Chapter - III
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Indian theatre reached its apex through the contribution of different regional theatres, theatre activists and dramatists. Indian theatre aggrandized its periphery and elevated its fame through various regional theatres such as Kannada theatre, Malayalam theatre, Gujarati theatre, Marathi theatre, Bengali theatre, Telugu theatre and so on. Amidst all the regional theatres of India, Bengali theatre occupies an esteemed position because of its great contribution to the domain of Indian dramatic culture and tradition. The Bengali theatre came into existence around two hundred years ago through the British colonial emperors and the merchants of Kolkata. Even before the “Siege of Calcutta” in 1756 by Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, there were theatres in Kolkata. “Already before the battle of Plassey, an English theatre was in existence in Calcutta, and Warren Hastings is mentioned as one of its subscribers” (Anand 36). One of the theatres built by the British generally had been known as Old Playhouse. “We find that even before 1757 there was a Play-House, known by that name, at Lalbazar where dramatic performances were held by the English residents of Calcutta for amusement” (Bhattacharyya 29). The actors who graced the stage of Old Playhouse with their performance were all amateur artists. Besides, the Old Playhouse also graced with the blessings of leading performance artist of London stage, David Garrick. The Old Playhouse was destroyed in the war of 1756 between the Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah and the British.

Now, I would discuss about the major theatres and theatre groups of Bengal theatre from its origin to till date. The analysis will also take up Bengal theatre which eventually developed elevated its fame in the course of time. The study will discuss about the technical developments and innovations of Bengal theatre from its foundation till date. This chapter incorporates all the technical aspects of performance such as stage, costume, design, makeup etc. and how it eventually develops and expands in the course of time. In order to evaluate the magnitude of several theatres of Bengal, this particular chapter will study the numerous performances of major theatres and theatre groups of Bengal from its inception to the contemporary times.
Origin of Bengali Theatre

Professional actors from London with the intermingling of amateur native English civilians of Kolkata endeavored to form acting companies on the model of London stage. At that time David Garrick sent an actor from London namely Bernard Messink to set up their own theatre in Kolkata to help the amateur artists of Kolkata. “The English amateur actors of Calcutta even dared to imitate their London role models” (Chatterjee 19). Around twenty years later of the destruction of Old Playhouse, the local English in Kolkata built a playhouse which was known as the Calcutta Theatre under the patronization of the Governor General Warren Hasting and the Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey. “Miss Sophia Goldborne gives a graphic account of the playhouse which consists of pit and boxes only, first an area in the center, the second a range of commodious enclosed or rather separated seats round it” (Raha 49). Before the closing of Calcutta Theatre in 1808, a dancer and hostess named Mrs. Emma Bristow formed a private theatre in 1789. It became the center of entertainment after the dinner and it attracted the attention of public. But, after certain period Mrs. Emma Bristow left for England and after her departure this private theatre was closed down.

“The concept of the Western-style proscenium stage made its incursion into Bengali culture, as an imitation of the colonial English theatres of Calcutta, in spurts and bursts, from the end of the eighteen century through the first half of the nineteenth” (Chatterjee 25). Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff (1749-1817), who was a Russian musician, composer, linguist and tireless traveler, came to Kolkata in 1787 after spending two years at Madras. Within few months in Kolkata, Lebedeff performed his debut musical concert with the skill of violin and cello. Lebedeff began to learn Bengali under the coaching of his Bengali tutor Golak Nath Das and within short period of time he learnt Bengali. He translated two English plays into Bengali for the purpose of performance i.e. The Disguise by Richard Joddrell and Moliere’s Love is the Best Doctor. Lebedeff’s translations of these two English plays were reviewed by Golak Nath Das and other experts from Bengali language. On the suggestion of his Bengali tutor Golak Nath Das and on his assurance of providing male and female both the actors from the locals, he rented a house. Lebedeff almost single handedly worked and converted the house into a theatre. The first ever Bengali theatre came into existence in 1795 at 25 Doomtullah Lane in central Kolkata (now Ezra Street) and
Lebedeff became the founding father of Bengali theatre. The Bengali version of the play *The Disguise* was first performed on 27th November 1795 in this stage and it was repeated on 21st March 1796. The performance was done with the accompaniment of orchestra and song, made up of European and Indian instrument. Interestingly, on both the occasions the house with its two hundred seating capacity became houseful. “In Bengal Lebedeff is now remembered as the pioneer of the modern stage, as the first to produce a Bengali drama with a Bengali cast in a playhouse called the Bengali Theatre” (DasGupta 47). In the year 1796, as the preparation for staging the second play began, the theatre caught fire at the middle of the year and Lebedeff was harassed and sent to jail by the creditors. Moreover, Mr. Lebedeff faced several legal and fiscal problems and eventually the situation became more deteriorated and finally he was made to leave India. “There are reasons to suspect that some Englishmen associated with the emerging English theatres in the city, caused this outrage. Lebedeff was forced to leave India soon after by the East India Company” (Raha 18). Later, Lebedeff recalled his days in Kolkata and the way he became a theatre maker from a linguist is described in his book titled *Introduction to A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed Indian Dialects*.

However, during this time Bengali theatre developed under the patronage of only a few amateur stages. Translations from English and, imitations and experiments were the characteristics.

**Major Theatres of Bengal Between 1795 - 1876**

Lebedeff left India on 10th December 1797 and he never returned. After Lebedeff’s departure, in the year 1831 Babu Prasanna Kumar Tagore built a playhouse called Hindu Theatre in a locality where predominantly Bengali people lived. But, in Hindu Theatre plays were produced in English language and the English translation of Sanskrit plays were also performed. In the very first night of its production it staged some extracts from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and Bhababhuti’s *Uttara Rama Charita* was translated into English by Horace Hayman Wilson. “It is funny, says Bishnu Basu, that the first Bengali play in Calcutta was staged by a foreigner; and when the Bengalis organized their first dramatic performance the language was foreign” (Translated by Sudipto Chatterjee) (Chatterjee 42). Both the debut performances of the Hindu Theatre received bad reviews from the English as well as
native audience. The English and Bengali local press also did not respond positively to these performances. After certain period, Prasanna Kumar Tagore himself produced a one-act farce i.e. _Nothing Superfluous_ in Hindu Theatre. Distinguished audience from the European people and also from the Bengali Bhadrolok were present to watch the performance. But, it failed to attract the attention of the people and after this performance the Hindu Theatre was closed down.

