Chapter - II

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It is comprehensively avowed that literature is the mirror of society as it minutely encapsulates the eclectic view of society in different literary genres. Literature is the facsimile of human action, emulating what people think, say and do in the society. It is not only an act of imitation of human action and cogitation, but is an ingenious appliance to reform and rectify the follies, disorder and distortion which subsist in the society. Literature also mirrors the political panorama of a particular time period. It exquisitely reflects the political prospect of a time with delineation of societal ambience of that particular age. To quote William Henry Hudson:

Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language. (10)

It is generally considered that among the entire literary genres, drama or theatre is the oldest genre that has been efficiently representing the society on the stage through performance. From the ancient time down to the present age, it is extensively noticed that drama deftly limns up the societal, economical and political surroundings on the stage. Well-known Indian playwright Utpal Dutt argues that “A theatre that merely entertains and avoids any reference to real social or political problems will never be able to subject the audience to stress and such an audience will not affiliate. Such a theatre denies the very reason why theatre was created” (85-86). Another contemporary Indian playwright Girish Karnard opines that:

Theatre can simultaneously be entertainment, political commentary, and artistic statement, and can be composed in traditional, realistic, and postmodern forms. But to have impact on the heart of society, drama must attempt honesty-not merely by using a mythical Indian history, but by engaging actively with possibilities in the present. (331)
Hence, it is apparent that in the theatrical writings and performances, society and politics play a pivotal role as dramatic works and performances encapsulate each aspect of society and politics. Thus, these two key terms i.e. society and politics need to be explained in the context of dramatic works and performances.

Robert M. MacIver and Charles Hunt Page explicate society “is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behavior and of liberties. This ever-changing, complex system we call society. It is the web of social relationships. And it is always changing” (5). Society signifies a group of interacting peoples who share a similar importance, culture, traditions, civilization and law. Every human being is the essential component of a society. Each and every individual member of a society directly or indirectly takes part and involves in tradition, politics, culture and religion. People need society for their subsistence, survival and accomplishment in this material world.

The society of Bengal or rather entire Indian society is composed of different religion, caste, ethnicity, race and faith. In the society of Bengal as well as society of India; religion, culture, tradition, gender, caste have an irresistible influence on the process of socialization. There is a great variation in food habits, customs, spoken languages, dress style, religious ceremonies among the members of different religion and caste. People can recognize one person’s caste or religion by his or her name.

There are several ceremonies which confirm membership in a religious group or recognize different stages in the life cycle. Think of all the ceremonies when a woman becomes pregnant, before the delivery, at the time of naming the child, for the feeding of rice, for the first haircut, and so on. Food habits and dress styles vary according to religion too. Consider the differences in wedding ceremonies and funeral rites. (Abraham 80)

In a society where all the members of diverse caste, race, ethnicity, religion are equal; it would be called a perfect society. But, in reality, it is very difficult to find out such kinds of perfect and ideal society in the world. Likewise, in Bengali society or whole Indian society one can find many social issues and problems. Like all the other societies of the world, from the old ages, the process of social reformation is going on
in Bengal too. “Social change refers to modifications of social structures and processes over time. In India, the old caste system based on the theory of pollution and purity has undergone a thorough transformation” (Abraham 246).

Politics is a kind of activity through which people can make, preserve and amend the rules, systems and policies under which they survive and subsist. Greek philosopher Aristotle propounds that politics is the activity through which human beings strive to develop and improve their lives, existence; and through politics they endeavor to create a good society for the better survival of human being in this material world. Hence, politics is all about society and above all politics is a sort of social activity; politics and society cannot be detached. Without society there is no existence and meaning of politics.

Politics is the skill or art of government, practice and exercise of authority and power, making decisions and distribution of all kinds of resources. It works at every sphere of human existence. Politics is at the centre of all kinds of social activities, personal and public activities, institutions and all kinds of human groups.

Politics comprises all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby people go about organizing the use, production or distribution of human, natural and other resources in the course of the production and reproduction of their biological and social life. These activities are nowhere isolated from other features of life in society, private or public. (Leftwich 103)

Therefore, politics is the ways and norms through which societies or countries are governed and on the basis of these systems government makes laws and policies and makes the distribution of resources.

It is widely considered that theatre embodies the societal and political milieu of a nation or society on the stage through the dramatic performance. The height of excellence, vividness and lucidity of a theatrical performance are measured through the theatricality of a particular performance. It is a creative, artistic, ingenious and erudite concept of theatre. Theatricality is a requisite and potential trait of a theatre. It is the component of performance on the stage amalgamating an exact technique of
dramatic representation and approach of observation of the audience. It has always been related to the stage or to the audience. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait opine that:

It is a mode of representation or a style of behavior characterized by histrionic actions, manners, and devices, and hence a practice; yet it is also an interpretative model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles, and hence a theoretical concept. It has even attained the status of both aesthetic and a philosophical system. Thus, to some people, it is that which is quintessentially theatre, while to others, it is the theatre subsumed into the whole world. (1)

The topic of the present research, ‘Society, Politics and Theatricality: Reformative and Revolutionary Structures in Select Translated Plays of Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra,’ involves a critical analysis of the select plays of these three playwrights exploring the reformative and revolutionary zeal with special emphasis on society and politics. In order to understand these dimensions in the works of these playwrights the present chapter undertakes a literature survey which is not confined only to the theatres of these three playwrights but gives a wider understanding of theatre as a social and political activity in the light of the Indian theatre and Bengali theatre as a whole.

The theatre of India has a significant history. Its journey begins with the ancient Sanskrit plays. The dramatic knowledge is primarily and loftily described in the *Natyashastra* which was written by Bharata Muni.

Bharatmuni’s *Natyashastra* is considered the foundation of science of dramatics and dramaturgy. Like Aristotle’s *Poetics*, it is accepted as the greatest treatise in the field of drama. The classical theatre is known as the Sanskrit theatre as most of the plays are written in the Sanskrit language which is the member of indo-European language family. (Wadikar 27)
The dramas in India were basically written in Sanskrit language in its initial stage. The early stages of Indian dramas are largely involved with the celebration of rituals, folks and cultural heritage. “Our knowledge about the initial, primitive stage of theatrical activity is very meagre. However, we can safely assert that in India, as in other cultures, the theatrical activity began with primitive magical, religious or social rites, ritualistic dances, festivals etc” (Jain 1).

The Sanskrit drama began its journey after the development of Greek and Roman drama and prior to the development of drama or theatre in other parts of Asia. “It emerged sometime between the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century B.C. and flourished between the 1st century and the 10th century, which was a period of relative peace in the history of India during which hundreds of plays were written” (Sawant 45-46). The Sanskrit drama or classical Indian theatre was the principal source of Indian theatre with culture, customs, rituals, traditions and ethnicity. The major playwrights who became the pioneers of classical Indian theatre are Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Sudraka, Harsha and Vishakadatta etc. And the key exponents of classical Indian dramatic art were Bharata, Bhatta, Abhinavagupta, Dhananjaya, Ramchandra and Ashvaghosha etc. All these are the pioneers of classical Sanskrit drama in India.

Sage Bharata was an ancient Indian musicologist and renowned as an author of Natyashastra, a theoretical treatise on ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics (400 B.C. and 200 B.C). The title of the treatise can be loosely translated as A Compendium of theatre or a manual of Dramatic art. The Natyashastra came into existence as an actual foundation of Indian dramatic tradition. Bharata’s notion of drama is based on the Indian theory of ‘Karma’. According to the theory, man is not just the puppet in the hands of destiny but he or she architects their own fate. Individual’s fate is determined by one’s own actions.

