of the Ibsen plays such as ‘Enemy of the People’ and ‘A Doll’s House’ respectively. The subject matter of these two plays were again unusual. While in ‘Dasachakra’, the superstitions and the religious fanaticism of the masses were exposed, in ‘Putulkhela’ the captive role of woman in her domestic life was depicted in remarkable details. Apart from these four, another three socials in this period deserve special mention. These were ‘Rupali Chand (1958), ‘Aar Habey NaDeri’ (1960) and ‘Gotraantar’ (1959). The first two were written, directed and produced by Tarun Ray under the pen-name of Dhananjoy Bairagi and the last named was written and directed by Bijon Bhattacharyya of ‘Nabanna’ fame. Mention also must be made of Ajitest Bandhapadhayay and his group ‘Nandikar’ which did an adaptation of the Ibsen play ‘Ghosts’ titled as ‘Bidehi’ (1960). But the most remarkable achievement of this period was the staging of the allegories. And out of a total of six productions, three were performed by ‘Bohurupee’ and all three were Tagore texts. Amongst these ‘Raktakarabi’ (1954) was an original play by Tagore and it was a sensational production covering all the branches of theatre-making hitherto unknown in the Bengali
stage. Written in a symbolic form, its subject matter was the age-old exploitation of the toiling masses, here specifically the workers under capitalist production system. In fact first time on the Bengali stage, Shambhu Mitra established the Tagore language with all its nuances and meanings. Tagore himself was unable to produce ‘Raktakarabi’ because he was unable to find a suitable actress to portray the central female character of Nandini. Tripty Mitra fulfilled this role and her ‘Nandini’ became a poignant human character (Majumdar, 1988). But apart from direction and acting, in two other departments of theatre-making, namely stage-decoration and lighting, the production of ‘Raktakarabi’ became legendary. Thus Khaled Choudhury’s set and Tapas Sen’s lighting even today remained examples of extra-ordinary brilliance in conception and execution. And then on top of ‘Raktakarabi’ came the success of ‘Dakghar’ (1957). This original Tagore play was directed by Tripty Mitra. In this play, the central character of the child ‘Amal’ was portrayed by Shaonli Mitra, daughter of Shambhu and Tripti Mitra. It was a remarkable portrayal, for ‘Dakghar’ was a complex drama, the nuances of which was not easy to understand. The Indian philosophy of continuity and tradition and the indomitable spirit of the artist to convey were the subject matter of the play. A very complex and difficult symbolic drama, it earned the accolade of the audience and broke the myth of Tagore being non-communicable. Again the stage craft of Khaled Choudhury and the lighting of Tapas Sen were extraordinary in this production. However ‘Muktadhara’ (1959), the third Tagore allegory did not enjoy much success like the other two. In this section the other notable production was ‘Rahumukta’ (1954). Written by Biru Mukherjee and directed by Gyanesh Mukherjee, it was a formal experiment combining the traditional jatra and the proscenium theatre form.

Apart from the socials and allegoricals, in the group-theatre circuit there were as many as 8 socio-politics. But performancewise these were none too significant, though the subject matters mostly were related to current social problems. There were only two production in the political section and ‘Dharmaghat’ (1953) or ‘The strike’ could deserve a special mention. This again was produced by ‘Bahurupee’, written by Manmatha Ray and directed by Shambhu Mitra. The stage craft was as usual by Khaled Chaudhury and the lighting was by Tapas Sen. This was a play which was more close to the social reality. And in the realm of farce, there were two plays one by Tagore, the ‘Sargiya Prroachon’ (1955) and the other by Badal Sarkar, ‘Bado Pishima’ (1955). The Tagore text was produced by ‘Bahurupee’ and was directed by the eminent actor Amar Ganguly. And the Badal Sarkar text was produced and directed by the author himself under the banner of his own group ‘Satabdi’. Added to this, in the period was the lone
crime drama 'Finger Print' (1959) of which a mention has already been made in the chapter titled 'Trends'.

In summation, one may therefore justly conclude that this was a period of gestation both for the professional theatre as well as the group theatres. While the former was forced to take a fresh look at their performances and adjust suitably to modernisation, the latter introduced new 'cultural symbols' by rediscovering Tagore and introducing new themes which were hitherto unknown to the Bengali theatre. It was true that barring such theatrical personalities as Utpal Dutta and Bijon Bhattacharyya, the other participants were not always directly involved in the political activities of the period. But the variety of socially conscious themes in the group-theatre circuit indicate both association and influence. That it was more pronounced in the next phase would all the more prove the contention that culture and change of attitude generally occurred at a distance and would not always be visible and transparent at the time of the incidence of the events. Therefore the lack of direct influence on the dramatic performances of the period was not at all surprising. Rather, on the contrary, the theatre plays of the period both professional and group-theatre tried to establish some normative aspects of social values in keeping with the rising mood of the people who were no longer under the yoke of British Imperialism. This could have been only possible due to the political climate of the period which was demanding social justice for its people through an alternative path of militant struggles. The bold and new attempts in both the camps of the Bengali theatre world in this period must be judged in this background. With this observation, one may now pass on to the next phase, i.e. 1961-1977.

**Period of politicalisation : 1961-1977**

Elsewhere, this phase has been termed as the period of politicalisation. Indeed the years between 1961-77 were full of political drama, particularly in the state of West Bengal. The unfortunate border conflict between China and India that occurred in 1962 has already been mentioned. It made all shades of communists defensive. And by 1964, the communist party got divided and the militant sections organised themselves into a new party under the banner of Communist Party of India (Marxist). The CPI(M) gradually became a very powerful opposition party in the state of West Bengal which was reeling under spiralling prices, scarcity of commodities, rampant black-marketing, shrinking employment facilities, and a number of lay-
offs and lock outs throwing innumerable number of workers and white collar employees out of job. And close on the heels of the border conflict between India and China, a second war broke out between India and Pakistan in 1965. The effect of these two conflicts on the state of West Bengal and its economy almost became unbearable. But neither the central congress government nor the state government of the same party were able to take any corrective measure in controlling the prices of essential commodities including food-staff. The open black-marketing and deteriorating services in every sphere of life, particularly in the city of Calcutta became the order of the day. By this time the much respected congress leader Dr. B.C. Ray (1882-1962) passed away and the veteran Gandhian Prafulla Chandra Sen became the Chiefminister. The food movement of 1959 was against his food policies and once again a second food movement was organised in 1966 though in comparison to the earlier one its magnitude was less. During the whole of 1966, there were meetings, processions and general strikes of which the most militant one was the 48 hours Bangla (West Bengal) Bandh (General strike)” (Basu, 1998). Thus the opposition to the Congress party was complete and the united strength of all left parties defeated the congress in the hustings of 1967 and brought in a non-congress ministry first-time in the state. However, the ministry thus formed did not last long due to the internal bickerings amongst the constituents of ULF. A mid-term election therefore became imminent. In this election held in 1969, the congress party again lost and yet another non-congress ministry was installed in the state. But this ministry was also unstable and after a short spell of President's rule another mid-term election in 1971 was held. However, though the CPI(M) bagged the largest number of seats, it was unable to form a ministry. A minority Government was installed in the state. The political instability thus created in the state continued which not even another election in 1972 could cure. To many critics and political observes the election of 1972 was a rigged one (Mitra, 1979). That however did not deter the Congress Party to form a ministry with the old CPI as its active partner. Though the spate of elections for the time being stopped, there was no respite for the people from violence, anarchy and disorder. The introduction of violence in the field of politics was a new menace which began with the Naxalbari uprisings of 1967. The Naxalites were a breakaway faction of the CPI(M), who organised themselves into a new left party known as Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Following: the Chinese way the leadership of CPI(ML) embarked upon a path of violent armed revolution in which invindual killing of jotders (landlords) in the rural areas and ordinary policemen as well as eminent political, non-political personalities in the city of Calcutta became a routine affair. Taking a cue from this violence, the Congress Party after the so-called rigged election of 1972, began to
systematically demolish their main opposition, the CPI(M), sometimes physically and where not possible, ruthlessly drove away the active cadres of the party from their localities. The entire political climate of the state became vitiated and these were all done in the name of the country's lady Prime Minister. The reign of terror that was let loose by her party cadres on the population of West Bengal in general, and the opposition political cadres in particular, was appalling. To many political observers, it was practically fascism in a disguised form. The introduction of fire-arms and physical annihilation were the main weapons and a reign of white-terror by organised musclemen under the banner of congress was a typical feature in the period between 1972-75. But not only this, the organised violence let loose by the state and central police forces with their trigger-free attitude was yet another characteristic feature of the political and social atmosphere of the state. The All India Railwaymen's strike in 1974 became a victim of these organised violence where not even the striking workers families were spared in the state of West Bengal (Mitra, 1979). However, the agony of the country and in particular that of West Bengal was not yet over, for a state of emergency was declared on June 26, 1975 curbing all the democratic rights available to the people (Mitra, 1979). But like all black deeds this also ended and Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was forced to lift the state of emergency and a general election was called for in 1977 which she resoundingly lost and a non-congress government was installed in New Delhi. Along with this, under the stewardship of CPI(M), an United Front Government was also formed in the state of West Bengal when CPI(M) and its allies won the following assembly election in the state with a large majority defeating their arch rival the Congress Party. Thus ended a bleak period of organised vandalism, chaos, anarchy, and police atrocities—in short complete disorder of public life. The people of the state heaved a sigh of relief and an era of great hope and expectation dawned in the minds of the people. In many ways this hope was not belied for it ushered in a period of more or less political stability, though the stigma of violence in the political and social life of the state could not be fully wiped out. From the events of the period it may now be seen that there were tremendous twists and turns and ups and downs engulfing the whole state. The social problems arising out of such kind of situation have already been enumerated in the chapter titled "Trends" while discussing particularly the socio-political plays of this period. For fear of repetition further details are not discussed here. But one particular point needs to be stressed. The ideological theatre-making, specially the political or socio-political plays that had been attempted to by such eminent director-producer like Utpal Dutta prior to 1977 had to face umpteen number of problems not connected with theatre. These were mob-violence, forcible closure of a play, state-terrorism,
even arrest by the police (Dutta, 1982). This one point indicates the nature of the period which	rightly may be termed as the period of politicalisation. It would now be our endeavour to
analyse the plays performed in this period both in commercial and group-theatre circuit.
However, due to space-restraint the analysis would be kept as brief as possible and as well for
the fact that much of the period and the performances have already been discussed in the two
chapters titled ‘Backdrop’ and ‘Trends’ respectively.

