INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth I, the queen of England granted her 'dear and most loving cousin George Earl of Cumberland' and others of her 'well-beloved subjects' the charter for promoting trade and merchandise in the East Indies.

"Whereas our dear and most loving cousin George Earl of Cumberland and others of our well-beloved subjects have of our certain knowledge been petitioners unto us for our Royal assent and license to be granted unto them, that they, of their own Adventures, Costs and Charges, as well as for the increase of our navigation and advancement of trade of merchandise might adventure and set forth one or more voyage, with convenient number of ships and pinnaces, by way of traffic and merchandise to the East Indies".

The wealth of the Indies had already become proverbial in Europe.
The East had attracted keen attention for her abundance of pepper and spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, indigo and muslin. And relatively, a European population of the time was in want of sufficient spices. Apart from the culinary and dietary utilities, spices being an indispensable ancillary to many medicines, occupy an important place in the British pharma-opoeia. And however insignificant this may appear, prospect of spices also was one of the reasons behind such a perilous commercial adventure. I

At Hampton Court, on the 16th of October, 1599, the queen had already vented her enthusiasm about the idea and ambition of the London merchants to open a direct trade with the East and the British East India Company was formed on the previous month of that year. The immediate gain, that was perhaps in her view was the vast customs revenue - She would receive if the countless stories of the fabulous wealth of the Orient were only half-true. The exact nature of the Charter was schemed out with the Privy Council and made ready for the formal assent of the queen. It was the 31st of December, 1600. Elizabeth I, the shrewd English.
monarch gave assent and herself became honoured by honouring the ambitious Charter and thereby set the Company in motion. The most promising new century dawed; a propitious adventure of the East India Company was launched, a new chapter of man's insatiable urge for expansion was added to and perhaps, never before had Englishmen felt 'so patriotic and so proud'.

It was in August, 1608 that the maiden voyage of the British East India Company, after a tedious journey of seventeen months anchored at the Indian shore. William Hawkins, bore a sealed recommendation from James I to the Mughal asking for trade with India.

The Indians were completely ignorant of the activity in Europe which was to decide and dictate their fate. The merciless invasion of Timur had long since swept through leaving India in a state of utter disruption and chaos. The reigning king was Akbar, third in the line of the 'Mughals'. By 1600, he had finished most of his conquests and was living at his court at Agra in pomp and luxury. His court had an outstanding reputation for wealth and grandeur. It astounded Sir Thomas Roe when he had arrived at the capital in the
early seventeenth century. Several other Europeans were equally impressed with the show of the royal power and prosperity. This impression led many of them to associate India with affluence. But this was not true. On the contrary, the general condition was poor, and depressing. Besides, the caste rigours were rather terrifying and unscientific. And however imposing the Mughal Empire had been, it was built upon the sand and after the death of its founder, the dissensions of his inheritors wrecked it altogether, corruption and jealous rivalry ate the vast empire through and through and anarchy prevailed everywhere through out the country. This time the Western invasion started in the guise of trade and commerce. It became slowly evident that Asiatic Commerce meant also Asiatic conquest. The competition among different European nations became sharper on the question of supremacy over India. The first Dutch voyages to the East had started a few years before 1600; the Dutch East India Company was formed a few years later. The first French East India Company was founded in 1604, the first Danish Company in 1612, the Portuguese had already been harnessing the business with India regularly for the last Century in the eastern seas; a German Collaboration was
likewise formed a century later. The British East India Company was another obvious contender to the game of supremacy and the prize of Indian Commerce was a bone of contention among all the European competitors for a considerable span of time, until it ultimately rested in the hands of the English. The English, too, relentlessly worked on to make their authority in India real and lasting. And the distant cannonade at Plassey on the 23rd of June, 1757, described as a battle, marked the end of the Government of the Nawabs of Bengal and indicated the fullfledged beginning of the British era in India.

From 1633 the Company had been trying to initiate trade with the eastern India along the main trade routes down the Ganges and its tributaries. At the delta of the river, where it was united with the Brahmaputra, was Bengal. In 1686 an expedition to curb the growing Mughal hostilities was deputed to Bengal, which resulted into the Anglo-Mughal War, 1685-1688, and Job Charnock, a legendary figure in Anglo-Indian history headed the enterprise. Charnock chose the vast 'Swamp-girt' area of Calcutta and made it the headquarters of the Company's third presidency. With the erection of the Fort in the early decade of the century, the Portuguese and the Armenian inhabitants together with a few
Dutch and Danes, gathered round the factory and the Fort.