Bharata wrote Natyashastra approximately in the third century. It was originally written in Sanskrit language consisting six thousand sutras or verse stanzas included in thirty six chapters. The Natyashastra expounds an intimate relationship between the idea of dancing and dramatic representation. Bharata explicates that drama uses the eight basic emotions or rasas i.e. love, joy, anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion, and wonder attempting to resolve them in the ninth holistic feeling of peace.
Natyashastra emphasizes almost all aspects of drama—stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting etc.

The Natyashastra’s primary concerns are not philosophical or theoretical; rather, the text elucidates and elaborates how theatre is performed. It prescribes in detailed the construction of theatre spaces in India, the application of make-up, the design and building of props, arm, foot, eye and other body movements, ritual practices, the organization of theatre companies, the audience, dramatic competitions and the community of actors with additional chapters on music and audience appreciation. (Das 135)

However, the finest Sanskrit drama had been closely associated with stir and manifoldness of the life of Sage Bharata.

Another important Sanskrit playwright was Bhasa who was the oldest known playwright. Thirty five plays are said to be written by him but only thirteen plays are in record at present. Bhasa does not follow all the dictates of the Natyashastra. Bhasa allows scenes which contain signs of physical violence to be shown on stage in plays like Uru-bhanga. The Uru-Bhanga and Karna-bhara are the only celebrated tragic Sanskrit plays in ancient India. Though branded as the villain of the Mahabharata, Duryodhana is the real hero in Uru-Bhanga shown repenting his past as he lies with his thighs crushed awaiting death. His relations with his family are shown with great anguishes. The Karna-bhara ends with the premonitions of the sad end of Karna, another epic character from Mahabharata. Though he is firmly on the side of the heroes of the epic, Bhasa treats their opponents with great sympathy. He takes a lot of freedoms and liberties with the story to accomplish this. In the Pratima-nataka, Kaikeyi who is responsible for the tragic events in the Ramayana is shown as enduring the calumny of all so that a far noble end is achieved.

Kalidasa was a celebrated Classical Sanskrit writer generally regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. He wrote three plays and amongst them, Abhijnanasakuntalam generally regarded as a masterpiece. It was among the first Sanskrit works to be translated into English which contained the story of King Dushyanta. While King Dushyanta was on a hunting trip, he met Shakuntala, the
adopted daughter of a sage, and he married her. A calamity befalls them when he is summoned back to court and they were separated from each other but later they were again reunited. Another notable work of Kalidasa is Vikramorvasivam which is all about the story of mortal King Pururavas and celestial nymph Urvashi. These two outstanding Sanskrit plays made Kalidasa a world famous dramatist and he is often called as the Shakespeare of India.

Bhavabhuti was an eight century scholar of India famous for his Sanskrit plays and poetry. He is remembered for his Mahaviracharita (The story of highly courageous), portraying the early life of Rama and Uttararamacharita (The story of Rama's later life), shows Rama's coronation, the abandonment of Sita, and their reunion. Amongst his all works the play Malatimadhava is the most celebrated one which is set in the city of Padmavati.

The playwright Sudraka is known for his drama Mricchakatika (The Little Clay Cart). He has been recognized as Abhira king Indragupta, who used the pen name ‘Sudraka’. Amid all the famous dramatic composition of ancient India, the Mrichchhakatika occupies a very elevated and distinguished position. The play Mrichchhatika is divided into ten acts based on the story of the love of Charudatta. The play dexterously documented the social and political panoramas of the day with the depiction of personal emotions. It enriched with wit, humor and satirical elements.

After this period a large number of playwrights emerged who wrote short plays in comparison to the full length plays. So far as the themes are concerned, societal issues were prominent in the dramas of this period. The dramas dealing with mythical and historical themes also occupied significant position. Some of the playwrights drew their themes from ancient myth and legends and contextualize them in terms of a contemporary social problem as in Perseus the Delieverer by Sri Aurobindo. Bharati Sarabhai and Krishnaswami also strived to project contemporary social issues in their plays. Dramatists like Kailasam and Ramaswami Sastri showed their interest either in highlighting the greatness of epic heroes and heroines or in giving significance to the neglected characters. However, the playwrights of this period massively contributed to the domain of India dramatic literature. But, the Indian drama elevated its fame during the modern period and the rise of the modern Indian drama dates back to the 18th century when the British colonial Empire strengthened its power in India.
However, the modern Indian theatre developed during the period of colonial rule under the British Empire, from the mid 19th century until the mid 20th. A large number of playwrights have come up and made sublimed the modern Indian theatre and aggrandized the periphery of Indian theatre. Moreover, the contemporary Indian playwrights vigorously exhibit the socio-political milieu of the coeval and endeavor to bring a social and political reformation through their dramatic works and activities. A large number of contemporary Indian playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnard, Nissim Ezekiel, Partap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy, Habib Tanvir, Mahesh Dattani, Mahesh Elkunchwar etc. have emerged as prominent figures and attained worldwide reputation by their theatrical writings. They have tried to stage the socio-political environment, existential and moral dilemma, marginalization, gender bias, suppression, poverty, discrimination, hunger and issues related to the daily life to the theatre. *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), is the most famous play of Vijay Tendulkar, in it he expatiates the burning issues of the modern India. In the play, he has spoken for the problematic social structure - social taboos, gender biasness, corruption in politics and biasness in judiciary which exists in society. Through the representation of these social ills, he has tried to reform the society from all these contaminating social disorder.

Silence! The Court is in Session is a satire against the rigid tradition, customs, orthodoxy and the social ills of the middle class society. The play also deals with the traditional and backward culture of narrow minded Indian. It is an attempt of Vijay Tendulkar to criticize the social ills and follies that prevail in our society. (Alam 157)

His play *Sakharam Binder* (1972) deals with gender discrimination and *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) is centered on the political upheaval of that time period. Mahesh Dattani’s play *Tara* (1990) mirrors the harsh and crude reality of modern Indian society. Here, the girl child Tara became the victim of male supremacy over the women. In this play, Dattani passionately unveils the exploitation in the name of gender in post independent Indian society. “It is Tara, the daughter, who faces the heinous impact of discrimination just because she is a girl. The third leg which biologically belongs to Tara is forcefully adjoined to the body of Chandan” (Alam 186). Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), and
Final Solutions (1993) are remembered for playwright’s vivid description of contemporary socio-political turmoil. Girish Karnard always strives to tackle the very burning issues of the post independent Indian society such as existential crisis, psychological and spiritual dilemma through the technique of amalgamation of mythical and historical element with the modernity. “Though myth by itself has the capacity to generate great meaning, in Karnard’s hands these plays achieve much more poignancy. He does this through an effective combination of myth and modern theatre” (Dass 120). These themes figure in Tughlaq (1964), Hayavadana (1972), Nagamandala (1988), Taledanda (1990), The Fire and the Rain (1995) and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997). However, the theatrical works and activity of Nissim Ezekiel, Partap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy, A.K. Ramanujan, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and Ratan Thiyam are very contextual and representative to the modern Indian society.

The topic of the present study, ‘Society, Politics and Theatricality: Reformative and Revolutionary Structures in Select Translated Plays of Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra,’ involves a critical analysis of the select plays of these three playwrights exploring the reformative and revolutionary zeal with special emphasis on society and politics. The aforementioned playwrights are basically Bengali playwrights and that is why, it needs to go back to the history of Bengali drama. It needs to analyze how the playwrights of Bengali theatre depicted the social and political outlook of the society in their dramas. In order to understand these magnitudes in the works of these playwrights the present chapter undertakes a literature survey of the Bengali theatre as a whole.