Professional theatre: 1961-1977

In the commercial circuit as many as 63 texts have been taken into consideration out of
which 26 were socials, 5 of each were romances and satires, 4 were musicals, 3 were biographies
and a single one was of detective variety. There were practically no historicals, mythologicals,
politics, socio-politicals, or allegories. But according to the enclosed list (Diagram A), there
were as many as 19 adult plays which became a new trend in the professional circuit. Thus the
dominance of the socials continued even in this period. And due to paucity of original drama
texts, as many as thirteen novels were converted into stage-version. But the most outstanding
of these script conversations was the Adwaita Mallabarman novel ‘Titash Ekti Nadir Nam’
done by none other than Utpal Dutta in 1963. It was a poignant story of the life style of the
fishermen tribe of Sylette in erst-while East Bengal, now known as Bangladesh. Its folk based
music, typical East Bengal dialect, expositions of the money-lenders in a feudal community,
were all remarkable theatrical achievements. It also established the fact that theatre could be
as intensely a documentary as history and anthropology. The details and nuances of the life of
the fishermen tribe, their fight with elemental nature and the characteristics of their community
rituals were all recorded in great details in this play. But this was somewhat an exception in the
professional stage, the parallel or equivalent of which was not quite visible in the professional
circuit. The hypothesis could be proved by the fact that both ‘Begum Merry Biswas’ (1970)
and ‘Khadi Diye Kinlam’ (1976), two magnum opus of Bimal Mitra and both period pieces,
when dramatised were unable to do any justice to their themes. These became only tight-knit
stories and did not venture deep into the crumbling feudal order of the landed gentry who were
torn between their interest of becoming a part of the urban bourgeoisie without shedding
their traditional feudal stature. Some exceptions may be conceded to ‘Ekak-Dasak-Satak’ (1965),
another period piece by Bimal Mitra and dramatised by Debnarayan Gupta, which tried to
capture the time-frame between 1947 and 1962. Though not in the same vein, but the novels of
Shaktipada Rajguru (Seshagni, 1962), Ashapurna Debi (Manjari, 1972, and Nanda 1976), Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (Naa, 1976), Banafool (Aghatan, 1976), and Samaresh Basu (Aparichita, 1977), suffered the same fate. These were neither the documents of the period under review, nor in retrospect were interpretive pieces highlighting the period they represent. The staging of these socials therefore could only indicate that the professional producer-director-theatre-makers of the period were reluctant to involve and committ themselves into the current political events. This would be all the more explicit by the fact that the most influencial writer-producer director of the period, Debnarayan Gupta produced and directed the three socials, ‘Dabi’ (1966), Sharmila’ (1968) and Seema (1971) of which the themes were Hindu devorce law, Hindu code bill and the problems faced by a spastic young woman in life respectively. No doubt these were social problems, but touching only the marginal few of the society and had no bearing whatsoever on the general life of the people. Rather as soon as the trauma of emergency was lifted in 1976, there were as many as 7 plays of which ‘Nahabat’ by Satya Banerjee (Senior) was a shallow slap- stick comedy. The contribution of the other trends, namely the romances, the satires, the musicals and the biographies were insignificant. The main thrust appears to be to stay clear of the political controversies, and keep on the economic concept of profit. Thus in the section of romance, ‘Tapasi’ (1963), ‘Kothay Pabo Tare’ (1971) and ‘Mallika’ (1973) achieved phenomenon commercial success throwing to the winds the bleak political reality of vandalism, anachry, and state-terrorism. The success of such musicals as ‘Dayal Opera’ (1972), ‘Kabi’ (1974) and ‘Bhola Moira’ (1975) as well as the biographies like ‘Antony Kabial’ (1966) and ‘Nati Binodini’ (1969) bear ample testimony to the hypothesis that the professional theatre circuit and its play-makers wanted to remain outside the domain of any political controversy. They wanted as if to assume a role of neutrality and passivity which in a way was against the tradition of Bengali Professional theatre. But since the present worker is not competant enough to judge, it may only be pointed out that this passivity and non-involvement in the prevailing political trends and opting out for financial success, ultimately ruined the professional theatre and robbed it of its pristine glory of yeaster years. The absence of an ideological belief, might also have been an important factor in ushering the so-called adult theatre which began its journey with ‘Barbadhu’ in 1972. Again the timing was significant for in the same year was held the so-called rigged election which brought the Indian National Congress to power in the state of West Bengal, none too gloriously. As mentioned earlier there were as many as 19 adult plays in between the period 1972-1977. No adverse criticism would have been raised against this trend, had the performances been confined to such literary pieces as ‘Barbadhu’ (1972),
Chowringhee (1972), ‘Bibar’ (1973), ‘Jana-Aranya’ (1974), ‘Prajapati’ (1974) and ‘Aslil’ (1975). These original texts were of high literary value written by such eminents writers as Subodh Ghosh, Shankar and Samaresh Basu. Of these ‘Janaaranya’ by Shankar was even filmed by an eminent film-director like Satyajit Ray. As an exceptional trend setters, these could have been poignant social documents, not withstanding the sexual content implicit in these works. But the actual thurst was just in the opposite direction of social disorder, chaos, vulgarism and morbidity in keeping with the political climate of the period 1972-75. In hindsight, it therefore now appears to be a deliberate attempt to vitiate the social climate of the state which was trying to recover its lost ground from the onslaught of white terror and the dubious declaration of emergency. That the hypothesis stood its ground might be judged by the fact that inspite of media backing and plenty of resource mobilisation, the cult of adult theatre and its exploitive sex and violence could not make a lasting impression on the general theatre audience of the state. With this submission, the analysis of the professional theatres in the period between 1961-1977 is concluded. It will now be seen how the ‘group theatre’ in the same period progressed.