The Burrabazar (a Hindusthani rendering of the Great Bazar) supplied provisions to the British Settlement. In one of the earliest references to Calcutta in Wilson's Annals, the names of a number of 'bazars' appear. The town including the Fort and its surroundings covered an area of 1,470 bighas of land in 'Dihi Calcutta', a part of which only is utilised. To the north of this 'Dihi' stood 'Chuttanutte' and on the south 'Govindapur' high on the river bank. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Calcutta was fast progressing into a 'traditional type' of Indian City from its original position of a few isolated and discreet hamlets. With the political take over of the area, the sleeping hamlets taken together woke up into a metropolis and underwent vital changes as regards physical expansion and qualitative prominence.

In the second half of this century Calcutta was primarily a nerve centre of busy merchandise - metropolis of benians and dewans - the business intermediaries and the Indian officials of the East India Company. The role of Bengalee Hindus at this formative stage of the company was unmistakably prominent, as regards the social evolution of the town which derived its vital force from the elites of
Bengalee Hindu population of the metropolis. The business transactions of the affluent natives with the Company changed, in one hand, the norms of social behaviour and, on the other, provided a free amalgam of the Britons with the Bengalees in the fields of Art and Culture. But the 'swamp-girt' town Calcutta, unlike Delhi or Lucknow or Benaras or even Murshidabad had no tradition or aristocracy.

"Nabababu Bilas", "Alaler Gharer Dulal", "Hootum Pechar Naksha" bear evidences to this. This township of Calcutta was founded in the year 1690 upon a few scattered hamlets. In the year 1756 there were in total not more than forty mansions and many of those, too, felt the impact of Siraj's sudden attack and invasion. It is only after Plassey in the year 1757 that the new township of Calcutta began to grow until it became in the course of next eighty years, the citadel of art and culture and the capital of British India.

As the Mughal Empire in India, especially in Bengal, began to disintegrate, the social structure and the productive systems severely suffered due to the gradual, authoritative supremacy of the British rule. Its obvious result
produced, in one hand, an affluent class of Bengalee landlords, and, on the other, a new class of Bengalee clerks in the offices of the British merchants along with a number of Bengalee elites, cultured and educated through English education, who became lawyers, physicians, teachers and professors and had some access to the English nobility in the contemporary society. The impact of English culture and education upon those elites became very pervasive and dynamic and Calcutta came to be recognised as a fountain-head of art and culture and the torch-bearer of the Renaissance and the Bengalee elites in Calcutta ushered in a new golden era and a turning point in the cultural life of Bengal.

During the mid-eighteenth century, life would leisurely glide by. The Company officers would generally attend the office during the morning hours, take rest at their Bungalows at noon, and towards evening, when the blazing heat would become tolerable, would take trips by rowing boats. They would try to enjoy the holidays and special festival days, some on boat and some by a ride on elephants.
But it is not possible for any cultured class to rest contented with trade and commerce or war only. As such, the men of the East India Company at the middle of the eighteenth century intensely felt the want of a well-built hall for theatrical and variety performance. In the map of Calcutta of 1753 by Mr. Will we see the first theatre hall built at the south-west corner of the present Lalbazar Street, Reverend Long, on the contrary, considers it to be opposite to the present St. Andrews Church at a little distance of which there is the Great Tank (Lal Dighi) next to which is the Old Fort. "The Theatre stood to the north west of the present Scotch-Kirk". There stands now the stream-lined, marble, palace of the Martin & Burn Company in the place and all the traces of the first Theatre House of the Company men in India, have been completely wiped out and there are wide differences of opinion even among the most serious research workers on the exact site and date of the 'House'.

On the 16th of June, 1756, Siraj with his troop of about fifty thousand, fell, all on a sudden, upon the Cossimbazar factory and proceeded towards
Chitpore. The company men and their negligible number of soldiers, frightened and puzzled, failed to resist the young Nawbab, and within a very short time, the area turned into an woeful scene of carnage and wastage. The first Theatre House or the Old Play-House was not spared. Though ultimately just the next year, the Company under the veteran leadership of Lord Clive could snatch away Calcutta for ever from Siraj after the so-called battle of Plassey and many other lost properties thereby, and the 'Old Play House' of that age was pulled down.