“The Regional theatre which has gone a great deal further towards realizing a true synthesis of old and new forms, without actually reviving the old folk theatre, is in Bengal” (Anand 35). Bengal has always been an extremely rich and has exalted culture of theatre from the ancient time. However, in Bengal, modern theatre had owed its existence from England around two hundred years ago through the British traders and the colonial rulers of Calcutta. For the sake of convenience the history of Bengali theatre can be divided into three ages i.e. early period (1852-1872), middle period (1872-1905) and modern period (1905s-). The early Bengali dramas are pre-eminently translation from English and Sanskrit, and imitations and explorations are
the chief characteristics of this period. In the middle period, Bengali drama greatly influenced the development of Bengal theatre. Early modern Bengali dramas are predominantly concerned with the patriotism and Hindu nationalism and also with the unity of Hindu and Muslim. Late modern plays are chiefly characterized with the social problems, political commotion, gender biasness and issues related to economy. “The latest Bengali dramas deal with the clash between individual and social interests and the complicated economic problems of the uprooted society” (Bhattacharyya 82).

It is generally acknowledged that Ramnarain Tarkaratna (1822-1886) is the first Bengali playwright.

Most of the original Bengali plays that were written during this period followed the tenets of Sanskrit drama. And the playwright who dominated the scene during this phase, Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, a learned Sanskrit scholar, was an astute propagator of the cause of Sanskrit aesthetics in Bengali drama. (Chatterjee 92)

All his plays, more or less, deal with socio-cultural issues of his time. His work “Kulinkulasarbaswa, the very first original play to be staged, was a social drama focusing on a contemporary social problem that was looming large in the Hindu society of the 1850s” (Chatterjee 151). It was originally written for the purpose of performance with the sense of affluent theatrical composition which was first performed in March 1857 in the house of Jayram Basak and then repeated several times all over Bengal. The play is well structured, divided into several acts and the acts are further sub divided into several scenes. The play effectively foregrounds the major social concerns of the society of Bengal of that particular time period. The playwright has competently captured the ominous and deleterious outlook of the society which comprises the noxious effects of polygamy in Hindu society. His other plays such as Ratnavali (1858), Naba Natak (1866), Venisanghar (1856), Malatimadhab (1867), Rukmini Haran (1871), and Kangsabadh (1875) also accurately illuminate the vitiating consequences of the socio-cultural consuetude of then society. His farces like Yeman Karma Teman Phal (1863), and Ubhay Sabgkat (1869) are emblematic of his concomitant society. Most of the dramas and farces of Ramnarain Tarkaratna were performed several times at the Rangamancha in Belgachhia and Jorasanko.
Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), the closest contemporary dramatist of Ramnarain Tarkaratna, was the rebel in life and also in literature. Like Ramnarain Tarkaratna, the major concerns of Dutt’s plays are to document and to stage the societal issues. The content and plot of his plays are similar to the plays of Tarkaratna. But Madhusudan Dutt generally takes a dig at the perverted societal norms and customs under the guise of rollicking and exaggerated humour. The technique of character sketch of Tarkaratna and of Madhusudan Dutt is quite similar. Madhusudan Dutt excoriates the hypocrisy of men, the religious orthodoxy, exploitation and manipulation of poor people in the name of religious institution and social tradition which prevails in that contemporary Bengali society. The playwright strikes a hard knock at the hypocrisy and meanness of the people through the technique of humour and satire. His play Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? (1860) and Buro Saliker Ghare Ron (1860) are the typical of his writings. Michael Madhusudan Dutt has written these plays to represent his contemporary societal structure and the distorted social values and tradition, but even today, these themes are very contextual and logical to the modern Bengali society in particular and Indian society, in general.

In one, Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? he caricatured the ways of the ‘Young Bengal’ lads, who, in the name of rebellion against orthodoxy, indulged in orgies of drunkenness and Worthing. In the second, Buro Saliker Ghare Ron, he attacked the other side of the coin, the upholder of Hindu orthodoxy who concealed their lechery and their exploitation of the poor under cover of religious observance. (Raha 22-23)

The playwrights of Bengal have a great legacy to represent the contemporary socio-political turmoil through the portrayal of mythological story. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, in his debut play Sarmistha (1859), conveniently depicts the social issues putting in it the very appropriate, logical and contextual elements from the Mahabharata, and makes it very rational and pregnant to the context of Bengal’s society of that particular time. The play Sarmistha that was first staged at Belgachia Natyasala in 1859 achieved great popularity and success in the Bengal theatre, and after that, it was repeatedly staged several times within the same month. His other two plays Padmabati (1859) and Krishnakumari (1860) also got theatrical acclaim and fame.
Dinabandhu Mitra (1829-1873), the most influential 19th-century playwright, unquestionably can claim the distinction as the greatest Bengali dramatist since the advent of Bengali theatre. His plays are essentially characterized with the constituent element of protest, revolution and socialism. He has more vividly and skilfully depicted and staged the social milieu than the earlier playwrights of Bengal. Similar to Ramnarain Tarkaratna and Michael Madhususan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra’s major concern is to represent the society incorporating its distorted norms and perverted customs. But, Mitra’s theatrical works are tinged with the element of protest and revolutionary zeal. He was an extraordinary playwright who gave the Bengali theatre a new direction and solid ground. His play *Nildarpan* (1860) is one of the trailblazing works in the theatrical arena of Bengali literature. It is one of the finest plays of early Bengali revolutionary theatre which dexterously limns up the exploitation of people by the British indigo planters.

*Nildarpan*, a political play that exposed the exploitative conditions on the indigo plantations of Bengal. When in 1872 the democratized ticketed theatre came into being, one of the first productions was *Nildarpan*. But *Nildarpan*, contrary to popular belief, is hardly the revolutionary ‘protest’ play it is championed to be. (Chatterjee 222)

The play *Nildarpan* profoundly delineates the suffering and anguish of Golak Basu, a landlord and also the farmers in the oppression of the British planters. The playwright courageously protests against the brutality and cruelty of the British indigo planter on the poor indigo peasant through the play and also daringly excoriates the British rulers of the day. There is a scene in the play which vividly shows the barbaric mentality and brutal behaviour of the British indigo planters towards the peasant.

Rogue (Planter): Dear, dear, come to me.
Kshetromoni (The daughter of a peasant): Sahib, you are my father, please let me go... (holds Rogue’s hands and pleads). Please let me go, you are my father.
Rouge: I want to be the father of your child. Come up to the bed or I will kick your belly.
Kshetromoni: Oh! my child will die. I am carrying. Have mercy, please let me go. I am pregnant.
Rouge: (tearing off her clothes) I will see you naked. Only then you will be rid of shame.
Kshetromoni: Sahib, I am your mother, don’t make me naked. You are my son, don’t take off my clothes... (Translated by Kironmoy Raha) (Raha 24)

Dinabandhu Mitra has written his debut play *Nildarpan* to rouse social and moral conscience of the people of the day. He has been successful in his endeavour to rise up the people against the brutality and oppression of the British indigo planter.

Close resemblance is observed between the works of Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra in the context of the use of humour and irony. Both the playwrights have attacked the traditional customs and norms of the society which create a hollowness of existence in the individual level under the humour and witty exaggeration. These themes can be found in the other plays of Mitra i.e. *Navin Tapasvini* (1863), *Biye Pagla Budo* (1866), *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1866), *Lilavati* (1867), *Jamai Barik* (1873) and *Kamale Kamini* (1873).