After around forty years from the date of Lebedeff’s performance of Bengali play, in the year 1835, Nabin Chandra Basu, a Kolkata based Bhadrolok, formed a playhouse in his mansion and named it Shyambazar Theatre. The theatre was built in the lavish house of Basu at the current location of Shyambazar tram depot of northern Kolkata. The first play premiered in Shyambazar Theatre was _Bidya-Sundar_ which was basically a poem by Bharat Chandra and later it was adapted for the stage.

Many historian mark Basu’s production of Bidya-Sundar as the first Bengali play on a Calcutta stage although it was not altogether a proscenium stage but, rather, a combination of western, native and environmental theatre. (Chatterjee 43)

The plot of the play was quite similar to those of Shakespeare’s play _Julius Caesar_. The play was staged with the accompaniment of the native traditional music, violin and other local musical instrument used to make the performance elegant. The play began with an invocation which followed the tradition of ancient Sanskrit theatre and before starting each scene there was a recitation for the audience about the subject matter of the performance. Like the traditional Jatra performance, the play ran from the midnight to the morning. “Performance of this first ever original Bengali play made some impact and form 1857 Bengali theatrical performances had become a fairly regular affair” (Roy 54). The performance was watched by more than thousand audience including European people as well as native Hindu and Muslim community audience. The performance received critical acclaim from the audience and the English and local native Bengali print media.

Basu did not opt for the Western proscenium stage but spared no effort to take advantage of the technologies available- lights, tunnels, props, painted scenes and so on- to create an environmental performance
outside the normative tradition as well as the available colonial paradigm. (Chatterjee 48)

Before the closing down of Shyambazar Theatre it produced several other plays. At that time the performance of plays increased in number as the young generation became enthusiastic about the English and Western ideas and started staging Shakespeare in two English medium colleges.

Eventually, on that occasion the popularity of theatre grew and English plays were performed on the stages of English medium schools and colleges. “The wide coverage that the performances received in the daily newspapers of the times is proof of the growing popularity of theatre” (Raha 19). Pyari Mohan Basu, a Bengali Bhadrolok set up Jorasanko Theatre in 1854 in his mansion. In this theatre Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* was performed in English language by the native Bengali artists. Although the weather of Kolkata on that day was not good, performance was watched by more than four hundred people including native Bengali people and the Kolkata based Englishmen. According to the local Bengali newspaper report the tragic performance of *Julius Caesar* was heartrending for the local Bengalis. On the contrary, The Hindu Patriot, daily English news, reported different views and mentioned that the decoration of stage and the stage direction were stunning but the performance of the artists did not get positive review.

Kolkata based another Bengali Babu namely Jayram Basak built a theatre in his house at Charakdanga, northern part of Kolkata in 1857. Before this theatre, all the performed plays were generally translated plays from other languages or adapted for the stage, but it was here in this theatre that the first ever original Bengali play was performed. It is considered that *Kulinkulasarbaswa* by Ramnarain Tarkaratna was the first original Bengali play which was a social drama satirizing the polygamy of that contemporary Bengali Hindu society. *Kulinkulasarbaswa* was the first drama which dealt with social evils and perverted societal norms, before this, all plays were more or less based on the mythological story. The play was essentially written for performance and in the month of March 1857 *Kulinkulasarbaswa* was staged for the first time. The play was staged by the Bengali endemic cast and performed with the supplement of music and songs. More than six hundred people watched the
performance. It gained critical commendation and the play was performed several times in Jayram Basak’s house.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Kishorimohan Mitra and Nagendranath Tagore were present at its third show the next year. The upsurge of a social reform movement in the nineteenth century involved theatre, too. As far as we know, Ramnarain Tarkaratna’s Kulinkulasarbaswa was the first among such social plays. (Barucha 72)

In July 1857, the play was staged at the house of Narottam Pal in Chuchura and the performance gathered more than one thousand audience. The daily Bengali news reported the performance positively and it attracted the attention of contemporary intelligentsia.

The year 1857 was a significant year in the context of the history of Bengal as well as India because this year Sepoy Mutiny took place. It greatly influenced the socio-political circumstances of the nation. The year 1857 remained as a signpost in the history of Bengali theatre because the year was the turning point of Bengali theatre. In Bengal from 1857 onwards the dramatic activity massively increased and became popular among the Bengali Bhadrolok. In the year 1857 several theatres came into being such as Ashutosh Deb’s Theatre (1857), Bidyotsahini Theatre (1857) of Babu Kaliprasanna Sinha, Raja Pratapchandra Sinha’s Belgachia Theatre (1858) etc. All the aforementioned theatres produced pre-eminently translated plays from Sanskrit language.

Under the patronization of Pratap Chandra Sinha and his brother Iswar Chandra Sinha, Belgachia Theatre was set up in the year 1858 at the garden of Rajas of Paikpara, Belgachia, north Kolkata. In July 1858, Shreeharsha’s Ratnavali was translated into Bengali by Ramnarain Tarkaratna, and was first staged in Belgachia Theatre under the direction of Keshab Gangopadhyay. After the first performance of Ratnavali at Belgachia Theatre, it attracted the Bengali elite class people to theatre. It is unanimously acknowledged that the decoration of stage, musical accompaniment and fabulous performance of the artists were never watched before by the audience. All the performance artists associated with the Belgachia Theatre were English educated Bengali. Keshab Gangopadhyay performed the role of clown and his artistic
caliber and lucidity got much acclamation. “With their active interest, Belgachia Natyasala soon became a centre of theatrical activity in the city” (Raha 20). The first performance of Belgachia Theatre was highly expensive as it spent ten thousand rupees at that time. Various renowned personalities were present in the performance of Ratnavali at Belgachia Theatre including Sir Frederick Halliday, governor of Bengal, Dr. Goodwib Chakravorty, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Raja Pratap Chandra Sinha and so on. The daily Hindu Patriot reviewed that an English audience said that his idea about the Indian music and song was very negative but after watching the performance of Ratnavali at Belgachia Theatre he corrected his misapprehension. The News Prabharak also responded very appreciatively about the performance. Later the play Ratnavali was staged at Belgachia Theatre several times after its first theatrical success.