News-papers were yet to come. The available records of this Theatre House and the performances therein are not quite satisfactory. The Court of Directors of the Company in England sent directives for the Theatre House:

"We are told that the Building formerly made use of as a Theatre may with a little expense be converted into a Church or public place of Worship, as it was built by the voluntary
contributions of the inhabitants of Calcutta”.

Philip De Stanhope, the writer of Asiaticus expressed his grief: "There is a noble play house, - but no Church ............."

For reasons, not comprehensively known as yet, but surprisingly enough, - no 'public place of worship' or Church was set up on that site and an auction house was founded, instead. The Commercial bids of auctioners began to be heard there where once the amateurist artists would keep the audience spell - bound by their acting and recitations. But it needs be admitted that the Theatrical performances that we witness today in India have had their origin in the direct and indirect impact of the British Rule. The precursors of the modern theatrical art and technique were those Europeans who had set up, towards the very beginning of the rule, 'the Old play house', and amateur music halls in Calcutta and staged various
performances for their recreations.

Thus the year mark in the title of the present dissertation has a historical significance. The map drawn by Mr. Williamson (briefly Mr. Will.) in the year 1753 distinctly proves that the theatre house existed any time, on or before 1753. Reverend Long in his "Selections from unpublished records of Government for the years 1748 to 1767, has recorded that Siraj and his troops in the invasion of the 16th of June, 1756 ransacked the Fort and the Factory and did not spare the first Play house in Calcutta. From the record of Reverend Long, it is clear that the play house existed in the year 1755. Further, though there is difference of opinion between Mr. Williamson and Reverend James Long on the exact location of the old Play house, the report of destruction of the play house in 1756 has never been disputed or denied. Therefore, it is safe to presume that the play house definitely had staged some plays during the years 1754 and 1755. Hence the year 1755 has been preferred
to be the year mark in the title of the present dissertation.

The dramaturgy in ancient India had reached its apex of glory and perfection. But in the eighteenth century the art and culture of Bengal was decadent. Through their association with the Britons, the Bengalee revived the passion for the stage. Even though the honourable John Company's men presented England with a new vast Empire, they compensated India with a counter gift and that is William Shakespeare.

The acquaintance with Shakespeare of Bengalee elites was made through two main channels - theatre and teaching.

The tradition of performance on various stages in Calcutta started since the middle of the eighteenth century. Among the theatre houses: The Old Play House (1755), The New Play-House or Calcutta Theatre (1776), Mrs. Bristowe's private Theatre-House (1789), Wheler place Theatre (1797), Athenaeum
Theatre (1812), Chowringhee Theatre (1813), Dum Dum Theatre (1817), Boitaconnah Theatre (1824), Sans-Souci Theatre (1839) are mentionable. A large number of Shakespearean Plays would be staged there. An equally large numbers of actors and actresses introduced the tradition of the Western theatrical performance and stage-craft. Also a good number of theatre troupes from western countries came to this part of the globe and staged a number of plays on different stages in Calcutta. This has enriched the native theatrical talents. The style of performance by David Garrick, Kean, Kemble, Henry Arving, Charles Frankling, Allen Terry, Mrs. Siddons, Emma Bristowe, Mrs. Joana Goodall Atkinson, Mrs. Chester, Mr. Leach, Mr. Francis etc. were important actors and actresses. Native amateurs, definitely, were closely acquainted with the western stage-craft and style of acting through this encounter. This fertilized the latent dramatic genius in many native actors and playwrights. Giris Chandra Ghosh is one of the many instances. The famous actress Mrs. Lewis, proprietor of Lewis
Theatre, deeply influenced girls. Girls would frequent the theatre, had intimate talks with her on various problems of the art and thereby was greatly benefited. The tradition of theatrical performance remained long unabated even when the native, rich amateurs set up theatre houses, wherein, among others, Shakespearean plays would be successfully staged. Besides the original, Shakespearean plays admirably rendered into native languages would be often staged by native producers, actors and actresses. Also, recitations of excerpts from different Shakespearean plays and stage performance of different popular acts and scenes would be taken up by pupils of different academic institutions at many festive occasions. Michael Madhu Sudan Dutt and L. V. Dacie were some of those pupils.