At this period, the themes of Bengali plays have shifted to the realm of historical romanticism, religious emotionalism, farcical comedies, emotional sentimentalism, clownery and vulgarity from the realities of day to day life and society. “Purposive” plays had become popular at the time. No other Bengali dramatist is as typification a ‘purposive’ playwright as Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925). The dramatist of an undisputed masterpiece of Bengali and Indian literature, *Purubikram* (1874), Jyotirindranath Tagore got critical and commercial success during his lifetime. Jyotirindranath Tagore’s major plays are the translation from other languages with some extension and modification. Massive body of his plays is translation from the Sanskrit plays and few comedies are from French playwright Moliere who was his most favorite playwright. He has written many plays in which he has depicted all these issues. *Purubikram* (1874) is one of the famous historical plays of Jyotirindranath Tagore in which he demonstrates enmity between Alexander the Great and the Hindu King Porus. In *Sarojini* (1875) and *Ashrumati* (1879), he has displayed the growing emotional and nationalistic sentiment of the people.
For a period of roughly fifteen years from 1880 to 1995, Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) dominated the Bengali stage, rendering themes and methods that would produce one of the greatest creative explosions in literary history and set the direction which subsequent Bengali dramatists would follow. There was simply nothing like the social and cultural and intellectual expressiveness on the Bengali stage before Girish Ghosh, and drama would never be the same after him. He was a versatile and multi-talented playwright. There is a great variety and calibre in his works. He has written large number of plays, tragedies, comedies, operas, farces and burlesques. Readers of Girish Ghosh’s plays can unfailingly come across the fact that almost the complete spectrum of his plays registers an explicit concern over the societal issues. Depiction of social milieu occupies acres of space in his play. His play Prafulla (1889) is a social tragedy portraying the downfall and spoil of a wealthy Bengali family. “It encompasses a wide range of emotions springing from misfortune, evil designs and melodramatic misdeeds” (Raha 56). The play Balidan takes a dig at the dowry system of the contemporary Hindu society and Sasti ki Santi dexterously hits off the plight of widows. Through the portraiture of all these sordid and flagitious social custom and tradition, he wished to bring a social and cultural reformation but he never questioned the Hindu code of life. He always appealed the people through his works for nobility, goodness and integrity.

Girish Chandra Ghosh is famous for his variety of subjects, themes and the formal structure of his plays. His play encircles a wide range of Indian mythology. The plays like Raban Badh, Pandaber Agnatabash, Jana and Dhruba Charitra are based on the stories from the Hindu epics and the Puranas. Bilwamangal Thakur is a play based on the stories from the Puranas, staged at Star Theatre in 1886 and achieved great success and reputation. In the play, a Brahmin young boy is infatuated with a prostitute but by God’s grace a sudden realization comes and the boy is rebuked by the whore herself for his debauchery. He also wrote some other plays on the basis of the stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Like Jyotirindranath Tagore, Girish Ghosh also brought the historical figure and event to address the contemporary issues in some of his plays like Chanda and Ashoke. He “immediately turned his attention to political subjects and wrote within a short period three powerful dramas, entitled Sirajuddaulla, Mir Kasim and Chhatrapati Sivaji. All of them were proscribed.
by the British Government on a charge of spreading seditious ideas” (Bhattacharyya 80-81).

It is largely viewed that satire and irony has always been a great device in Bengali plays to represent the vitiated and monstrous effects of distorted societal customs and tradition. Through the technique of mocking, one can meticulously unravel the follies of men and contaminated effect of the perverted societal norms. The Bengali playwrights have a great tradition to criticize these kinds of norms and practices through the device of satire from the early period of Bengali theatre. Most of the playwrights of early Bengali theatre have followed this tendency in their works but the technique is appeared in a pronounced manner in the plays of Amritlal Basu (1853-1929). Amritlal Basu is the great innovator of comical and satirical drama in the theatre of Bengal. He revived farcical play in the 20th century as a serious reflection of human nature and experience, and perfected theatrical conventions that have maintained their powers in the hands of such different artists as Sachindranath Sen Gupta, K.P. Vidyabinode etc. One also must credit Amritlal Basu for the legitimatization of comical theater in Bengal and the establishment of a classical repertory. His best known plays are Bibaha Bibhrat, Babu, Bauma and Byapika Biday etc.

No dramatist of Bengali theatre has probed into the subject of patriotism and nationalism with more penetration than Dwijendra Lal Roy (1863-1913). It would not be an exaggeration to describe much of the century’s political and social history as describe Roy’s work. His poems, songs and plays are the evidence of his versatile calibre and distinctiveness. He wrote different sorts of plays to visualize the scenario of contemporary Bengali society. It incorporates his social and satirical plays, mythological plays and his most distinguished historical plays. His satirical and farcical plays bitterly mock the Hindu orthodoxy which exists in the society and the so called newly English educated reformist class. In his first play Kalki Avatar (1893), D.L. Roy strongly criticizes all kinds of social ostracism and all section of Hindu society, and also satirizes the Hindu scriptures. In addition to this, his other noted social and farcical plays like Biraha (1897), Prayaschitta (1902), Ananda Biday (1912), Parapaare (1911), and Banganari (1916) are also remarkable for the depiction of contemporary social and religious fanaticism and orthodoxy. His
“comedies and farces had been confined to social evils with occasional diversion” (Bhattacharyya 81). Like his prior Bengali dramatists, D.L. Roy also wrote few mythological plays to contextualize the contemporary issues with the episodic representation of mythological and legendary figure in his plays. *Pashani* (1900), *Sita* (1902) and *Bhishma* (1913) are the extraordinary and striking mythological plays in Bengali Literature.

At present, the people of modern era first and foremost remembered D.L. Roy for his distinctive and diacritic historical and patriotic plays. D.L. Roy was deeply influenced by the Swadeshi movement, but his patriotism and nationalism was influenced by the European thought which restrained him from emotional and fanatic feeling of nationalism like the fellow countrymen. But in certain specific point, his historical plays are different from the historical plays of his predecessors and contemporaries like Girish Ghosh, Jyotirindranath Tagore and K.P. Vidyabinode. He has taken less liberty and freedom of historical facts and events than his predecessors and contemporaries. He “differed in his humanist and secular outlook. The emphasis in his plays is not on religious revival and spiritual salvation but on faith in human action and human destiny” (Raha 80). D.L. Roy wrote seven major historical and patriotic plays such as *Tarabai* (1903), *Rana Pratap Singha* (1905), *Durgadas* (1906), *Nurjahan* (1906), *Mevar Patan* (1908), *Sajahan* (1908) and *Chandragupta* (1911); and got rapid commercial success and fame. To quote Asutosh Bhattacharyyya:

> the dramas dealing with mythological and historical themes centre round the actual country and its predominant social problems. What distinguished the patriotic dramas of Dwijendra Lal is the perceptible emphasis on Hindu national sentiment as evident in the clash between the Hindu Rajput and Muslim Moghal powers. (81)

To continue the propensity of producing diverse kinds of Bengali dramatic literature, Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode (1863-1927) also has a great contribution. Like his predecessors, K.P. Vidyabinode wrote different kinds of plays such as mythological plays, historical plays, farcical plays etc. Unlike D.L. Roy, his historical plays are based on the tales and characters of Hindu epics and the Puranas. His most famous historical play *Alamgir* (1921) is based on the life of last great Moghal emperor Aurangazeb. Here the life of emperor Aurangazing is represented in a tragically
gloomy mode. “A similar approach- but with an emphasis on inner psychological conflicts- in the portrayal of the same Moghal Emperor can be seen in D.L. Roy’s Shahjehan and Durgadas” (Raha 83). His other historical plays such as Pratapaditya (1903) and Raghubir (1903) are also remembered for their dexterity. His mythological plays Bhisma (1913) and Naranarayan (1926) are emblematic of his writings. The play Bhisma is based on the episodes and characters of the Mahabharata and it is one of the best known plays of K.P. Vidyabinode. Coincidentally, the Playwright Dwijendra Lal Roy also wrote a historical play with the same name Bhisma which was published later. The play Naranarayan is centred on the character ‘Karna’ and again it is also taken from the Mahabharata. The contribution of K.P. Vidyabinode in the arena of Bengali dramatic literature is immense. Besides his historical and mythological plays, he has also written few musical operas. Among them, Alibaba (1897) is very famous and even today it is very common name in rural Bengal.