“Not the least of Belgachia Natyasala’s contribution to the future development of Bengali theatre was its share in making a dramatist out of poet Madhusudan Dut” (Raha 20). In the performance of Ratnavali at Belgachia Theatre many Englishmen were present and for the sake of their understanding the Rajas of Paikpara requested Michael Madhusudan Dutt to translate the Ratnavali into English and later they published it in the book form. This act of translation became the turning point for the poet turn dramatist Madhusudan Dutt. Soon after Madhusudan Dutt wrote Sarmistha which was a mythological play satirizing the social follies. The play was first staged at Belgachia Theatre on 3rd September 1859 and it was repeated a number of times within the same month. The playwright himself translated the play into English for the English audience. Madhusudan Dutt wrote Padmabati and Krishnakumari for Belgachia Theatre but these two plays did not get much theatrical acclaim. He wrote few other plays such as Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?, Buro Saliker Ghare Ron etc. but these plays were not performed at Belgachia Theatre because of his disappointment with the working body of the theatre. Raja Iswar Chandra was one of the patrons of Belgachia Theatre who died on 1861 and then Belgachia Theatre closed down.

In 1865, Rajkumar Bahadur established Sobhabazar Private Theatrical Society. The purpose of this theatrical society was to stage the social drama and reform the social follies and distorted customs from the society. Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s farce Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? was premiered in Sobhabazar Private Theatre in July 1865. The
play was performed by the native English educated Bengali cast and almost nineteen performance artists performed in the play. Several Bengali Bhadroloks were present in the performance like Jyotindromohan Tagore, Digambar Mitra, Kaliprasanna Sinha etc. and each of them eulogized the acting of the artists. The daily English Hindu Patriot and News Prabhakar admired the performance of Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? The play was again staged in Sobhabazar Private Theatre on July 1885. Kaliprasanna Sinha became the managing chief of Sobhabazar private Theatrical Society but soon after he detached himself from this theatre. In February 1867, Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s highly accomplished play Krishnakumari was staged in Sobhabazar Private Theatre.

Likewise, another private theatre namely Jorasanko Theatre was built at the mansion of Jyotirindranath Tagore at Jorasanko in northern part of Kolkata. The playhouse was mainly built by Jyotirindranath Tagore, Gunendranath Tagore and Saradaprasad Ganguly. The first play staged here in this theatre was Krishnakumari and after that Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? by Madhusudan Dutt. In both the performances Jyotirindranath Tagore played the role of female i.e. mother of Krishnakumari and surgeon respectively. “To encourage the writing of original plays in Bengali they hit upon the idea of offering prizes” (Raha 19). The Jorasanko Theatre requested Ramnarain Tarkaratna to write a play on polygamy and he wrote Nobo Natok which got him the prize of two hundred rupees. The play Nobo Natok is centered on polygamy and the deplorable condition of women in the contemporary Bengali society. The play was first premiered in Jorasanko Theatre in January 1867. The stage was decoration very sophisticated and vivid. The scenario of jungle in the play was projected so vividly that it seemed to be real to the audience. Many distinguished personalities from the elite class of Kolkata were invited to watch the performance. Even the playwright Ramnarain Tarkaratna was also present in the first performance of the play in Jorasanko. The noted theatre activist of Bengal Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi commented after watching the performance of Nobo Natok at Jorasanko Theatre that “I have watched, heard and learned all about the acting which earlier I needed to know” (Translation Mine) (Bandyopadhyay 67).

At the endeavor of Baldeb Dhar and Chunilal Basu a theatrical society was formed in Bohubazar, Kolkata. Both the founding members of the society were competent
performance artists and both of them were the performers of Pathurighata Theatre. In 1868, Manmohan Basu’s Ramabhisek was first staged in Bohubazar theatrical Society. The ‘National Paper’ commented on the performance that decoration of stage and scenario took huge expenditure, the spectators were properly welcomed, the costume and makeup of the artists were sophisticated and the acting of artists were sensible, laudable and flamboyant. Five years later, a new building was erected for the Bohubazar Theatrical Society and was renamed Bohubazar Bengali Theatre and Babu Pratap Chandra Bandyopadhyay became the editor. In January 1874, Manmohan Basu’s Sati was first staged in Bohubazar Bengali Theatre. The Amrita Bazar Patrika admired the performance and suggested some modification. On Saturdays the play Sati used to be performed in the theatre and the play was last staged in April 1874. In January 1875, Manmohan Basu’s Harishchandra was staged in Bohubazar Bengali Theatre.

“The Bagbazar Amateur Theatre was established during this time, which was the first stable theatre group that performed under the leadership and guidance of Girish Chandra” (Bandyopadhyay 37). By this time the dramatic activity immensely grew in all parts of the Kolkata city. In such a way, in Bagbazar, few youngsters became enthusiastic about the performance and set up Bagbazar Amateur Theatre. Amongst its founding members were Girish Chandra Ghosh, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay and Ramadhar Kar etc. Bagbazar Amateur Theatre’s first production was Dinabandhu Mitra’s Sadhabar Ekadasi performed in 1868. The Bagbazar Amateur Theatre performed it on the occasion of Durga Puja at the house of Prankrishna Halder. Then the play Sadhabar Ekadasi was performed numerous times in various places and in its fourth performance in 1870 playwright Dinabandhu Mitra was present as an audience. Among the performers Girish Ghosh appeared on the stage as Nimchand and Ardhendu Mustafi as Jibanchandra; and the dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra was very much impressed by the performance of the artists and complemented “improving upon the dramatist” (qtd in Raha 26). The Bagbazar Amateur Theatre’s seventh or last performance of Sadhabar Ekadasi was staged on the occasion of Durga Puja in the house of Laxminarayan Dutt in 1872. After this the Bagbazar Amateur Theatre produced once Dinabandhu Mitra’s Biye Pagla Budo.
In May 1872, the Bagbazar Amateur Theatre was renamed as Shyambazar Natyasamaj. The Shyambazar Theatrical Society’s first production was Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Lilavati* in May 1872 at the house of Rajendra Pal in Shyambazar. The background scenario of the stage was made by Dharma Das Babu but due to lack of enough funds somehow just the stage decoration was managed. The play used to be performed on Saturdays and it was staged three times at the house of Rajendra Pal. In these performances Girish Ghosh appeared on the stage as Lalit Mohan, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi as Harabilash and a Maid Servant, Nagendra Bandyopadhyay as Hemchand, Suresh Mitra as Lilavati etc. “Apparently it was a great success. Reviews in the newspapers were fulsome in their praise for the décor, the painted sets and Ardhendu’s acting in the double roles of Harabilash and a Maid Servant” (Raha 26-27). The Education Gazette published its review and appreciated the productions of *Lilavati* by Shyambazar Theatrical Society. The Education Gazette commented that the space on the stage for performance was enough and it was skillfully decorated and there were eight scenes in the play which were dexterously structured.