**Group theatre : 1961-1977**

From 1961 onwards, group theatre movement began to grow in leaps and bounds inspite of many constraints and hurdles it had to face from the media and the state. The volume of output indicates this growth and even in a cross-sectional selection, the present worker had to take note of as many as 143 productions as representative of the period. Out of these, major clusterings were visible in the trends of socials (37), socio-politicals (27), politicales (22), allegories (21) and satires (16). Productionwise less attention was paid to the historicals (6), mythologicals (4), Biographies (4), musicals (3), romances (2) and there was only one adult play which was an adaptation of the famous Virginia Wolf text, ‘Who’s afraid of Virginia wolf’ (1970). In fact adaptation became a trend setter in this period. Out of eight productions of ‘Nandikar in the social section there were as many as 6 adaptations. The noteworthy amongst these were Pirandello’s ‘Six-characters in Search of a playwright’, (Natykarer Sandhane Chati Charitra’ (1961), Anton Chekhov’s ‘The Cherry Orchard’ (Manjari Amer Manjari, 1964) and Arnold Wesker’s ‘Roots’ (Jakhan Eka, 1966). All three were contentwise uncommon and indicative of social awareness. Staged about in a period between 1961-66, and facing the crusade of anti-communism arising out of the conflicts with China and Pakistan, Ajitesh
Bandhopadhyay and his group 'Nandikar' did not hesitate to produce these plays which experimented in form as in the Pirandello play or in such touchy contents as crumbling feudalism in the Chekov play or the socialist aspiration and dreams as in the Wesker play. The other major contributors in the social section were the Bohurupee productions. Altogether 9 in number, their major successes were the two Badal Sarkar's plays, namely 'Baki-Itihas' (1967), and 'Pagla Ghora' (1971), Nitish Sen's 'Aparajita' (1971), 'Chup Adalat Chalchhe' (1971) an adaptation of the Marathi Playwright, Bijoy Tendulkar's 'Chop Adalat Aahe' and Tagore's 'Ghare-Baire' (1974). Every one of these productions in a tangent way were reflections on the changing post-independence middle-class values. Thus in the Badal Sarkar play the role of history, which was always collective but could not over-rule the role of the insignificant individual and the individual crisis felt by such individual were exposed in details in an uncommon form and poetic language rare in the theatre world. And with the same vein of experimentation was produced Nitish Sen's 'Aparajita', a solo performance by an actress for two hours (Tripti Mitra) depicting the life of a lone middle-class woman and her dreams, hopes and frustration. Bohurupee, in fact was very conscious of the role of woman in the contemporary society. Tagore's 'Ghare-Bairey' (1974) therefore might have been produced with the twin objective of women's role in the contemporary society as well as the implication of violence in the field of politics. The only other important adaptation in the social section was Arthur Miller's 'Death of a salesman' or 'Janaiker Mrituya' (1965) produced and directed by Ashim Chakraborty later of the adult theatre fame. Two other socials of this period, namely Parabash' (1975) and 'Sajano Bagan' (1977) were both original plays by Manoj Mitra and produced by his group 'Sundaram'. True, these productions did not commit themselves to the polltical contingency of the period. But unlike the professional theatre, they kept to the steadfast ideals of openness and could not be coerced to submissions towards political vandalism and censorship. However, in the list of adaptation in the social sections, two more need to be added. These were Jean Paul Sartre's 'La Putain Respectueuse' which in Bengali adaptation came to be known as 'Lolita' (1966), and Sean O'casey's 'Juno and the Peacock' which was called 'Chhayay Alloy' (1967). Both were produced by Theatre-workshop, a breakway faction of 'Nandikar' and a keen follower of left politics. The socio-politicals in this period had more depth and variety. Thus play like 'Karnik' (1963), by Joehan Dastidar depicted the life of masons who were a part of the unorganised labour-force of the state. Next were the 2 plays of Utpal Dutta, Manuser Adhikary (1968) and 'Tiner Talower' (1971). Elsewhere though 2 plays of Utpal Dutta are included in the professional circuit because of his initial challenge to that stream and taking lease of the hall
Minerva, rest of his plays have been included in the group theatre circuit which was where he rightly belonged to. Inspite of his occasional extreme left deviation, which he himself admitted (Dutta, 1982), Utpal Dutta was the most brilliant amongst the writer-producer-directors of the group theatre movement committed to left radicalism. Of the forementioned two plays, ‘Manusher Adhikarey’s central theme was the lynching of the balcks by the racial white in America way back in 1931, and the court-room scene in the play was an outstanding piece of high voltage drama. The play ‘\Tiner Talowar’ had already been discussed elsewhere. Next mention must be made of ‘Sagina Mahato’ (1971). Based on a story by Gaurkishore Ghosh, it was dramatised by Badal Sarkar, the content of which was the degeneration of a tribal tea-garden labour who, when elevated to a dominant position of trade-union leader, lost all contact with social reality. Seen at the period to be an anti-communist play, particularly agaisnt the CPI(M), its content was legitimate criticism of the petty bourgeous tendencies found in the trade-union movement even in the later years. Incidentally the simplicity of form adopted in this play in all departments of dramaturgy was the beginning of yet another off-beat theatrical movement known as the ‘third-theatre’ movement, not under the perview of this work. Due to space restring, the important plays in this section in a chronological manner are mentioned. Thus Raj-Rakta (1971) by Mohit Chatterjee, ‘Chak Bhanga Madhu’ (1972) by Manoj Mitra, ‘Kalkatar Hamlet’ (1973) by Asit Basu, ‘Bhalomanush’ (1979) an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘The Good person of Szechwan’ by Ajitesh Bandhopadhyay, ‘Janmabhumi’ (1974) by Shekhar Chatterjee, ‘Haraner Naat Jamai’ (1975), a story by Manik Banerjee and dramatised by Arun Mukherjee, Bhoma (1976), by Badal Sarkar, ‘Dansagar’ (1976) by Debasis Majumdar and ‘Jagannath’ (1977), an adaptation of the ‘True story of Ah’q, a short story by L’shun adapted by Arun Mukherjee were the important dramatic texts produced in the period. It would also be intresting to note that barring ‘Haraner Naat-Jamai’ and ‘Jagannath’ the rest were original plays and directed and produced by such individual and groups as Bibash Chakraborty and Theatre Workshop (1971, 1972), Asit Basu and CPAT (1973), Ajitesh Bandhyopadhyay and Nandikar (1974), Shekhar Chatterjee and Theatre Unit (1974), Gyanesh Mukherjee and Mass Theatre (1975), Badal Sarkar and Shatabdi (1976), Nilkantha Sengupta and Theatre Commune (1976) and Arun Mukherjee and Chetana (1977) respectively. And it will also be important to note that apart from ‘Jagannath’, all other plays were staged in between the period 1971-1976 which was full of anarchy,chaos and white terror. But all credit must go to the Group-theatre play-makers of the period who unflinchingly stood their grounds and produced plays in support of positive culture and democratic values. The contents of the plays forementationed embraced such subjects as exposition of
racial politics, exploitation of the peasantry and the toiling masses, untouchable’s plight, petty-bourgeois politics and assorted many other problems which were directly related to economic and political movements of the period. Even in the spirit of best democratic tradition of the state, such anti-communist criticisms like ‘Sainik’ (1963) by Tarun Ray, ‘Sagina Mahato’ (1971) by Badal Sarkar and ‘Kolkatar Hamlet (1973) by Asit Basu were accomodated in the stream as an alternative opinion. The majority opinion did take a stand of supporting the left and the later political developments also vindicated their stand. In the ‘politicals’ of the period out of 22 plays, there were as many as 8 plays written by Utpal Dutta. All 8 were directed by him, 4 under the banner of LTG in Minerva and the remaining 4 under the new banner of ‘Peoples Little Theatre’ or PLT. Out of these the most prominent ones were ‘Ajeya Vietnam’ (1966), ‘Kallol’ (1967), ‘Barricade’ (1972), ‘Dushwapner Nagari’ (1974) and ‘Ebar Rajar Pala’ (1977). In ‘Ajeya Vietnam’ he depicted the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese against American imperialism and in ‘Kallol’ his subject matter was the Naval mutiny of 1946. In ‘Barricade’ he depicted the rise of fascism in Germany under the leadership of Hitler and ‘Dushwapner Nagari’ and ‘Ebar Rajar Pala’ depicted the fascist tendencies and the fall of dynastic rules in Indian politics.

The other notable productions of the period in this section were Badal Sarkar’s ‘Tringsha Satabdi’ (1969) by Bohurupee and his ‘Spartacus’ (1973), an adaptation of the Howard Fast novel produced by ‘Satabdi, ‘Ajker Spartacus’ (1974) an original play by Jochan Dastidar and his group ‘Rupantari’, ‘Spartacus’ by Arun Mukherjee and his group ‘Chetana’ and ‘Antigone’ (1973) by Rudrprasad Sengupta and ‘Nandikar’. The texts based on the life of Spartacus, a slave gladiator in the early ages of Roman empire symbolically represented the individual freedom pitted against the tyranny of a dictatorial state which exactly was the political climate, particularly in the state of West Bengal between the period 1971-1975. The theme therefore was an apt choice. However, the interpretation differed according to the perception of the dramatists and directors. Thus while Badal Sarkar interpreted the theme in relation to all round violence and stifling climate in a negative way. Jochan Dastidar and Arun Mukherjee went for a straight interpretation of individual’s fight for freedom. The play ‘Antigone’ by Rudraprasad Sengupta also depicted the same value of individual freedom and the oppression of the state in the same context. The Bohurupee play ‘Tringsha Satabdi’ was an exception in the sense that it was neither a period drama nor a criticism of political events of the period. It rather raised the central question of a third world war, the dominant weapon of which could be the ‘nuclear bombs’. In this sense it was a general anti-war, pacifist document, highlighting the atrocities of atomic war.
There were altogether 21 allegories in this period the significance of which has already been discussed in the chapter titled ‘Trends’. Out of these, five were ‘Bohurupee’ production, the most important being the two Tagore texts ‘Bisarjan’ (1961) and ‘Raja’ (1964). Both were very difficult texts depicting Tagore’s philosophy towards life. But in line with ‘Bohurupee’s tradition, these were made highly communicable to the audience. The next most important allegory in the section was ‘Ebong Indrajit’ (1965) of Badal Sarkar. The play has already been discussed in details and would require no further elaboration. The allegory ‘Yuddham Dehi’ (1968) was an LTG production in the Minerva period of Utpal Dutta and did not receive much success perhaps due to the form and left deviation of the dramatist himself. The other successful allegory of the period was ‘Marich Sambad’ (1972). An original play, written and directed by Arun Mukherjee under the banner of his group ‘Chetana’, immediately attracted the attention of the audience for its blending of the traditional ‘Jatra’ and the more modern European theatre form. The anti-imperialist content of the play and life stage-singing of Biplab-Ketan Chakraborty were an additional asset. The timing of the play in 1972 was also very significant for its success. While discussing the implication of allegory as a form in the chapter ‘Trends’, it has already been highlighted the intentions of the dramatists behind such formal experimentations. Thus one finds Parthapratim Choudhury’s ‘Visuviaser Mrityu’ (1962), ‘Rajakiya Mrityudanda’ (1964), ‘Krishnachudar Mrityu’ (1966), ‘Iswar Niruddesh’ (1966) and ‘Kancha’ (1970) - all directed by him under the banner of ‘Sundaram’. And likewise another prolific writer of this genre, Mohit Chattopadhyay’s ‘Mrityu Sambad’ (1965), ‘Nilranger Ghora’ (1966), ‘Chandraloke Agnikanda’ (1967) and ‘Bagh-bandi’ (1972) were attempted to by groups like ‘Nakshatra’ and CPTA. Though these were formal experiments and mostly influenced by the absurd drama of European school, introduction of technical and modern methods of stage forms in these plays were quite exceptional and praiseworthy.