Only a few literary giants, such as Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pushkin, and Goethe, have had as comparable an impact on a people’s language, literature, and cultural identity as Rabindranath Tagore, the preeminent figure in Bengali literature. Tagore’s influence extends into the artistic achievement of other Indian languages, and in the West, Tagore is the most respected of all Indian literary artists. (Burt 395)

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is the colossal and legendary figure in the history of Bengali literature. He has an immense contribution to the field of Bengali literature incorporating all literary genres i.e. poetry, songs, fiction, drama etc. His writing displays a concern for diverse kind of issues such as religious orthodoxy, socio-political issues, existential crisis, spiritual and moral dilemma. His dramas did not follow any traditional theme and structure of earlier Bengali plays and he gave the Bengali theatre a new direction. “Tagore did not pursue the traditional course of development of the Bengali drama, nor did he have any successors in the line, which was uniquely his own” (Bhattacharyya 82). Tagore wrote various kinds of plays such as symbolic plays, dance dramas, comedies, social plays, verse plays, musical plays and so on. His first play Valmiki Pratibha (1881) comes under the category of musical and verse play. The story of the play is expressed through the song and music. It achieved instant success and popularity; and after its succession, Tagore wrote several
other plays such as *Sesh Barsan, Basanta, Rituranga* and *Sravan Gatha* which also come under the same group. The dance dramas of Tagore are evident of his unique kind of theatrical and artistic calibre. The themes of these plays are evolving through the accompaniment of dance, mime, music and the choreography. The plays like *Chandalika, Tasher Desh, Chitrangada* and *Shayama* are the emblematic work of Tagore’s dance drama.

Rabindranath Tagore’s first full length play is *Raja O Rani* (1889) in which the influence of William Shakespeare is evidently observable. Like Shakespearean play, it is a five-act play in blank verse and the theme of the play is full of melodramatic happenings. The play got success, but it was moderately popular, for that, the playwright himself was not satisfied with it and he revised it in 1894. After this, Tagore has written another full-fledged play *Visarjan* (1890). In it, the playwright meticulously exasperates the religious orthodoxy and conservativeness which exist in the contemporary Bengali Hindu society. After few performances, it was not staged at any professional theatre, most probably because of fear of hurting the Hindu sentiment. It is based on one of his novels and after few performances he revised it. The play *Achalayatan* (1912) also displays a similar kind of concern like the *Visarjan*. It excoriates the soulless rituals and institutionalized religious authority. *Raja* (1910) is a renowned play of Tagore which comes under the domain of mystic or symbolic play. The play is based on the Buddhist story of King Kush. The theme of the play is all about the spiritual quest. However, in the period of Rabindranath Tagore, a change of theme in the dramatic literature of Bengal is discernible. The play is about a queen’s search of beauty and love and her salvation through suffering. In the play, the queen is rampant to see the king and demands the heart of the king. The following lines are the evident of mystic and philosophical overtones, different kinds of languages and the uniqueness of Tagore.

*Sudarsana (Queen):* How do you see? What do you see?
*King:* I see you as beauty born out of the whirling light of a myriad stars drawn from the darkness of limitless skies by my joy. In you lie the contemplation of ages, the emotion of the skies, the offering of seasons.
*Sudarsana:* I have so much beauty? When I hear it from you my heart
swells up. But I cannot fully believe it. Why do I not see me like as you say?

King: One cannot see oneself in a mirror. The image becomes small. If you could see yourself through me you would see how grand you are.

(Translated by Kironmoy Raha) (Raha 132-133)

It is widely accepted that among Tagore’s all sorts of dramatic writings, the symbolist plays secured a standard status. *Dakghar* (1912) is the first and one of the most popular plays which belongs to the category of symbolist drama. It is one of the internationally acclaimed plays of Rabindranath Tagore and it is translated into various languages for its competent structure and diction. The phase of symbolist plays reached its climax with the production of *Muktadhara* (1922) and *Raktakarabi* (1922). Both the plays are enriched with the imagery and complexity of design. In these plays, the playwright adroitly describes the ‘plague’ of amorality and dehumanization in the society, and the contaminated and deleterious effects of these practice and customs. Through the contextual and preclusive representation of these flagitious practice and consuetude, the playwright wishes to reform and rectify the society.

As the mythical beliefs are densely rooted in the cultural and religious thought of Bengali people, the playwrights of Bengal have a great legacy to incorporate the mythological stories in the literary cannon to make obvious their view in a more vivid way. From the early stage of Bengali theatre this trend of writing has been conspicuous. The playwrights take basic theme of their stories from mythological tale and then contextualize the rationale and morale of the mythology to the present social and political situation. Of all the principal shapers of Bengali mythological drama-Girish Chandra Ghosh, Dwijendra Lal Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and K.P. Vidyabinod, -Manmatha Ray’s (1899-1988) reputation was the slowest to be recognized outside of Bengal. He is Bengal’s greatest dramatist, who fundamentally changed the theater as a vehicle to express a particularly modern conception of human experience and social possibilities. As a writer, Manmatha Ray achieved distinction not only in his mythological plays but also as one of the Bengal’s greatest political and socialist playwrights, whose reshaping of theatrical technique is a pioneering legacy for Bengali theatre in the 20th century. For many of his mythological plays, he
is indebted to the Hindu epics and the Puranas. In his plays, the mythological figures are less spiritual or godly, and more human in action and ground. The playwright breaks the traditional ground of Bengali theatrical literature in his plays by making uniquely the common and general people heroes. “Manmatha Ray links the earlier period of mythological drama with the new age; his plays are without the overt moral lessons of the earlier period, but embody their verve and vitality and reveal the psychological understanding in a contemporary idiom” (Bhattacharyya 83). His play *Karagar* (1930) is based on the story of the Puranas and it is a vibrant allegory on the contemporary political upsurge. His mythological plays such as *Devasur*, *Savitri* and *Chandsaudagar* are theatrically success. *Ashoka* (1933) and *Mir Qasim* (1938) are famous among his historical dramas.