In 1872, members of an amateur organization came together and rented an outhouse of Madhusudan Sanyal’s huge mansion at Jorasanko in the northern part of Kolkata. They rented the house at the cost of monthly forty rupees and built a playhouse and named the playhouse National Theatre. The prominent faces among the founding members of the National Theatre were Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Amritlal Basu etc. The debut production of the National Theatre was Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* in Kolkata in December 1872 and it was the first ever performance for which tickets were sold for earning money. The first performance of *Nildarpan* got huge popularity and it has again staged after seven days. “All agreed on the excellence of acting and special mention was made of the performance of Ardhendu Mustafi who not only rendered the main role of Golak Basu but took on four other roles as well including the female one of Savitri” (Raha 28). The daily Amrita Bazar Patrika and Education Gazette highly admired the performance. The Education Gazette mentioned that the stage of National Theatre was wide and spacious, there were two sides of the stage, the footpath was lighted and the roof of the staged was lighted with the crown. The second performance of *Nildarpan* drew huge crowd and many people had to go back because of lack of seating facility, and the earning was four hundred fifty rupees. For its second production National theatre
selected Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Jamai Barik* which was a farce. The daily Amrita Bazar Patrika reviewed that *Nildarpan* made the audience cry last week and *Jamai Barik* caused boisterous laughter among the audience. Then National Theatre took Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Sadhabar Ekadasi* for its next production and it accomplished critical acclamation. *Sadhabar Ekadasi* was considered the best farce among Mitra’s all farces. In 1873, National Theatre staged Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nabin Tapasini* in which the casts of the performance got huge fame because of their delicate craftsmanship. The Amrita Bazar Patrika extolled the acting of the casts but disparaged the songs and musical accompaniment of the performance. The next venture of National Theatre was Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Lilavati* which was staged in the same month. The actors deftly represented the love between Lalit and Lilavati with artistic caliber on the stage. After the performance of *Lilavati* on Wednesdays, the tradition of Bengali performance got changed and it was performed twice in a week i.e. Saturday and Wednesday and before the introduction of this tradition it was performed only on Saturdays. The National Theatre again took up Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Biye Pagla Budo* and few pantomimes for the subsequent performances. In *Biye Pagla Budo*, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi appeared on the stage as Rajib and showed his artistic dexterousness as a performer. The National Theatre again staged Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan, Jamai Barik, and Nabin Tapasini*. After all these performances, the National Theatre decided to stage Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s *Krishnakumari*. Due to the commercialization of the National Theatre, Girish Chandra Ghosh disassociated himself from it but at the performance of *Krishnakumari* he convinced to play the role of Bhim Singh. *Krishnakumari* was the last play which was staged at united National Theatre.

A number of eminent theatre personalities of that period have stated that owing to financial disputes the National Theatre fell apart and subsequently two groups were formed: (1) National Theatre, (2) Hindu National Theatre. By the end of 1873 the Hindu National Theatre was renamed the Great National Theatre. Eventually, the National Theatre merged with the Great National again in 1874. (Kundu 63)

The Hindu National Theatre headed by Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi rented the former playhouse at Lindsay Street, The Opera House. The Hindu National Theatre
premiered its performance with Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s *Sarmitha* on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1873 and then staged the play *Widow Marriage*. At the end of April 1873, Hindu National Theatre performed *Nildarpan* in the railway theatre house of Howrah railway station. In the month of May 1873, the Hindu National Theatre toured to Dhaka. In Dhaka, Hindu National Theatre first staged *Nildarpan* with the accessory support of Nawabi Band and the musical concert team of Mohini Babu. In the performance, several dignitaries were present to watch the play such as Kaliprasanna Ghosh, Abhoi Das, Dr. Kedarnath Ghosh, Joint Magistrate Rampini, and superintendent of police and so on. The Hindu National Theatre in Dhaka gained huge appreciation and publicity after the performance of *Nildarpan*. The daily Amrita Bazar Patrika reported appreciatively about the Dhaka performance of Hindu National Theatre. Moreover, the Hindu National Theatre staged few other plays in Dhaka such as *Naba Natok, Nabin Tapasini* etc. and then came back to Kolkata. On that occasion the Hindu National Theatre and National Theatre collaboratively performed few plays at Rajshahi (Bangladesh) like *Krishnakumari, Nabin Tapasini* etc. In *Nabin Tapasini*, Ardhendu Mustafi played the role of Jaldhar and in *Krishnakumari* as Dhandas and showed his versatile caliber as an actor. Then this united venture of both theatre groups returned to Kolkata and performed at different places such as Rampur, Boalia, Berhampur etc. In September 1873, the Hindu National Theatre staged two plays namely *Yeman Karma Teman Phal* and *Mohoner Ei Ki Kaj* at Chuchura.