Next important trend in this period was the satires. Two Bohurupee productions stand out and these were ‘Kanchan-Ranga’ (1961) and ‘Jadi Aar Ekbar’ (1976). Both hilarious comedies, the first was a scathing attack on the influence of money on the middle class/lower middle society and the second one was an ingenious adaptation of Shakespeare’s ‘A Mid Summer Nights Dream’ done by Badal Sarkar placing the content in a most urban set up. ‘Kanchanranga’ was directed by Shambhu Mitra and ‘Jadi Aar Ekbar’ by Tripty Mitra. Produced at two ends of the period both were very clean and down to earth entertainments. In the same vein were the two adaptations of the Chekov plays, namely ‘The Swan-Song’ (Nanaranger Din, 1961) and
the Proposal (Prastab, 1961) done by 'Nandikar' and directed by Ajitesh Bandhyopadhyay. Both were produced as package-play and were highly popular for uncommon themes and tight-neat acting. Next comes the two Badal Sarkar plays 'Kabi-Kahini' (1967), and 'Ballabpurer Roopkatha' (1970), directed and produced by the author himself under the banner of his group 'Satabdi'. The first one was brilliant in its use of verse in a typical Gogal style and a situational play of immaculate plot building. The second one was almost a modern fairy-play as the name suggested. Two other productions that demand special attention in this period were Bertolt Brecht's 'Puntilla and his men (1975) and 'Narak Guljar' (1976). The adaptation of the Brecht play was done by Shekar Chatterjee. Titled 'Pantu Laha' it was produced and directed by the script-writer himself under the banner of his group 'Theatre-unit'. It was a very competent adaptation of a Brecht play combining all the nuances of intellectual humour and proletarian fun. However, the most successful satire of the period was Monoj Mitra's 'Narak guljar' (1976). Directed by Bibash Chakraborty under the banner of Theatre-workshop it was practically an allegory commenting indirectly upon the prevailing political situation. An uncanny plot involving the Hindu deities and sages and bringing them into the mundane atmosphere of mother earth for solving her problems was an ingenious plot which with deft acting became a hilarious success. Most of the 16 satire productions in this period were genuine original fun and gave the audience the worth of their money. That the theatre-makers of this genre did not get disheartened by the political atmosphere of the period was indicative of the fact that good, clean, laughter and fun were an integral part of human culture and society; and no repression, not even the repression of a state-machinery could suppress it. This was amply proved by the satires produced by the group theatres in the period 1961-1977. It was as if resolved to be an undercurrent of humour and a positive living sign of a society which was reeling under various social and political problems and some kind of relief was essential for its survival. The satires of the period, at least in the group-theatre circuit, did exactly that.

The period will now be concluded after a brief analysis of the minor trends. But though minor in nature, in terms of production, there were many exceptional texts of high calibre in different streams. For example 'Sher Afgan' (1966) an adaptation of Pirandello's 'Enrico IVth' was a brilliant period piece of experimentation both in form and content. Adapted and directed by Ajitesh Bandhyopadhyay, under the banner of 'Nandikar', it was as if the past history commenting upon the present. However, the implication, interpretation and relevance of past history was more pronounced in 'Tota' (1973) by Utpal Dutta. Produced and directed by the
The period '1961-1977' is now concluded with the contention that it was apt to be defined as a period of politicalisation though not all the productions of the period were corroborative to the hypothesis, particularly in the professional theatre stream. The 'group theatre' movement adequately proved the contention of politicalisation which in turn indicated definite influence of social change in the attitude of the people. The professional theatre productions of the period were by and large non-committed. But that did not deter the other movement, i.e. the group theatres from siding with left-radicalism which was the basic ideological plank, not withstanding the negative effect of violence, anarchy, public disorder and state terrorism. With this observation, one may now enter the last phase of post-independence era, i.e. 1978-1990, or the period of stability and diversification.

**Period of stability and diversification: 1978-1990**

The political situation in the country underwent rapid changes and there were number of general elections held at the central and state level. Most important of these was the general election held in March 1977 which Indira Gandhi and her Congress Party known as Congress
lost resoundingly ending the stifling era of emergency. This paved the way for an Assembly election in the state of West Bengal which was held in June 1977. The left United Front under the leadership of Jyoti Basu and his party, the CPI(M) formed a new ministry on 21st June, 1977 (Basu, 1998). Thus began a stability ending the chaos, anarchy and lawlessness in the state which not even the Congress (I) coming back in the power in 1980 by winning the Parliamentary election could destabilise. The establishment of a stable and democratic government in the state as it has been pointed out elsewhere, brought in much hope and expectations, though not all of these could be fulfilled due to the limited power enjoyed by a state government under the Indian constitution. But the major achievement of the Left United Front Government was the removal of anarchy and chaos and indiscipline from the school, college, university campuses which became practically a hot-bed of violent politics in the earlier period of 1972-1976. This was an area that affected the cultural milieu of the state most and a resemblance of order and discipline brought in much sought after relief. In fact the establishment of United Front government in the state became a process of continuity unbroken even at the time of writing the present work in 1999. The stability and continuity, thus achieved, had great influence on the cultural activities including theatre-making in the state. The only negative aspect of the period was the use of force and violence which continued to be applied in the field of politics inspite of the best efforts of the United Front Government that won a series of assembly election after 1977. But the application of force and violence in these elections as well as in general public life was a negative feature that cropped up time and again. The Congress (I) as the main opposition party though may be partly held responsible, because of their propensity to vent grievances in a violent way, the trend of violence became a general social menace, particularly amongst the youth section of the society born on or about 1970-72. One of the significant social reason behind such behaviour could be the enormous influence of the Hindi cinema flashed through Television channels all over the country. Television, by 1980, had become a major source of mass-information for the general people. Another economic reason could be the rising unemployment curve that generated frustration and a sense of helplessness amongst the youths as well. Thus perhaps to ventilate anger at the slightest pretext, violence would break out and a tendency to take the law into one's own hands had become a permanent feature amongst the masses. But perhaps this has become an all India feature and comparatively less pronounced in the state of West Bengal due to the presence of a stable state-government whose record of keeping law and order within reasonable limits should be termed as exemplary in comparison to many of their counter-parts in the country.
Thus in summing up the characteristics of the period, i.e. 1978-1990, it may be seen that a stability in politics and public life was the basic feature. This helped the middle class intelligentsia to concentrate and focus their attention in wider cultural activities in a much more open atmosphere. In fact the activities of the state government, particularly in the field of dramaturgy, were quite encouraging. The government constructed new halls in the city of Calcutta as well in the important district towns, thus spreading theatre far and wide. The state government also distributed grants to the deserving theatre groups, established a Natya Academy which encouraged research projects on dramaturgy as well as original writings of dramatic texts. Of course the acts of the government were in keeping with its declared policy of left radicalism. But the stability in social life also brought in a sharp focus the contradiction between the path of non-violence and violence. The second characteristics of the period therefore is the application of force and violence. The ideological bias towards armed revolution insofar as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was concerned, now became a theory which until and unless it would become a political compulsion, might remain in the oblivion. But surprisingly the main opposition party of Indira Gandhi’s Congress (I), also forgot conveniently the creed of Gandhian non-violence and according to them, as a necessary means of political survival, they embarked upon the path of force and violence vitiating the atmosphere of the state. The introduction of the lumpen musclemen recruited for the sole purpose of violent activities thereby became a routine affair, the effect of which in the general public life of the state had become enormous. Thus the two contradictory approach towards the concept of force and violence was the second basic feature of the period.