The greatest of the Bengali Historical playwrights who exerted a profound influence on the course of Bengali theatre in the 20th century, Sachindranath Sen Gupta (1891-1961) was master among them and remained the most read playwright around the Bengal. He attained reputation by preaching patriotism, nationalism, socialism and communal harmony through his plays. Unlike his predecessors, his historical plays are concerned with nationalistic and liberal agendas with communal harmony. His most famous historical play *Sirajuddaula* (1938) proficiently sermonizes the nationalism and the Hindu-Muslim unity. *Gairik Pataka* (1930) is based on the life of Shivaji and it is centred on patriotism and nationalism. *Raktakamal*, *Dhatri Panna* (1943) and *Rashtrabiplab* (1944) also come under the realm of his historical romance. The theme of *Dhatri Panna* is taken from the famous Rajput story and he enriches the play with his versatile theatrical calibre. Sachindranath Sen Gupta’s social plays focus on various aspects of the society that are vitiating and paralysing the social fabric of the society. “The social dramas of Sachindranath are an attempt to give special colour to the varied problems of present-day life, both individual and domestic” (Bhattacharyya 83-84). Over the last century onward, male chauvinism over the women became one of the vital social diseases. The patriarchal customs and norms of the society make onerous and perverted mind setup among the people of the society. *Janani, Swami and Stri, Tatinir Bichar* (1938), and *Kanta O Kamal* (1942) are the representative among his social dramas. He wrote few plays on the contemporary political upsurge, on the reality of Indian politics and on Bengal politics. The plays like *Daser Dabi* (1934), *Naradebata* (1935) and *Sangram O Shanti* (1939) can be
categorized as his political plays. He wrote some plays on Indian Independence struggle and these plays show that the independence struggle disenchanted him. *Swadhinatar Sadbana* (1947), *Kalo Taka* (1947) and *Ei Swadhinata* (1949) are based on the Indian Independence struggle.

In the domain of Bengali dramatic literature, in nineteen forties and fifties onward, major concerns of the theatrical literature has been turned into more specific and particular issues such as domestic problems, urban life problems and day to day life. Only the greatest dramatists pioneer a new form and vocabulary in the theater, and Bidhayak Bhattacharya’s (1907-1986) originality, innovation, and pervasiveness are evident in the various coinages that have entered contemporary parlance. His area of writing is compact and confined to the periphery of middle class Bengali urban society. In his most famous play *Matir Ghar* (1939), he has artistically projected the problems of an urban aristocratic family. The family in the play is suffering from the isolation and existential crisis which creates a hollowness of existence and spiritual vapidity among the people of urban society. *Megh Mukti* (1938) is also one of the representatives of his social plays in which he portrays the day to day life of urban society and its problems. His latter plays like *Bish Bachhar Agey* (1940), *Rakter Dak* (1941), *Rajpath* (1949), *Khabar Balchhi* (1950), and *Ksudha* (1956) are more deeply concerned with the social and economic life of the urban middle class society.

“It was the Bengal famine which shook the whole country that produced the greatest spurt of theatrical activity in Bengal” (Anand 39). The Bengal Famine of 1943 which shook the foundation of the nation immensely affected the socio-economic and political condition of Bengal as well as India. It also greatly influenced the theatrical activity of Bengal. At this time, Bengali drama headed towards many directions and explored many new paths of dramatization and performance. Few dramatists burst on the literary scene so audaciously or as powerfully as Bijon Bhattacharya (1915-1978). His major dramatic works represent the sufferings and exploitations of the lower class people i.e. peasant, labour, tribal and also the anguish of other oppressed classes. Poverty, hunger, oppression and corruption in the rural Bengali society stir him to the path of writing and performance. His works have a great contiguity with rebellious zeal and reformative notion. “But he avoided any doctrinaire approach in his treatment of the themes of his plays. And even though many of them are set in
specifically regional territories of rural and tribal societies he did not seem to have felt any urge to seek inspiration from folk theatre” (Raha 157).

Bijon Bhattacharya has written many plays including few one-act plays. *Jabanbandi* (1944) is a one-act play in which he adeptly limned up the extreme poverty and penury of a peasant family of the post famine period of Bengal society and *Agun* created a mild sensation in the audience. It is his full length play *Nabanna* (1944) that gave him a wide publicity as a playwright. The play *Nabanna* remains a landmark in the theatrical arena of post famine Bengal. The play is centred on the great Bengal famine of 1943 in which around three million people died because of famish, malnutrition and various kinds of diseases. The plot of the play is centred on the character Pradhan Samaddar who is a peasant in Bengal. The play represents a vivid picture of the food crisis in the famine through the decline of Pradhan Samaddar’s family. The play achieved great success and fame, and it was staged all over the Bengal. *Nabanna* enhances the thematic periphery of Bengali theatrical literature. “It set a trend and inspired a number of playwrights, young and old, like Digin Bandopadhya, Kiron Maitra, Salil Sen, Tulsi Lahiri and others to write plays depicting the misery of the poor and the oppressed” (Raha 156-157). The play *Devi Garjan* (1966) is based on the exploitation and oppression of the poor peasants by the land grabbers. The play is set in the tribal region of West Bengal. In it, the playwright meticulously portrays the conflict between the landless poor peasants and Prabhanjan, the hypocritical landowner in the play. His other notable plays are *Mora Chand* (1951), *Gotranatat* (1959), *Garbhabati Janani* (1969), and so on.

During the Naxalite Movement of Bengal in 1970s, anti-establishment plays became very popular in Bengal. As one of the groundbreaking literary modernists of the 20th century Bengal, Badal Sircar (1925-2011) helped take the drama from the surface realism of external details to the deeper reaches of consciousness and the interior life. In his plays, Badal Sircar exerted a powerful influence in reshaping the possibilities of drama and the role Bengali Playwrights ought to play in creative life. Badal Sircar, the prolific playwright of Bengal in post- independence India, is famous for his ‘Third Theatre’.

Plays of Badal Sircar placed him on a pedestal higher than other contemporary playwrights of Indian Drama. His time of entry into
Indian drama was very appropriate. Perhaps he made the final breakthrough when a considerable amount of modernity had already been ushered in and the new directors who responded so happily to him had already achieved an identity. (Dass 68-69)

He has written more than fifty dramas, and most of his plays are concerned with the theme of maladjustment and futility of human existence, social awareness and disillusionment. His play *Evam Indrajit* (1963) is the trailblazing work in the history of Bengali dramatic literature. The play focuses on various social and cultural problems of the contemporary society of Bengal, in particular and India, in general. The play is considered as one of the finest absurd plays which deftly depicts the existential crisis and dilemma of the people of post-independence India.

Different kinds of vitiated societal norms and malpractices which create a hollowness of existence and deficiency of spirituality and morality are skilfully depicted in the play, and the playwright also tries to rectify these flagitious and contaminated value loaded norms through the contextual and remedial representation of mythical elements. (Alam 307)

The play *Baki Itihas* (1965) mirrors the inhumanity and guilty conscience of the men and its contaminating consequences to the society from the ancient time to the present day. *Tringsha Shatabdi* (1966) also raises the same kind of issues but in a more specific and pointed context of bomb explosion of Hiroshima. The play *Sesh Naai* (1969) speaks for the disillusionment and fragmentation of an ambitious middle class intellectual. In his play *Bhoma*, Sircar efficiently represents the sufferings and anguish of the downtrodden, tribal, and the lower class people and their struggle and rebellion to overcome from these circumstances. *Basi Khabar, Pralap* (1966), *Prastava, Juloos, Saari Raat* and *Kavi Kahini* are also remarkable for the playwright’s lofty craftsmanship.