Another faction of National Theatre led by Girish Chandra Ghosh was also performing plays in various places. The National Theatre headed by Girish Chandra Ghosh “Relied mainly on the plays of Dinabandhu Mitra and Madhusudan Dutt” (Raha 30). Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* was the debut performance of National Theatre at Town Hall in March 1873. The play was staged for the welfare of a native hospital (now Meo Hospital). The earning of the performance was two hundred ten rupees and it was given to the native hospital. The Education Gazette mentioned that the performance was remarkable and thirty of the five hundred audiences were Englishmen. Though the performance was staged at Town Hall for the Englishmen, they were not present in enough number. Then, with the financial support of Indian Reform Association, the National Theatre staged *Sadhabar Ekadasi* by Dinabandhu Mitra at Town Hall in April 1873.
After the performance of Sadhabar Ekadasi at Town Hall, National Theatre came to Sobhabazar and started performing at the Natyasala of Radhakant Dev. At Radhakant Dev’s Natyasala, the National Theatre first staged Madhusudan Dutt’s Krishnakumari and later Nildarpan. The Hindu Patriot praised the acting of the artists and reported that the play was staged on the request of Englishmen but they did not come to watch the play. The National Theatre took up Jyotirindranath Tagore’s farce Kinchit Jalojog and Madhusudan Dutt’s Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? for the next production. The same day National Theatre also staged two other plays namely Dispensary and Charitable Dispensary. The last performance of National Theatre at the Natyasala of Radhakant Dev was Kapalkundala in May 1873.

In May 1873, National Theatre toured to Dhaka but they failed to attract the attention of the people as already Hindu National Theatre led by Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi had staged several plays in Dhaka. The National Theatre came back from Dhaka and staged Krishnakumari at Opera House with the collaboration of Hindu National Theatre. The performance began with a song that was dedicated to Girish Chandra Ghosh. Two months later the National Theatre toured to Murshidabad and in the month of October it went to Banaras and Kashi to show the performance. The Sadharani Patrika reported that National Theatre staged two plays namely Nildarpan and Krishnakumari at Banaras Dham. However, both the theatre groups: Hindu National Theatre and National Theatre made a first ever record among the Bengali Theatre Groups which toured to several rural and urban localities. These theatre groups had been successful in their enterprise to convey the message of their performance to audience and made huge contribution to the domain of commercial Bengali Theatre.

In the year 1872, on the foundation occasion of National Theatre, Oriental Theatre was simultaneously set up in its imitation. The Oriental Theatre came up at the house of Babu Krishna Chunder Dev, Cornwallis Street 222. It chose Ramnarain Tarkaratna’s Malatimadhab as it’s first venture in February 1873. The Education Gazette severely criticized the acting of the artists but appreciated the songs and musical instruments which were concurrently played with the performance. Besides, Oriental Theatre staged Modan Mohan Mitra’s Manoroma on the last day of February
1873 and in the middle of March it staged Bidya-Sundar. However, Oriental Theatre did not last long because of its repeated failure to attract the concern of masses.

One of the most important theatres of this age was Bengal Theatre which was formed at the temporary closing of National Theatre. Sarat Chandra Ghosh was the manager and Pyarimohan Roy was the editor of the theatre. They constructed a stage and modest auditorium at Beadon Street. “Bengal theatre deserves mention for another reason. It made history of sorts by engaging women to play the female roles” (Raha 30). Before the Bengal theatre, the female roles were generally played by the male artists in the theatres of Bengal. It was the first venture to perform the female roles by the female artists themselves. After the first performance of Sarmistha, there was a storm of protest. “The staging of Sharmishta in 1873 had begun a new era. Golap later known as Sukumari Dutta, was one of the first four women to join the stage as a professional actress. Her entry into acting provides a sketch of the route to stardom” (Bhattacharya 147). The Hindu Patriot reported:

Mr. Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s classic drama of Sarmistha was selected for the first performance. The actors performed their parts very creditably, the two actresses, who were professional women, we are informed were most successful. We wish this dramatic crop had done without the actresses. It is true that professional women join the jatras and natches, but we had hoped that the Bengali theatres would not bring themselves down to the level of the jatrawallas. (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 143)

Likewise, weekly Bharat Sanskarak and daily Amrita Bazar Patrika excoriated the issue of female role performed by the women actress in Bengal Theatre at the performance of Madhusudan Dutt’s Sarmistha.

However, the Bengal Theatre continued to stage plays with the professional women actresses. The debut performance of Bengal Theatre was Sarmistha and again next week i.e. last week of August 1873 the performance was repeated. In the play Sarmistha, the role of Sarmistha was played by a professional female artist, Devjani and as a co-actress, Devika appeared on the stage. The acting of all the artists incorporating professional female and male casts was highly appreciated. In October
1873, Bengal Theatre staged Ramnarain Tarkaratna’s *Swapnodhan* and in March 1874 performed *Bidya-Sundar* and *Yeman Karma Teman Phal*. The Englishman news reviewed and credited the dexterity of the performance. Then, Bengal Theatre took up Madhusudan Dutt’s *Mayakanon* to perform it for the first time which was never staged in any theatre so far and probably Dutt wrote the play for Bengal Theatre itself. *Mayakanon* was staged in Bengal Theatre twice within a short period. In the end of the year 1874, Bengal Theatre came to Burdwan at the request of Maharajah of Burdwan and staged plays at Kalna of Burdwan. After that the Maharajah of Burdwan became the patron of Bengal Theatre and on this occasion the play *Durgesh Nandini* was staged on 12\textsuperscript{th} December 1874. The inside and outside of the theatre building were neatly decorated with festoons and flags and as usual a bumper house was rewarded to the company for their exertions to please the public. In February 1875, Bengal Theatre in collaboration with the Great National Opera Company staged Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay’s *Sati Ki Kalankini or Chaste or Unchaste* and Madhusudan Dutt’s *Meghnath Badh* on 6\textsuperscript{th} March. With the joint venture of Bengal Theatre and The New Arean Theatre in August 1875 Upendranath Das’s *Surendra Binodini* was staged. According to the report of Englishman news “An opposition company commenced their season on Saturday last at the Bengal Theatre with the new drama by Babu Upendranath Das called Surendra Binodini. It was a great success, but the theatre is too small” (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 146). Moreover, Bengal Theatre produced many other plays such as *Guikear, Beer Naari* and so on.