It would now be our endeavour to analyse the dramatic performances of the period between 1978-1990 in the above light. There were as many as 130 productions that have been taken into account in the commercial circuit during the aforementioned period. Out of which there were 61 socials, 24 satires, 3 historicals and 1 each of socio-political, biographical and romance variety. Also produced during the period were 39 adult plays. Trends such as political, mythological, allegory and musical remained unrepresented probably due to lack of direct initiative on the part of the professional hallowners and the producers.

In comparison to this there were as many as 147 plays that were produced in the group-theatre circuit within the same time-frame. There were 34 socials, 30 socio-politicals, 23 satires, 15 politicals, 14 allegories, 8 mythologicals, 5 historicals, 4 crime and detectives and 2 each of
musicals and romances. The group-theatre circuit, therefore tried to do justice to all trends available to them.

Professional theatre: 1978-1990

As usual, in both professional and group-theatre, the socials were a dominant trend though in selecting the contents, the ideological concepts were widely divergent. Out of the 61 socials in the professional theatre, very few were related to any concrete social problem. The tendency appear to be an admixture of easy middle-class entertainment in the form of slapstick comedy and soap-opera. A reason for this kind of thinking was perhaps the prevailing open atmosphere which the producers interpreted to be conducive enough for easy entertainments without taxing the intellects of their target audience. But there were exceptions to this. The renowned film artist Soumitra Chatterjee and his productions admirably proved that. His 4 productions in the commercial social section were; Nam Jiban (1979), ‘Rajkumar’ (1983), ‘Fera’ (19870 and ‘Nilkantha’ (1988) and all 4 were a combination of serious thought provoking drama and clean entertainment. And he also did not hesitate to experiment as a result of which he even attempted an adaptation of Durrenmat’s ‘The Visit’ which in Bengali became ‘Fera’. In fact his focus was on universal human values which had to face constant attacks arising out of the new social tensions in the later periods of post-Independence era. However ideological commitment apart, some of the social scripts were noteworthy for variety of reasons. For example Bimal Mitra’s masterpiece, ‘Saheb-Bibi-Golam’ (1978) was a period piece depicting the fall of the erstwhile feudal aristocrats. Dramatised by Rash Behari Sarkar, a prominent hall-onwer and producer it was a tremendous crowd-puller. Then there was Saktipada Rajguru’s ‘Meghe-Dhaka Tara’ (1980) a poignant story of an young refugee girl, it was earlier successfully filmed by the eminent filmographer, Ritwick Ghatak, but its dramatic version was of very little significance. The same was the fate with Shankar’s ‘Jana-Aranya’ (1981) dramatised by Samar Mukherjee who later on switched into the arena of adult theatre. This was a story which was also filmed by none other than Satyajit Ray. Samaresh Basu’s ‘Baghini’ (1982) was another bold attempt. Revolved round boot-legging it had a powerful social content and its dramatist/director, Samir Majumdar was a long time associate of Utpal Dutta. But inspite of his radicalism, it was a muddled affair and became a flop. Next to these were adaptations of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novels-’Anandamath’ (1983) by Rash Behari Sarkar and ‘Indira’ (1984) by Debu Basu/Shovanlal Mukherjee combine. Both were futile anachronisms and practically rejected
by the audience. In comparison, Subodh Ghosh's 'Sujata' dramatised by the experienced Biru 
Mukherjee and directed by Bibhuti Mukherjee, a lesser known name, achieved better success 
perhaps due to the realistic approach and a very involved appearance of Sandhya Ray, noted 
film actress in the lead role. It was a typical sentimental story of a young Bengali woman fighting 
with the odds of life. Mention must also be made of 'Swaralipi' (1986) based on a novel by 
Narayan Sanyal. This was a music-oriented social, the lead role of which was done by Aparna 
Sen and the music was scored by Jatileswar Mukherjee including lyrics. Just a run of the mill 
ordinary soap-opera, it was successful due to the glamour of Aparna Sen and the serious 
musical score. A notable exception was 'Dampati' (1986), which was an original play by Manoj 
Mitra and its music was scored by Debashish Dasgupta, an artist groomed in the IPTA genre. 
It enjoyed limited success inspite of much media-backing. Surprisingly 'Shyamali' (1987), a 
very successful social play of the fifties was revived once more and this time it became a hopless 
anachronism. The social consciousness of the producer-director-dramatists of the period may 
well be understood by the fact that such soap-opera like 'Jay-Jayanti' (1988), and 'Ki-Bibhraf' 
(1990) were produced, scripted and directed by Gaurish Mukherjee and his likes in the profession. 
Both plays were puerile exercises and appeared to be an attempt to obfuscate and 
side-track the main social issues. One may refrain from further detailed analysis of the socials 
in the professional circuit because the forementioned productions adequately established the 
hypothesis that inspite of occasional efforts, the bulk of the socials in this period were nothing 
but entertainments, the motive behind which was simple profit, and to that end every conceivable 
means was adopted. In this process, thrown and cast-aside were the traditions of Bengali 
professional theatre established by Girish Chandra, Amarendra Nath, Dutta and Sisir Bhadhury, 
without any qualms whatsoever. In fact the concept of hallowners assuming the self-styled role 
of playwrights and usurping in the directorial rights and the ideological bankruptcy 
simultaneously took place in this period and it ultimately led to the ruin of a tradition which was 
the Bengali professional theatre.

In the trend "satire" one would find the same kind of shallow entertainment which was 
practically aimed at to draw an audience who, it would appear, were advised to leave their 
brains back-home. "Slap-stick" comedy or "Soap-opera" in whichever names these 
productions were called, they virtually lacked social understanding. Some notable exception 
even in this procession of insignificances were Sailesh Dey's Jay Makali Boarding (1979), 
directed by the noted screen comedian Bhanu Banerjee. It was a hilarious fun depicting the
mess life of the calcuttans in the fifties. It also had an earlier successful film conversion. Then mention must be made of “Shrimati Bhayankari” (1979) directed by yet another film personality Rabi Ghosh. It was a character portrayal of a dictatorial lady whose pranks were both tragi-comic. Another exception was Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar’s ‘Vranti-Vilash’ (1980) which was an adaptation of William Shakespear’s “A Comedy of Errors”. The play was directed by Santosh Dutta, a noted film comedian. Another successful play in this genre was a Manoj Basu story “Angti Chatterjee Bhai” (1981) dramatised by Partha Pratim Choudhury. Another eccentric character-protrayal of a lady was found in “Aloowalia” (1985), by Shekar Chatterjees, the noted group-theatre writer-director-producer. Then there was Satya Banerjee’s “Kaker Basa” (1987) and Shyamakanta Das’ “Sabash Peto Panchu” (1988) which deserve mention. The last named was directed by Rabi Ghosh. In this section also was a Soumitra Chatterjee Play, “Ghatak Biday” (1990) which was directed by him on board the “Star”. As in his social plays, it bore the mark of distinctive Soumitra Chatterjee style. The content of the play was the age-old Bengali custom of match-making through a “Ghatak” or a match-maker which sometimes wrought havoc on the families. In a subtle humorous way, this was exposed in the play and was a thumping success.

Apart from the trend of social and satire, two other productions in the socio-political and crime and detective section need to be mentioned. These were Biru Mukherjee’s “Char-Prahar” (1983), earlier performed in group-theatre circuit as a socio-political and Saradindu Banerjee’s crime-story Beni-Sanhar (1980) dramatised by the same Biru Mukherjee. Both were directed by the noted film actor Gyanesh Mukherjee, who also was a professed left-radical group-theatre personality. There were 3 historicals in the period. ‘Rajadrohi’ (1978) based on a Saradindu Banerjee story was directed by Dilip Ray, quite an established film actor, ‘Bilkis Begum’ (1984), a Tarun Bhadury story dramatised by Utpal Ray and directed by Gyanesh Mukherjee and the Shakespear classic ‘Hamlet’ (1989) translated and directed by Amar Ghosh who was also the manager-cum-proprietor of the hall ‘Circarina’. Though these three were placed in the historical section in the professional circuit, practically the first two were fictions and had nothing to do with the standard Indian History. However, since the story-lines in the two plays were placed in the backdrop of imaginary history, these had been classified as historicals. And in the same sense ‘Hamlet’ had also been put in this section since in the classification table (Diagram : A) no such section as ‘Classic’ was contemplated. Of the three ‘Bilkis Begum’ enjoyed quite a lot of success. But the production of ‘Hamlet’ miserably failed.
In fact it was a typical example of the hall-owners usurpation of the playwright and director's prerogative of which mention had already been made.