The Naxalite movement of Bengal had reached its zenith in 1970s, and at that time, West Bengal was passing through one of its most politically tumultuous and turbulent era. During this period, political plays gained popularity, and a number of new playwrights had emerged and got wide publicity. Mohit Chattopadhyaya (1934-2012)
Alam has been called the quintessential playwright of the 20th century Bengali theatre. In his remarkable career, Mohit Chattopadhyaya set the standard for Bengali theatre, and the moral and political thinking that defined his theatrical career. He is considered as a playwright of ‘theatre of absurd’ but he did not admit it. The playwright has written more than hundred plays and his plays are translated in various languages. Besides his full length plays, he has written many one-act plays, verse plays and micro plays. His Raajrakta (1974) remains one of the pioneer works in the arena of Bengali political drama. The play is first produced by the Theatre Workshop in 1974 in Kolkata, and after the performance of this play, Mohit Chattapadyaya got wide recognition as a playwright. The play is concerned with the political issues like institutionalized power and the misery of common people in the callous society. The play has made a unique landmark in the history of political theatre of Bengal. His other plays which attract the attention of mass people are Mrityu Sambad (1965), Nishad (1968), Bagh Bondi (1969), Kanamaachi Khela (1983), Aalibaba (1985), Kaaler Jatra (2004) etc.

Mahendra Gupta deserves to join the select company of Pramathnath Bisi, Debasis Majumdar, and Mohit Chattopadhyaya as the 20th and 21st century’s greatest dramatic masters. In the recent history of Bengali historical drama, Mahendra Gupta is a prominent face who gained recognition by writing historical dramas. Like his prior historical playwrights of Bengal, he was also connected with the professional theatre of Kolkata. Like Dwijendra Lal Roy and others, his historical plays are also preaching the patriotism and nationalism to the people. The historical plays of Mahendra Gupta are well structured and are scintillating with the noble idea of nationalism. His Tipu Sultan and Maharaj Nanda Kumar are very well-known historical plays in Bengali literature.

Pramathnath Bisi, the greatest Bengali playwright of the modern era, is deservedly ranked among great Bengali modernist innovators like Bidhayak Bhattacharya, Badal Sircar, Mohit Chattopadhyaya and Debasis Majumdar who pioneered new forms and a radical shift of focus for modern Bengali dramatic literature. As important in the development of modern Bengali drama as John Osborne is to modern English drama, Pramathnath Bisi renewed the societal dimension of drama with disturbing uncertainties and discontinuities that undermine fundamental concepts of identity and reality. He is considered one of the ruthless critics of contemporary modern society.
and a social commentator; and he confined his thematic periphery only in social dramas.

Socio-political and economic milieu of India is contaminated as it became the inception of anarchy, corruption and nepotism. Perhaps no other modern Bengali dramatist, with the possible exception of Badal Sircar, has so embodied the notion of art as the product of human value as Debasis Majumdar. A darker complement to his fellow Bengali playwright Pramathanath Bisi, Debasis Majumdar exerted a comparable influence on modern Bengali drama as a source for naturalism, expressionism, and various experimental modes on the modern Bengali stage. His plays are predominantly concerned with the decline of human values in the contemporary society. Other notable playwrights who came to the fore-front in recent times are Chandan Sen, Indrasis Lahiri, Dr. Sisir Das, Sekhar Samaddar and Ujjal Chatterjee. They have written plays on variety of subjects and issues which are considered as burning issues in modern times.

The involvement with theatre and the theatrical career of Utpal Dutt began with the English theatre. At the initial stage of his theatrical career, Utpal Dutt was associated with the Geoffrey Kendall’s Troupe, and staged and produced several plays of Shakespeare. In the meantime, he formed Little Theatre Group (LTG) which also predominantly produced English plays and then he was associated with Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). He once admitted that he had learnt professional approach of theatre from the Kendall’s troupe. But the playwright detached himself from these entire theatre groups because of their preference of English plays and their reluctant attitude towards political theatre. According to Utpal Dutt, the role of a theatre should be politically and socially conscious, professionally skilled, and the socio-political message should be dissipated to the masses through performance. “Utpal Dutt’s purpose to use theatre as a political weapon is almost an article of faith with him. But it would be unfair because of that to deny his allegiance to what according to his informed lights he considers the basics of theatre” (Raha 162). Utpal Dutt has written a large number of plays on the social and political upheaval of contemporary Bengal. Utpal Dutt’s dramas are mostly concerned with revolutionary politics and with revolution against the class enemy of the society.
From the very beginning of my theatre-work, we have tried to put revolution in a historical perspective. Studying social phenomena in isolation, assuming each phase of development as a whole, i.e. sub-situating the general with the particular, is universal bourgeois vice which has infected ‘progressive’ thinking as well. (Dutt 33)

The tradition of writing political plays is not new thing in Bengali theatre. From the early stage of Bengali theatre, the trend of writing political plays is observable. Playwrights like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Dwijendra Lal Roy and K.P. Vidyabinode have written many historical plays which are substantially political, preaching patriotism and nationalism. Later, the playwright Manmatha Ray has written many plays, based on the mythological tale but allegorically he has commented on the social and political circumstances of the contemporary society. But the foremost concern of the dramatic works of Utpal Dutt is contemporary politics, and his works ideologically reflect his endorsement with left wing ideology in politics and socialism. “What Utpal Dutt did was to give the political play a more substantial theatrical body and a left ideological colouration reflecting the radicalization of political thinking in Bengal in the post-independence period” (Raha 162).

Contrary to Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi’s works are basically fiction and stories. They are dramatized later for the purpose of performance, because plays would be more accessible and approachable to the largely illiterate audience to them she wanted to reach her message.

Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali activist writer and the recipient of Jnanapith award for the year 1999 stands unique among Indian writers in portraying the societal and governmental/state violations of human rights to Dalits, tribals, women and children. The oeuvre of her writings document the struggles of the subalterns, especially the untouchables, for their basic human rights. (Dasan 77-78)

However, Mahasweta Devi is a strongly determined and committed social activist, who works among, with and for the downtrodden and oppressed class. Her literary works are a part of her social and political program of action. Mahasweta Devi is a deeply political social activist who has been working with and for labor class, tribals
and marginalized communities such as landless laborers of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. “She presents the rare combination of an activist and a writer who has been leading a spirited crusade against social injustice meted out to the disenfranchised and the dispossessed” (Asaduddin 236). The plays of Mahasweta Devi are deeply rooted in history, folk mythology and realities of coeval society. Her plays offer a vivid and meticulous picture of socio-political and economic milieus of various segment of the society such as urban bourgeois society, status of women in contemporary society, urban underworld, rural untouchable, tribal society and many other lower class societies. One of her finest plays, *Rudali* (1992) dexterously documents the condition of women of that contemporary Bengal society, and the play can be read as an important feminist text of contemporary India.

The entire text is a critique of the socio-economic and religious systems, and the nexus between them. By showing the dire poverty of the villagers, the ways in which they are exploited, the burden of ritualized religion, the absolute power of the malik-mahajans, and the corruption within the privileged classes, the author construct a powerful indictment. (Katyal 46)

The plays of Mahasweta Devi capture a distinctive and diacritic kind of scenario of the social and political milieus of Bengal as well as of India. The earlier playwrights of Bengali theatrical literature also talked of all these issues but Devi represents these issues in a more pronounced manner as she herself works with the tribals and the marginalized people in various places of India. “One of the main concerns that emerge from Mahasweta’s own works relate to tribal independence, self-possession and the historical possibility of peasant insurgency” (Sen 26). Mahasweta Devi’s writings, solely in Bengali dramatic literature, manifest the socio-economic and political ambiances range from the urban bourgeois to the urban underworld, from rural untouchable societies to tribal segments, and demonstrate an outlook of India hardly ever seen in any kind of Indian literature.