At the end of the year 1873, both theatres i.e. National Theatre and Hindu National Theatre came back to Kolkata after their rural tour. The Hindu National Theatre was renamed as Great National Theatre and National Theatre continued with the same name. The National Theatre started producing plays at their old locale, Jorasanko, Chitpur Road. This time National Theatre commenced its performance with *Hemlata* by Hara Lal Ray. Each of the artists played the concerned role adroitly and especially the role of the characters like Hemlata, Bikram Sinha, and Kamala Devi were skillfully performed by the competent artists. In January 1874, National Theatre came up with Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* to commemorate the playwright Dinabandhu Mitra and in February staged *Mrinalini* of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. After certain period, the entire team of National Theatre amalgamated with the Great National Theatre and became one i.e. Great National Theatre.
The Week,- SATURDAY, 18th April, We observe that two of the native theatres are still a-going. This evening Hemlata was performed at the Great National with which the National has been amalgamated, The HINDOO PATRIOT for April 20, 1874. (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 154)

The Great National Theatre with the financial support of Bhuban Mohan Niyogi started building a new theatre house on imitation of Lewis Opera House. The responsibility of building the theatre house at Beadon Street was given to Dharmadas Sur. The ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the Great National Theatre was held on 29th September 1873. It took three months to complete the building of theatre. “The Great National was not an exact lookalike of the London Lyceum but it had a similar Grecian-style triangular arcade supported by six pillars” (Chatterjee 220). The Great National Theatre started its production with the play Kamya Kanana. The performance began with a song by chorus but after completing its fifth scene the stage caught fire and the performance was disrupted. The first performance and its mismanagements faced severe criticism from different intelligentsia and commentators. On the next day of this mishappening Great National Theatre staged Nildarpan at Belvidearbazar.

From 10th January 1874 onwards, the Great National Theatre again started staging plays in its own building at Beadon Street Pavilion. The Great National Theatre began its performance on 10th January with the play Widow Marriage. This performance began with the heart-melting song of Bharut Bidhoba. The Somprakash news gave the detail account of the performance and mentioned that the musical concert of the performance was marvelous and each of the casts performed very skillfully. The scenes and the background of the stage were standard like the Lewis Opera House. This time the roles of the females were played by the female artists and two professional actresses performed. The musical band of the performance was played stunningly but the intermingling of English verses with the Bengali songs sometimes caused the irritation for the native Bengali audience. After seven days of this performance Great National Theatre produced Manmohan Basu’s Pronoy Parikha. The Bharat Sanskarak reported that the acting of the artists was dexterous and full of artistic skill and especially the role of maid servant Kajla was delicately performed by
a professional female actress. Each of the scenes was decorated fashionably and the songs and musical tune were heart-melting. On 24th January 1874, Great National Theatre staged Madhusudan Dutt’s *Krishnakumari* and on 7th February the adaptation of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s fiction *Kapalkundala* was performed. This was not the first time in Bengali theatre that the fiction was adapted for the stage; before *Kapalkundala* several fictions and poems were adapted for the performances such as *Bidya-Sundar, Mrinalini* etc. The Bharat Sanskaran news pointed out various issues regarding the adaptation of *Kapalkundala*. However, the work of adaption of fiction *Kapalkundala* and its first performance was appreciated by the audience. Then the Great National Theatre displayed a plenty of performances for the next one month. On 21st February, it staged the adaptation of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Mrinalini* and it was repeated on 28th February and on 7th March Great National Theatre staged *Nagorer Naboratna*. At the very outset of Great National Theatre the stage caught fire and on that particular day the members of the theatre promised to show a performance free of cost in future. Accordingly 18th March, Great National Theatre performed Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nabin Tapasini* free of cost. The Great National Theatre adjourned its performance after the performance of *Kulin Kanya and Kamolini* for the next four months.

At that time the Great National Theatre toured to rural Bengal and reached Berhampur, Murshidabad. In Berhampur, Great National Theatre performed few plays but it failed to create enthusiasm among the masses. The Great National Theatre commenced its performance with *Hemlata* at an amateur station theatre near railway station. It was not a performance stage but the Englishmen built it very elegantly. In the performance, few audiences were present and it faced ruthless criticism. The next venture of Great National Theatre in Berhampur was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Kapalkundala* and it also disappointed the people. The Manager of the Great National Theatre realized the dissatisfaction of the people and finally staged Ramnarain Tarkaratna’s farce *Yeman Karma Teman Phal* and somehow managed to entertain the audience and came back to Kolkata.

The Great National Theatre returned from its rural trip to Kolkata and flamboyantly and colorfully opened the theatre and this time it included five professional actresses in its team namely Kshetromoni, Rajkumari, Haridasi, Kadambini and Jadumoni. At
the completion of its new arrangement and organization Great National Theatre advertised its first production in Amrita Bazar Patrika on 17th September 1874.

On 19th September 1874, *Sati Ki Kalankini* was performed in the Great National Theatre. In this performance Girish Chandra Ghosh appeared on the stage. The performance of *Sati Ki Kalankini* was repeated after seven days. At beginning of October 1874 Great National Theatre staged Jyotirindranath Tagore’s *Purubikram* and on 10th October two plays namely *Sati Ki Kalankini* and *Bharate Jabon* were performed. The Englishman admired the performance and reported that after long time the Great National Theatre came back to its theatrical caliber. In the month of
November, Great National Theatre produced few plays among them some plays deserved to be mentioned such as *Ananda Kanan*, *Madaner Digvijay*, *Kinchit Jalojog* etc. Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi appeared on the stage as Abibeka in the performance of *Ananda Kanan*. According to the Englishman report the performance was fairly done.