The last section to be discussed in the professional circuit is the adult plays. The basic analysis of this trend and the ideological background have already been discussed in the appropriate section of the chapter 'Trends'. Here therefore, only a resume of the performances and that too in a very brief manner will be attempted to. Out of the 39 plays in this section, only 5 were based on established literary pieces. These were Shankar's 'Samrat-O-Sundari' (1979) and 'Nagar-Nandini' (1980), Subodh Ghosh's 'Jua' (1979) and 'Piu Kanha' (1979) and Samaresh Basu's 'Rangini' (1983). It's no use indicating the names of the dramatist because the scripts were rather insignificant. Suffice it to say, many of these script-writer and a host of new-comers tried their hands to write so-called original adult plays and failed miserably. And interestingly two hall-owners, Rash Behari Sarkar of 'Star' and Amar Ghosh of 'Circarina' also tried their hands in this kind of writing. Their two plays respectively were 'Rakta-Ranga' (1982) and 'Disco-Queen' (1983). Both plays were surprisingly not produced in their own halls. These two apart, Samar Mukherjee, a veteran of group-theatre movement wrote and directed 4, Partha Banerjee, an absolute new come wrote 4, another new comer Parthasarathy Das wrote 3 and Sumit Das and Kumar Gopi, each wrote 2. It is felt that the detailed subject and content analysis of these plays would not bring any significant data. But a year-wise breakup may help one to understand the psyche of these producers in grasping the open and unfettered opportunities that came in their way in a free democratic atmosphere under a stable government. Thus there were only one play in 1978, 7 in 1979, 4 in 1980, 2 in 1981, 4 in 1982, 3 in 1983, 1 each in '84, '86, '87, 4 in '88, 2 in '89 and as many as 7 in 1990. It will be seen that both the years of 1979 and 1990 were quite productive for these producers of adult-plays. Significantly 1979 was just the following year of an establishment of a stable governemnt in the state and 1990 was the preceeding year of an assembly election to be held in the state in 1991. A hypothesis therefore would not be far-fetched, if one would have to deduce that the mushrooming of the adult-plays in these two years were not at all accidental. For in 1979, the elected United Front government had other priorities and their declared policy of non-interference in the democratic movements and institutions emboldened the sponsors of the adult plays in the name of freedom of artistic opinion and creativity. And 1990 being a pre-election year, the governemnt was preoccupied elsewhere in terms of priority and the adult theatre, being a minor cultural train, got the opportunity of going scot-free in their endeavours. That they could not continue these
efforts of titillation of morbid sex in the later years was indicative of social awareness and futility of the adult-plays which unlike their counter-parts in the European culture lacked cohesion, ingenuity and innovative concepts. It has been pointed out earlier in the chapter titled 'Trends', this could have been achieved only by the group-theatre circuit with more imaginative and social perception towards sex and morality. After all morbidity and suppressed libido can only be countered with clean, healthy and delicate interpretation of as touching a subject as sex.

Group theatre: 1978-1990

Coming to the analysis of productions in the Group-theatre circuit, it may be seen that here also socials were the dominant trend, closely followed by socio-politicals, satires, politicals, and allegories. Little lesser were biographies and mythologicals. And there were historicals, detective and crime-stories, musicals and romances. Representing all the trends in this period was a major achievement of the group-theatre circuit. In fact the variety of form and content clearly indicate maturity and an urge to communicate. This would be revealed in the following analysis, albeit, in a brief manner.

In the social section there were as many as 10 adaptations, prominent among these were. Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay’s ‘Pap Punya’ (1978), based on Tolstoy’s ‘The Power of Darkness’, and ‘Tettirishtama Jamnadibasar’, (1982), based on Harold Pinter’s ‘The Birthday Party’, Chandan Sen’s ‘Gyanbriksher Fal;’ (1985) based on Tolstoy’s ‘Fruits of Culture’, Rudraprasad Sengupta’s ‘Neela’ (1986) based on the combination of film script of Bergman’s ‘Dolls house’ and the original play by Ibsen, Navendu Sen’s ‘Bhomma’ (1989) based on Chekhov’s ‘Uncle Vaniya’ and Indrashish Lahiri’s ‘Ichhe Gadi’ based on Tenessy Williams’ ‘A street car named Desire’. The contents of these productions were as varied as could be. For example in ‘Pap-Punya’, perhaps first time on the Bengali stage, an illicit relation between a moneyed jodtar (land-lord) and his kept maid in a rural backdrop was brought into play in a very tight as well as complex manner. It was a deep incisive analysis of man’s primitive instincts which the directorial acumen of Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay brought to the hilt. Incidentally this was his first production after he broke away from ‘Nandikar’ and established his own group ‘Nandimukh’. The second production of this group was the Pinter adaptation, again a very complex drama.
involving the middle-class, but in an urban backdrop. Another courageous attempt was the
Tennessee Williams play adapted by Indrashish Lahiri. It dealt with the love-story of an odd
couple, where violent passion and submission alternately dominated their life. However, apart
from adaptation, Nandikar, now under Rudraprasad Sengupta, attempted the Sanskrit Classic
‘Mudra Rakshas’ (1979) by Bisakhdutta following his own translated script. Apart from
adaptations and translations, there were number of original plays in this section. Some of
the important plays were Chandan Sen’s ‘Sadhu Sanga’ (1981) and ‘Anubikshan’ (1983), Chandra
No doubt the most successful amongst these were Manoj Mitra’s ‘Alakanandar Putrakannya
which dealt with the battle of a helpless lower-middle class Bengali mother facing the stiff
economic and social odds of life. Interestingly all these texts dealt with universal human values
and purposefully exposed such superstitions as the concept of ‘Sati’ which even in the modern
times was in vogue, or the retrogressive Bengali usage and custom while in mourning as in ‘Niyam
Bhanga’. Apart from originals, the literary works that had been dramatised in this period were
also related to social problem as well as human values. Rampada Choudhury’s ‘Kharij’ (1982)
dramatised by the present worker, was a poignant story of the death of a boy servant employed
by a modern Bengali nucleus family. The death symbolically exposed the hollowness of radicalism
professed by the middle class. Another example of such hollowness and drudgery in a bantering
form was the Shrisendu Mukherjee story ‘Jatin Babur Chakri’, which was aptly scripted by the
upcoming dramatist Dwipendra Sengupta. Also notable was the Saiyad Mustafa Siraj story
‘Manoos Bhoot’ (1990) which dealt with poverty, superstition and degradation of human being.
If one now adds to this spectrum, two feeble attempts of Tagore stories being converted into
drama such as ‘Bicharak’ (1989) and ‘Dristidan’ (1989) and two oft-repeated dramatic versions
of Sarat Chatterjee novels, namely ‘Bipradas’ (1989) and ‘Charitraheen’ (1989) and the revival
of the Girish Ghosh social ‘Balidan’ (1990) by the West Bengal Natya Academy, one would be
bound to arrive at the conclusion that what the professional theatre lacked, the group-theatres
achieved. The social section of the period was not only full of variety, but it also solved the
dilemma of being only anti-establishment in nature. The group-theatre, in fact found the alternate
path of humanism and universal values in keeping with the rising social consciousness of the
people. In their efforts in the social section, not scared of audience rejection, they relentlessly
followed the hypothesis of induced action expressed earlier by the present worker while
introducing the thesis under consideration. In the socio-political section there were as many as
7 adaptations from European languages and 3 translations from Marathi language. Notable amongst these were ‘Kharir Gandi’ (1978) or Bertolt Brecht’s ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’ by R.P. Sengupta and Nandikar, ‘Scheweyk Galo Juddhe’ (1981) or Bertolt Brecht’s ‘Schweyk in the second World War’ by Asoke Mukherjee and Theatre Workshop, and ‘Bela-Abelar-Galpo’ (1986) or Arnold Wesker’s ‘Chicken soup with Berley’ by the same Asoke Mukherjee and Theatre Workshop, and ‘Hochheta ki’ (1986) based on Dario Fo’s ‘Trumpets and Raspberi’ by Bibash Chakraborti and Anya Theatre’. Subjectwise, ‘Kharir Gandi’ was a Chinese fable commenting upon the reactionary bourgeois justice, Bela-Abelar-Galpo was a veiled self criticism of the falling standard of marxian values among the middle class and ‘Hochheta ki’ commented upon the new modern technique of capitalist exploitation, the remedy of which perhaps could be found in terrorism and anarchy. All three productions were quite complex and in that sense self critical as well as thought provoking. These were induced action-play, which as ideology, may be accepted or rejected. In comparison, the three Marathi plays, namely ‘Kamala’ (1983) by Vijay Tendulkar and ‘Uttaridhikar’ (1984) and ‘Party’ (1990), both by Mahesh Elkunchwar dealt with current socio-political subjects While Tundeulkar highlighted the buying and selling of child brides for the purpose of flesh-trade, Elkunchwar delved deep into the psyche of neo-classical marxian ideologues and their credentials in shaping the destiny of the country. The Tendulkar play was directed by Samir Majumdar, a close associate of Utpal Dutta, and the ‘Elkunchwar’ plays were directed and produced by Sohag Sen, a very prominent, upcoming female director. The noteworthy original plays in this section were ‘Amitakshar’ (1978) by Debashish Majumder and produced by ‘Shudrak’, ‘Gabbukhela’ (1980) by Dwipendra Sengupta and New Theatres Group, ‘Virsa Mundar Gan’ (1983) by Aloke Deb and ‘Pratikriti’, ‘Uttarpurush’ (1983) by Tusher Dey and ‘Charbak’, ‘Roshan’ (1983) by Arun Mukherjee and ‘Chetana’, ‘Agni-Sajyaa’ by Utpal Dutta and P.L.T, Dwiper Raja’ (1989) by Mohit Chatterjee and ‘Samakalin’, and ‘Haldi Nadir Teerey’ (1989) by Amalesh Chakraborty and ‘Anik’. All the original plays dealt with subjects quite uncommon but in keepting with emerging new social ideas which were not hesitant to criticize. For example ‘Amitaksher’ was a caustic comment on the central government award of copper-plaques to the erstwhile freedom fighters without caring for the misery, sorrow and frustration felt by these gentlemen in post-independence society of India. ‘Gabbu Khela’ dealt with the hoax purported on the society by the so-called religious gurus or preceptors. ‘Virsa Mundar Gaan’ was a reflection of the struggles of the santhal tribe against the British. ‘Uttar Purush’ was an attempt to find out how far justifiable was the concept of armed-revolution and ‘Haldi-nadir-Teerey’ espoused the interest of the
working class in the fast emerging port city of Haldia. Thus it is not difficult to conclude that there was a search for new ideological values commensurate with the changing times of stability. Needless to say, these experiments were possible due to a very stable climate of governance of the state and diversification and growth were therefore easier to achieve.