Apart from stage performance, the pedagogic tradition in Bengal has a prominent place in popularising Shakespeare. Hindoo College, afterwards Presidency College, founded in 1817 and Calcutta University in 1857 introduced Shakespearean plays and sonnets as compulsory study in the undergraduate and Post-Graduate syllabi. Many outstanding Shakespeare scholars and teachers joined Hindoo College, a premier
institution of the day. Their reputation as teachers of Shakespeare spread and would keep students spellbound, for hours together. One such was professor D. L. Richardson.

(While reading Shakespeare, he himself would be entranced and would similarly excite his pupils. No doubt, he was considerably the cause behind fruition of the poetic genius of Madhusudan. Hearing his recitation, students would come to accept that there was no poet like Shakespeare, no literature is better than English literature.)
Rajnarain Basu has recorded:

(He would inspire us to frequent the theatre house. whenever we would see him at his house, he would say, "Are you going to the theatre to-day?" He firmly believed that the theatre house was the model school for learning the art of poetry and recitation. He himself would teach actors and actresses the art. They also, would, receive his lessons and advice with greatest respect.)
The great pedagogic tradition in Bengal is very rich and its influence upon elites was lasting. In the mid-nineteenth century, a number of litterateurs tried to render the original plays into Bengali. Some of these renderings are mere transliterations and some are free. The art of rendering came to be very popular, this time. But despite the huge bulk of translations, no fixed form or principle of the art could be evolved. Harachandra Ghosh, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Satyendranath Tagore, Girish Chandra Ghosh may be mentioned in this connection. Many of these rendered versions were staged in different theatre houses of the time.

Professor A. C. Bradley in his criticism on Shakespeare has pointed out three main structural features in a Shakespearean play, viz:—exposition, complication and catastrophe. The first act is exposition of the play; the second, third and the fourth act contain the complication, rising action and climax; sometimes, the climax scene is exhibited in the fifth act; the final act
records falling action and then the catastrophe or denouement. As for example, 'Nil-Darpan' by Sree Dinabandhu Mitra may be taken up. In the first act the feud between Nabinmadhab and the indigo merchants is the exposition; the second and third acts intensify this feud and reaches climax; the fourth act dramatises falling action at the death of Golok Basu, Nabin Madhab dies in the fifth act and the inevitable catastrophe follows. Another play, "Nurjahan" by D. L. Roy may also be referred. The first act of the play is the exposition where we notice severe inner conflicts in Meherunnisa and death of Sher Khan, the clash of action begins and is intensified in the second and third acts; in the third act Meherunnisa becomes Nurjahan and the play ascends the climax, in the fourth, the opponent forces are prominent and the falling action leads to the tragic downfall and catastrophe in the final or the fifth act. Like Shakespearean tragedy most of the Bengali tragedies do not end in the midst of violent action.
Apart from formal similarities or influences, perhaps, the greatest influence that Shakespearean plays exerted upon native drama is in the matters of tragic sentiments and feelings. The tragic conception in native literature before this influence was very insignificant. Realization of the greatest and the deepest truth about life and world as in a Shakespearean tragic play was then absent in a native play. It is through association with the western thought and literature that native literature, especially, Bengali drama was greatly enriched. Two factors were mainly responsible for this enrichment, first, the choice of Calcutta as capital of the British in India in 1756 - and secondly, foundation of Hindoo College in 1817. Next significant landmark was the foundation of the theatre of a tenacious Russian Scholar - Gerashim (Eerashim) Lebedeff in 1795 in Collaboration with a native enthusiast, Sri Goloknath Das. They staged near Doomtollah in Calcutta, the Bengali versions of 'Disguise' and 'Love is the Best Doctor'. These were the first stage performance
of native plays after the western style and technique. Next in importance is the name Sri Nabin Chandra Basu — a leading figure of the affluent society. Mr. Basu set up a theatre in his garden-house, built there a costly stage, and successfully staged the first original Bengali Play 'Vidyasundar' by the great Bengalee poet Bharat Chandra Roy, in 1835, in Shyambazar, Calcutta. Devendranath Tagore, Prasanno Coomar Tagore, Kaliprasanno Singha, Asutoosh Dev, Ramjoy Bassak, Raja Pratap Chandra Singha and Raja Iswarchandra Singha must also be mentioned.