Though this time Great National Theatre had been successful in its performances, the team did not last for long time. Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay along with few artists from Great National Theatre separated and named his team as Great National Opera Company. The Great National Opera Company headed by Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay first performed *Durgesh Nandini* and soon after staged *Sati Ki Kalankini* at Chuchura. Great National Opera Company at Lewis Theatre Royal staged *Sati Ki Kalankini* and *Kinchit Jalojog* where many prestigious personalities were present including Maharaja of Jodhpur and many Englishmen, native Bengali Bhadrolok and few English women. The performances of the artists were eulogized, especially the role of Radhika represented by Jodumoni, and in *Kinchit Jalojog*, Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay appeared as Matal (drunken). Then Great National Opera Company performed three plays at Howrah Railway Station Stage which were *Sati Ki Kalankini*, *Ananda Kanon* and *Bharate Jabon*. After these performances the dispute between Great National Theatre and Great National Opera Company was resolved and the Great National Theatre staged *Satru Sanhar*. The play was centered on Bhattanarayan’s “Benisanshar” and it was written by Harolal Roy. In this performance the famous actress of Bengali theatre Binodini Dasi appeared first time on the stage. From this time, the tradition of patronization of Zamindar or Maharaja in Bengali theatre started. On 2nd January 1875, the Great National Theatre advertised that:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Under the distinguished and kind patronage</th>
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<tr>
<td>His Highness, Moharaja Koomar Hurundra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kissore Sing Bagadur of Bhettia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His Highness will be personally present. (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 172)</td>
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On the same day, the play *Sarat-Sarojini* was performed for the first time on the stage and next week the performance was repeated. Both performances were watched by the huge crowd and around five hundred people returned from the theatre on account
of lack of seating capability. The performance of Sarat-Sarojini was rich and was exalted with the delicate artistic technique of the performers. The role of Sarat Sarojini, Sukumari, Haridas, Motilal was played with high skilled artistic competency and craftsmanship. On 16th January, Great National Theatre staged few pantomimes in the presence of ambassador of the Raja of Burma and on 20th January performed Promothnath Mitra’s Nago-Nalini. According to the report of 4th March 1875 of Englishman, on 28th February Great National Theatre in the presence of Maharaja of Vijiyanagram, Prince of Bethiar, Ambassador of Burma and Royal representatives of Mysore performed the famous farce Yeman Karma Teman Phal by Ramnarain Tarkaratna was performed in the house of Raja Harekrishna.

“To get back to up-country tours of theatrical groups, the most successful and the longest of such tours was the one undertaken by Great National Theatre in 1875. In March-April of that year it travelled to Delhi, Lahore, Meerut, Agra and Lucknow” (Raha 32). The team of Great National Theatre which includes the performance artists like Dharmadas Sur, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Abinash Kar, Kshetromoni, Binodini Dasi etc. toured to west part of the united India. The detailed account of the tour was given in the series of the autobiographical articles namely Amar Abhinetri Jibon by Binodini Dasi. The team first reached Delhi and stayed there for almost ten days and performed few plays but could not get much success there. Then the troupe went to Lahore and stayed long time but it did not perform regularly; only ten performances were executed there. From Lahore the touring troupe of Great National Theatre came to Meerut and Agra. In Meerut and Agra it staged only few performances because of lack of theatre enthusiastic audiences. Finally, the troupe came to Lucknow and Dharmadas Babu prepared a stage in a huge mansion of Lucknow. The news spread to the masses that famous Great National Theatre of Kolkata came to the Lucknow city and huge number of people from various parts of Lucknow city gathered in the mansion and crowded the place. On the very first day in Lucknow the play Lilavati and two operas titled Sati Ki Kalankini and Kaminikunjo were performed. The team decided to stage Nildarpan and invited Magistrate of Lucknow, English Sahibs and many other distinguished personalities. In the performance of Nildarpan in Lucknow, Ardhendu Mustafi played the role of Ud-Sahib, Abinash Kar as Rogue Sahib, Mahendra Babu as Nabin Madhab, Binodini Dasi as Sarola etc. The performance was started decorously; all the dignitaries were present including European and native.
But, it took ugly turn after awhile when the scene appeared on the stage: “Rogue Sahib tortures Kshetromoni, and Kshetromoni to save herself cries out Sahib, you are my father, please let me go… Then Torap came and holding Rogue by the throat began kicking him” (Translated and edited by Kironmoy Raha) (Raha 33). All the English spectators became agitated and protested and came to the stage; eventually the curtain was immediately pulled down and performance was disrupted. Then the Magistrate of Lucknow gave them police protection and advised them to leave Lucknow. The entire touring team of Great National Theatre immediately left Lucknow and returned to Kolkata. After certain period of its return from tour, a drastic change took place in the organizational body of the Great National Theatre. Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay took the main charge of Great National Theatre and all the post holders of theatre were dismissed.

In January 1876, the Royal Prince of Wales came to Kolkata and a leading lawyer Jagadananda Mukherjee took the Prince to his house where he was warmly received by the ladies of his house in a traditional Indian style. “This breach of the Hindu code of conduct by the lawyer led to a lively controversy in the columns in the newspapers” (Raha 36). On this occasion the Great National Theatre staged a farce called Gajadananda and the Prince which lampooned the Prince. After its first performance police stopped its second performance. The Lord Northbrook issued an ordinance on 29th February that empowered the Government of West Bengal to prohibit certain dramatic performances which are scandalous defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest. On 4th March 1876 the Great National Theatre performed the play Sati Ki Kalankini when the Deputy Commissioner of Police stopped the show and arrested the director Upendranath Das, playwright-actor Amrit Lal Basu and other seven actors. All the members were imprisoned for a month without trial and later they were acquitted by the courts of law. “There were occasional and sporadic protests against the Dramatic control ordinance from the civil society. There was a meeting against the bill in Kolkata on April 4 1876, where proposals were drafted for withdrawal of the bills” (Rakshit 9-10). However, in the month of March 1876 they enacted the Dramatic Performances Control Act. Later in 1954, Allahabad High Court stroked down the Dramatic Performances Control Act as “being ultra vires of the Constitution” (Raha 37).
During this period the theatre tradition and theatrical activity immensely grew in all parts of the Kolkata city and other parts of Bengal. Dramas of initial stage of this period are pre-eminently translation from English and Sanskrit, and imitations and explorations are the chief characteristics. Thereafter, a large number of Bengali playwrights have come up and massively contributed to Bengali theatre. Major plays of this period deal with socio-cultural issues of the day.