This growth and diversifications are qualitatively visible in satires of the period. Due to space restraints only a few examples can be cited here. Both the original playwright, Manoj Mitra and Mohit Chatterjee contributed a lot in this genre. ‘Raj-Darshan’ (1982), ‘Naisa Bhoj’ (1986), ‘Kinu Kaharer Thetar’ (1988) and ‘Kenaram Becharam’ (1989) were all original plays by Manoj Mitra in this period. Out of these the Bohurupee production of ‘Raj-Darshan’, directed by Kumar Roy was a grand success for its simple and clean fun. His ‘Kinu Kaharer Thetar’ again produced by Bohurupee and directed by Kumar Roy was also an experiment in form. A rural story-telling method adopted by the potuas (traditional story-tellers using scrolls in the districts of Murshidabad and Midnapore) which by and large became extinct had been reintroduced in the play as a novel form with much success. Mohit Chatterjee’s original contributions were ‘Swadeshi Naksha’ (1979) and ‘Totaram’ (1986). Both plays were produced by ‘Samikshan’ and directed by Pankaj Munshi, an one time close associated of Badal Sarkar and a versatile stage-singer and performer. Another play need special mention. ‘Gorur-Garir Headlight’ written and directed by Saroj Roy and produced by his group ‘Natasena’, created a sort of records in terms of number of performances. A hilarious comedy as the name suggests, it was a humourous critique of the Indian-cum-Bengali society which was shown as a piece of anachronism.

In the political section, there were as many as 6 plays of Utpal Dutta, who true to his fame remained ever loyal to political subjects. All 6 were produced by PLT and excepting ‘Ekla Chalo Re’ (1989), which was directed by his daughter Bishnupriya Dutta and Mrinal Ghosh jointly, rest were under his own direction. Noteworthy amongst these were ‘Bangla Chado’ (1980), an adaptation of the Dario Fo play ‘Accidental Death of an Anarchist’ and ‘Srimatir Bichar’ (1982). The last named was based on the writings of the noted British journalist David Selbourne criticising sharply the dictatorial policies adopted by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Apart from the Utpal Dutta plays, the notable political dramas produced and performed in the period were ‘Julius Ceaserer Shesh Saatdin (1983) by Nilkantha Sengupta and Theatre Commune, ‘Police’ (1984) by Suber Roychoudhury and Gandharba, ‘Swet Santrash’ (1990), a Carel
Chapek play translated by Asit Baran Dey and directed by Bibash Chakrabarti under the banner of 'Nandipat', 'Cremliner Ghori' (1990) by Amalesh Chakraborty and Anik and 'Ninda-Panke' (1990), a Sartre play translated by the noted poet Arun Mitra and produced by Bohurupee. The subjects were varied but pre-supposed. The producers were not hesitant to dig in self-criticism. Most of the plays depicted the danger of dictatorship irrespective of which camp the dictator belonged. While Nilkantha Sengupta like Utpal Dutta, projected the inevitable fall of a dictator in Bourgeois society, Debkumar Bhattacharya chose to project the curtailment of democratic rights in a communist country like Czechoslovakia. 'Nindapanke' directed by Kumar Ray chose Jean Paul Sartre play 'Les Mains Sales' because of its subject matter dealing with the communist led anti-fascist resistant movement in France, depicting the inherent contradictions and weaknesses. All in all under a communist led United Front Government, these political expressions assumed a greater significance insofar as individual freedom and liberties were concerned. And also these were induced actions in anticipation that the future menace of curtailment of the people's rights might not occur without the resistance of the masses.

In the allegory section, there were number of experimentation both in content and form. In fact it is very difficult to choose from the 14 allegory plays of the period. However, from the formal point of view, mention must be made of Mohit Chatterjee's 'Mahakalir Bachha' (1978), Monoj Mitra's 'Mesh-o-Rakshas' (1980), Chandan Sen's 'Sonar Mathawala Manush' (1983), Swatilekha Sengupta's 'Mananiya Vicharak Mondali' (1985), Prasanta Deb's 'Mr. Kakatua' (1987) and Badal Sarkar's 'Sesh Nei' (1989). Three Tagore stories were also produced in the period and these were 'Bisarjan' (1984) by 'Theatre Workshop', 'Malini' (1986) by Bohurupee and 'Raja' (1990) by 'Anya Swar'. Added to these were two adaptation of the Sartre play 'The Flies' and these were 'Nijeder Safclhane' (1981) by Anjan Dutta and 'Open Theatre' and 'Anusochita Argos' by Shubendu mukherjee and 'Komal Gandhar'. Needless to say most of these were experiments in form irrespective of their contextual relevance to the prevailing situation. But even then the productions of 'Mahakalir Bachha', 'Mesh-o-rakshas', 'Sonar Mathawala Manush', 'Mananiya Vicharak Mandal', 'Malini' and 'Mr. Kakatua' were the cream of these allegorical productions highlighting very asorbing contents concerning the individual human being, its alienation from the society and the responsibility of solving their problems through collective social actions. The plays in this section genuinely display new social ideas and human values not confined to any particular ideological doctrine. Rather these were expressions of individual freedom born out of the emerging new social values. As a fore-runner
and anticipator, the group-theatres in an indirect symbolical way were inducing social actions which they believed might act as social deterrent in future irrespective of the continuity of political stability and peaceful atmosphere.

In the rest of the trends of the period same variety and uncommonness in form and content could be visible. In the ‘Biographies’, Utpal Dutta’s ‘Titu Mir’ (1978) and ‘Danrao Pathikbar’ (1980), Mohit Chatterjee’s ‘Galileo’r Jevan’ (1980) and ‘Socratis’ (1989) and Kumar Ray’s ‘Galileo’ were creditable performances. In ‘Titu Mir’, Dutta projected the life of the legendary Santal hero of the same name in a revolutionary way and ‘Danrao Pathikbar’ was the life of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, a revolutionery creator of Bengali verse-play. Mohit Chatterjee’s ‘Galileo Jeevan’ and Kumar Ray’s ‘Galileo’, both were adaptation of Bertolt Brecht play ‘The life of Galileo’. The Mohit Chatterjee play was directed by Franz Benevitz, the noted German director who organised theatre workshop in the city of Calcutta at the time and as a result the play was produced. It was a combined effort of group-theatre actors and actresses and Shambhu Mitra’s performance in the lead role was memorable.