Bulk of Manoj Mitra’s plays is concerned with the typical social structure and social dilemmas of lower middle class society. From the primordial stage of his writing, Manoj Mitra always takes a dig at politics of caste, social taboos and social hierarchy which subsists in contemporary Bengali society. The plays of Manoj Mitra are
enriched with satirical and ironical elements, and he excoriates the caste politics, inequalities, powerful class’s cruelty and oppression through the device of irony and humour. “Early plays like Moroger Dak and Pakhi are indicative of his search for a dramatic form and speech appropriate for conveying his keen observation of life and expressing his gift of humour” (Raha 184). His plays are based on the ground of social realities. In one of his well known plays An Encounter with Royalty (Rajdarshan) (1982), the playwright takes a dig at class and caste relation in rural Bengal, and the abuse of power and social inequalities.

Certain qualities which exist in the plays of Manoj Mitra make him unique and different from his predecessors and other contemporary Bengali playwrights. From the early stage of Bengali theatre down to the present time, the propensity of staging, and criticizing social and political inequalities and hypocrisy through satirical writing, is perceptible. His plays are not politically biased, but based on the ground actuality which makes him distinctive. Exclusively, the supernatural and mythological figures of his plays act and behave like a real human, and come to the world to solve various day to day and domestic issues of the common people. Unlike the other Bengali playwright, he is not dependent on the foreign playwrights and their stories for the themes of his plays. The structures of his plays are remarkable and characteristic and the language of his plays are conspicuously exuberant.

He makes the farcical satirical element in them help him create slices of life which come out as convincingly real when they are not naturally so. His plays may have ghosts, gods, animals or mythical kings as key characters. They may deal with down to earth domestic problems. But their topical relevance is never in doubt. What is particularly refreshing is the absence of political bias and overt political messages in his plays imbued though they are with a progressive social outlook. (Raha 185)

Very few critical works are available on Utpal Dutt and different scholars have approached him in different manners. Kironmoy Raha states that the prime concern of the dramatic literature of Utpal Dutt is contemporary politics, and his works ideologically reflect his endorsement with left wing ideology in politics and socialism. “What Utpal Dutt did was to give the political play a more substantial theatrical body and a left ideological colouration reflecting the radicalization of political thinking in
Bengal in the post-independence period” (Raha 162). On the contrary, according to Sudipto Chaterjee Dutt believed that the role of theatre should be politically conscious and the purpose should be the spreading of revolutionary message to the masses. As Chatterjee opines that “Utpal Dutt's theatre, popular, provocative and, at the same time, politically confrontative, stands as one of the best paradigms of its kind in the Indian context. Dutt's legacy will endure not only in his plays but also in the numerous actors he trained” (Chatterjee 29). Arnab Banerji, in his essay “Rehearsals for a Revolution: The Political theater of Utpal Dutt” asserted that Utpal Dutt was the last great political and revolutionary theatre activist who was commercially successful. “In spite of his commercial success, Dutt was always steadfast in his theory of the revolutionary theater. Even if he was not able to incite an actual social revolution, he did create a politically subversive theater of a kind that was previously unseen and unheard in Bengal” (Banerji 229). Victor Mukherjee in his research paper “Staging the Revolutionary Propaganda in the Political Theatre of Bengal: A Study of Utpal Dutt’s Nightmare City” states that Dutt’s plays exhibits the contemporary social issues. As Mukherjee rightly pointed out that:

“His plays explored his contemporary social issues like the consequences of the Naval Mutiny of 1946, the Scottsboro trials of 1951 and the oppression of the Congress Government of West Bengal during the early 70s. Dutt’s political plays intended to stage his revolutionary propaganda in order to resist the impact of the emerging trends of capitalism, imperialism and fascism in the post-independent Indian society. (Mukherjee 195)

Many researches have been done on various issues inherent in the fictions of Mahasweta Devi but her plays have been explored by very few researchers. Available critical works of different scholars on Mahasweta Devi exhibited her in different approaches. Vandana Gupta in her book Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Reading opines that Devi’s literary works are a part of her social and political program of action. Mahasweta Devi is a deeply political social activist who has been working with and for labor class, tribals and marginalized communities such as landless laborers of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar.
The tradition of politically active creative literature, as embodied in the works of writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, James Baldwin, Ken Saro-Wiwa, is forwarded by Mahasweta Devi in India who traverses the world of fiction, history, journalism, socio-political activism with equal elan. (Gupta 29)

Nivedita Sen has asserted that Mahasweta Devi is a strongly determined and committed social activist, who works among, with and for the tribal, marginalized, downtrodden and oppressed class of the society. Sen states that “One of the main concerns that emerge from Mahasweta’s own works relate to tribal independence, self-possession and the historical possibility of peasant insurgency” (Sen 26). M. Asaduddin in his essay “Of Rape and Marginalization” writes that the writings of Mahasweta Devi represent a harsh reality of Indian civilization. She herself works for the suppressed and tribal community, and her writings also capture a kaleidoscopic picture of all the marginalized communities of India. “She presents the rare combination of an activist and a writer who has been leading a spirited crusade against social injustice meted out to the disenfranchised and the dispossessed” (Asaduddin 236).

On the other hand, very few critical works are available on the playwright Manoj Mitra and the scholars have differently exhibited him. Manoj Mitra changed the direction of the Bengali stage from what people termed ‘the political theatre of realistic conventions,’ to a new kind of theatre what Mousumi Roy Chowdhury, the translator of Mitra’s work, called “The Theatre of Conscience” i.e. theatre more in the realm of ethics than of politics. Kironmoy Raha has said that Mitra’s plays are based on the ground of social realities. Playwright Manoj Mitra always takes a dig at class and caste relation in rural Bengal, and the abuse of power and social inequalities. “They may deal with down to earth domestic problems. But their topical relevance is never in doubt. What is particularly refreshing is the absence of political bias and overt political messages in his plays imbued though they are with a progressive social outlook (Raha 185). Mukul Sk in his research paper “Manoj Mitra’s Play Honey from a Broken Hive: A Discourse of History and Culture” showed that Manoj Mitra is the one who dreams to see a revolution, as in France, to bring all the sections of people on the same ground of humanity. He further writes:
He has longed to create a society where the dimensions of conflict and violence between unequal social forces come to an end. Manoj Mitra is one of the contemporary Indian playwrights who draw a new phase to the tradition of Indian theatre, incorporating new traits that concern the class relations and class struggles and that echo a revolutionary voice against the established order of society. (SK 54)

After analyzing the available critical books and researches on these three notable playwrights, it is felt that these available studies fall short to capture all the aspects of the whole spectrum of the contributions made by the dramatists to the changing socio-political scenario in India and Bengal in particular. It is also felt that these available materials are not only found wanting in informational exposure, these observations also lack some aspects of crucial importance that create a rich argument for research. The research proposes to place the playwrights on the map of nation and theatre movement. It is aimed to locate and document the journey of revolution and reformation through theatre which has suffered with lack of adequate scholarly and intellectual attention.

The present study will make an effort to investigate and exhibit reformative and revolutionary zeal of three versatile and well established playwrights namely Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra with special emphasis on society and politics. It will also focus on the aspects of societal, political and theatrical elements in the theatre in Bengal while focusing on the works of these three playwrights. The texts will be analyzed from various theoretical approaches such as cultural Studies, humanistic approach and other contemporary literary theories. The main concern of the thesis would be the thematic aspects of the aforementioned three playwrights with special emphasis on the theatrical devices that make them distinctive and unique in the canon of Indian theatrical literature.