The mythological plays of the period were all interpretive as well as experimental. ‘Nathbati Anathbath’ (1983), and ‘Katha Amrita Saman’ (1990), two plays by Saonli Mitra, produced under the banner of ‘Pancham Baidic’ and directed by the play-wright herself were sensational. Both plays were written following certain episodes of the Indian epic ‘Mahabhaarata’, throwing new lights upon them. Incidentally these were solo performances by the authoress herself and were tremendous crowd-pullers. The interpretive role of Draupadi in ‘Nathbati Anathbath’ in an absolutely new format with music to back up was appericated by all sections of the audience as a marvellous piece of dramaturgy and superlative acting. Also as an experiment, a new group ‘Theatron’ took up the challenge of verse plays. They produced Buddhadev Basu’s ‘Pratham Partha’ (1980), Tapaswi-o-Tarangini’ (1982) and the greek classic ‘Medea’ (1985). Bohurupee also produced a mythological play which made tangential reference to the prevailing political situation. This was Shyamal Sengupta’s ‘Dharmadharma’ (1983) and was directed by Amar Ganguly. Its content was based on episodes of the epic ‘Mahabharata’. In the historicals, two plays stand out. These were ‘Ranikahani’ (1982) and ‘Aguner Pakhi’ (1984). The first one was an adaptation of a Hugo Betti play directed by Ramaprasad Banik under the banner of ‘Chenamukh’ and the second one was a translation of Jean Anouilh text ‘The Lark’ by Arup Rudra depicting the life of Joan of Arc. The last named was a Bohurupee production and was
directed by Kumar Roy. The two romances of the period were translations of the Sanskrit playwright Sudrak's 'Mrichhakatic' or the 'clay-chariot'. While Kumar Ray produced and directed the play under the banner of 'Bohurupee' in 1979, Mohit Chatterjee's translation was produced by 'Samikshan' in 1989 and was directed by Pankaj Munshi. During the time Mohit Chatterjee appeared to be more interested in revivals. Thus in the musical section he recreated 'Alibaba' (1988) which was produced by 'Theatre Workshop' and directed by Asoke Mukherjee. But the most outstanding musical of the period was 'Madhab-Malanchi Koinya' (1988) which was scripted and directed by Bibash Chakrabarti of 'Annya Theatre'. Based on a folk tale known as 'Mymonsingh Gitika' of erstwhile East Bengal, it was a combination of the Brechtian form followed in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' and the age-old tradition of Bengali folk-lore singing. There were four crime and detective plays in the period which was quite unusual considering the tradition of group-theatre circuit. Noteworthy amongst these was 'Indurkal' (1981) which was based on the famous Agatha Christie text 'Mouse Trap'. It was translated and directed by Ashit Ghosh and produced by Shouvanik.

Summation

Thus one comes to an end of the survey of performances in the post-Independence period both in the professional circuit and the group theatre circuit. Scanning through this wide spectrum, certain observations become obvious. First of all it may be seen that there were wide divergence of perceptions in so far as social responsibility was concerned. While the non-professional theatre-makers in the group-theatre circuit from the very beginning were conscious of this responsibility, their counterparts in the professional circuit did not pay much attention in the post-Independence period to this aspect of theatre making. One contention in their defence was the argument that the audience of commercial theatres were heterogeneous and therefore the professional theatre had an obligation to satisfy them. There was not much scope for experimentation and opportunity to go beyond the tradition of the professional theatre. (Gupta, 1983) Another contention in this regard was the perception that the audience of non-professional group-theatres were mostly confined amongst the literate people. (Gupta, 1983) Both contentions appear to be erroneous if in retrospect one looks back at the performances of the professional theatre in the pre-Independence period. There was no alternate theatre in those periods and theatre obviously could not have been continued and persisted only with the active patronage of the so-called educated people. Rather the problems faced by the amateur
theatre makers in the post-Independence period, namely the crunch of resources and an absence of liberal atmosphere till 1977, were equal and same for the professional theatre right upto 1947. But that did not deter the likes of Giris Chandra Ghosh, Amarendra N. Dutta, Aparesh Ch. Mukherjee and Sisir Bhadury or even Mahendra Gupta, Ahnindra Choudhury and Debnarayan Gupta to pursue their social responsibilities as theatre-makers. Interestingly it was the same tradition that was followed by Digindra Chandra Bandopadhyay, Manmatha Roy, Tulsi Lahiri, Bijon Bhattacharyya, Manoranjan Bhattacharyya, Shambu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutta and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay and later on carried forward vigorously by Kumar Ray, Badal Sarkar, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Bibhas Chakrabarti, Jochan Dastidar, Asit Mukherjee, Asoke Mukherjee, Manoj Mitra and Mohit Chatterjee and their likes. Even the younger generation of Pankaj Munshi, Meghnad Bhattacharyya, Dwijen Banerjee, Nilkanatha Sengupta, Dwipendra Sengupta, Ramaprasad Banik, Arijit Guha, Saonli Mitra, Sohag Sen, Jayati Basu and Seema Mukherjee gracefully accepted this social responsibility inspite of great difference of opinion in regard to marxian ideology. In fact the true understanding of the social characteristics arising out of the new contradictions that have been chronicled earlier was the main stumbling block that stood in the way in so far as the professional theatre-makers were concerned. The twin objectives of profit and non-involvement in the affairs of state appear to be the guiding principle of the professional circuit from on or about 1970 and onwards. That such social understandings and social responsibilities were possible and essential could be seen from the productions, performances and perceptions of the two noted professional theatre personalities like Soumitra Chatterjee and Gyanesh Mukherjee. Working inside the limitations of professional theatre, these two gentlemen did not hesitate to experiment, nor they were lukewarm to the rising social reality. What was more appalling for the professional theatre circuit was the fact that inspite of vast resource mobilisation and the services of the prominent film personalities in their disposal, they were unable to rise to the occasion as had been done in the fifties on the face of a challenge thrown to them by the alternate group-theatre movement and particularly by a theatre-presonality like Utpal Dutta. A noted chronicler had aptly summerised the situation “The public theatre (the professional theatre) has lost its dramatist. Of the original dramas written between 1953 and 1980, only a few have real dramatic merit. The rest, though with record runs on the stage ... are just mediocre. Their theatrical success was due to factors other than their literary or dramatic merit ... Speaking generally, it may be said that what the public theatre drama has gained in skill and cleverness, it has lost in power and depth” (Mukherjee, 1982). In plain language it simply means the abandonment of social responsibility and hiding in the shell of self-
deceit. The indiscriminate rise of the adult-plays was a direct fall out of this kind of attitude. Without further elaboration, one may conclude this chapter by simply observing that the twin objectives of theatre-making, namely "the reflection of the contemporary society and a documentary evidence recorded for the future generation" (Gupta 1983), were primarily abandoned by the professional theatre-makers of this period and ultimately these objectives were shouldered by the non-professional group-theatres which understood their time and society better than the professional theatre-makers because of their ideological commitments. Notwithstanding the fear of rejection by the audience, they courageously pursued a path of experimentation and variety inspite of resource crunch and at times the wrath of the state. What was a glorious tradition in the pre-independence era thus was duly shouldered by the group-theatre movement in the post-Independence era without being ideologically too assertive and in keeping with the free democratic norms of a society suffering from too many social problems. Another interesting point to note is the role of Radio and Doordarshan (Television) in the field of media-publicity and communication. The Bengali section of All India Radio, Calcutta centre did yomen service in publicising jatra and group-theatre productions. Doordarshan became a mass-media from the early seventies in Calcutta and by eighties became a wide network through out the country. This opening was fully available to the group-theatres and they took the full advantage of it. In fact many of their actors and actresses gained much fame and footing by appearing in the Bengali serials of the Television. And many of their productions in pure format of theatre were reproduced in this audiovisual medium. Surprisingly in comparison, the professional theatres' response to this medium of mass-communication, to say the least, was tardy. The reason behind this is not easy to understand and since there are not much data available to probe deeper, the matter is left as it stands today. Another point to note is the organisation of theatre-festivals time to time in the group-theatre circuit. This tradition began way back in the early part of the sixties when 'Bohurupee' began to organise theatre-festivals. But these were generally the retrospectives of their own productions. But the most prominent and important festival that began to be organised in the early part of the eighties was the 'Nandikar' festival. Practically from the beginning it almost became an All India festival where important productions from all over the country were invited to participate. Not only that, even prominent group-theatre productions, from neighbouring Bangladesh were also invited to participate because of commonness of language. This in a sense expanded the horizon of theatre whereby works of eminent theatre personalities such as Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Agase, Girish Karnad, Sriram Lagoo, Mahesh Elkumchwar, Ratan Thiyam, to name
only a few, came to be known in its original production scheme and language. For the group-
theatre audience this was an excellent opportunity and experience. And the most heartening news
is that the effort is still continuing. Such kind of efforts were never visible in the professional
circuit. Thus the spirit of experimentation, an intelligent exposure to the mass-media and taking
the advantage of such medium and a collective spirit of building a 'country-wide network' as
has been done by the group-theatres were never attempted to in the professional theatre circuit.
The resultant decline is therefore quite inevitable and predictable. With this the chapter is
concluded with a hope that the analysis has adequately served the purpose of pinpointing influences
on theatre vis-a-vis economic and political struggles of the period between 1872-1990.