**Major Theatres of Bengal Between 1876 – 1923**

The period from 1881 to 1890 remained the landmark in the history of Bengali theatre. Between this time periods, the richest and wealthy people of the Bengali society massively came forward and invested money to build theatre and theatrical society. In this period Girish Chandra Ghosh started to write, produce and direct the plays. “Towards the end of 1880, Pratap Johuri, a businessman, had taken over National Theatre to run it as a business proposition. He persuaded Girish Ghosh to throw up his job and join the theatre as a salaried manager” (Raha 63). Under the patronization of Pratap Johuri and direction of Girish Ghosh, the National Theatre gave huge contribution to the Bengali theatre through various new and innovative plays from 1880 to 1883. With Girish Ghosh, a number of theatre artists such as Dharmadas Sur, Amritlal Mukherjee, Ramtaran Sanyal, Binodini Dasi, Kshetromoni etc came and joined the National Theatre. Initially, on 1st January 1881, the National Theatre staged the play *Hamir* by Surendranath Majumdar but it could not get theatrical success. In the performance, Girish Ghosh played the role of Hamir and Binodini Dasi appeared as Lila. At that time Girish Ghosh wrote two operas: *Mayatoru* and *Mohini Pratima* and staged the plays on 21st January and on 9th May 1881 respectively but could not get much positive response from the audience. Those days Girish Ghosh wrote plays basically for the purpose of performance on the stage.

In the mean time, Girish Chandra Ghosh decided to write mythological plays and started his writing with the play *Raban Badh*. The play *Raban Badh* was performed on 30th July 1881. Girish Ghosh appeared on the stage as Ram, Mahendralal as Ravan, and Binodini Dasi played the role of Sita. It got massive theatrical success and the performance was watched by huge audiences. Then, Girish Ghosh wrote several plays based on the Indian mythology like *Sitar Bonobas, Tiltarpan, Ramer Bonobas, Dhibor O Dyotyo* and many more. All these plays got huge dramatic success on the
stage. On 16th September 1882 National Theatre staged Girish Ghosh’s *Malinmala* and on 14th October *Bhotmongol* but the plays theatrically and commercially could not get accomplishment. In May 1883, Girish Ghosh with his associate artists left National Theatre, therefore, Kedarnath Chowdhury became the new manager of National Theatre and Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi also joined National Theatre. National Theatre led by Kedarnath Chowdhury first staged *Tarunisen Badh* and soon after Kedarnath Chowdhury adopted Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath* and performed it. In the middle of the October 1883, the triumphant era of National theatre came to an end. In 1885, Bhuban Mohan Niyogi took the charge of National Theatre on lease and in July 1886 staged *Raja Basanyo Roy* and later the adapted version of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Bou Thakuranir Haatt*. In the end of the year 1886 the National theatre was closed down. However, National Theatre achieved an esteemed and glorious position in the history of Bengali theatre because of its massive contribution to the progress of Bengali theatre.

Sarat Chandra Ghosh established Bengal Theatre in 1873 but after his death on 8th October 1880, Biharilal took the charge of Bengal Theatre. Under the headship of Biharilal, Bengal Theatre in 1881 performed Jyotirindranath Tagore’s *Ashrumoti*. In 1882, Biharilal wrote the play *Ravan Badh* on the basis of the play *Ravan Badh* by Girish Ghosh and Rajkrishna Roy wrote *Harodhonu Bhanga*. Both the plays were staged at Bengal Theatre in 1882. In the middle of 1882, playwright Amrit Lal Basu left National Theatre and joined Bengal Theatre and on 25th December performed his farce *Dismiss* and on February 1883 staged his play *Brajlilā*. The performance of *Brajlilā* got great dramatic success and popularity among the people. Whereas on 4th February 1883 Girish Ghosh left National Theatre and formed Calcutta Star Company which on the stage of Bengal Theatre performed *Sitaharon* on 28th March and on 7th May *Harishchandra*. On 11th October 1884, Bengal Theatre staged Rajkrishna Roy’s *Prahlād Charitra* which was considered the greatest play of Rajkrishna Roy. The performance of *Prahlād Charitra* made huge financial profit and fame for the Bengal Theatre. In the performance of *Prahlād Charitra* made huge financial profit and fame for the Bengal Theatre. In the performance role of Prahlad was played by Kusumkumari, Hironnokosipur by Jogindranath Ghatok, Amark by Mathurchandra Chattopadhyaya etc. From the year 1881 to 1890, Bengal Theatre gloriously performed many plays and secured a respectable position in the history of Bengali theatre. On 7th January
1890, Bengal Theatre produced Kanjubihari Basu’s opera *Sakuntala* which earned the title ‘Royal’ for Bengal Theatre.

On 21st July 1880, Gumurkho Roy, who was a young Marwari set up Star Theatre. At the same time a disagreement between Girish Ghosh and Pratapchandra was going on in National Theatre, consequently, Girish Ghosh with Amritlal Mitra, Binodini Dasi, Upendra Mitra etc. left National Theatre and joined Star Theatre. Many theatre critics opine that Girish Chandra Ghosh because of Star Theatre reached his destination and became one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Bengali theatre. The playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote his major mythological plays for the Star Theatre. The famous actress of Bengali theatre Binodini Dasi also sprouted her theatrical and acting career from Star Theatre. The grand inaugural ceremony of Star Theatre took place with the performance of Girish Ghosh’s play *Dakhya Jagya* or *Death of Sati*. In the performance, Girish Ghosh appeared on the stage as Dakhya, Amritlal Mitra as Mahadev, Dadhichi as Amrit Lal Basu, Upendranath Mitra as Nandi and Binodini Dasi represented the character of Kshetromoni. In a period of five years, Star Theatre produced around thirty five plays of Girish Chandra Ghosh and Amrit Lal Basu.

On 11th August 1883 Star Theatre staged Girish Ghosh’s *Dhrubo Charitra* that contained the element of Bhakti Andolan and mythology. In the performance of *Dhrubo Charitra* Girish Ghosh played the role of ‘Bidusak’ or clown and through this performance the tradition of engagement of a role of clown was started. Thereafter, the organization and management of body of Star Theatre was changed on 1st January 1884. On 29th March 1884 Star Theatre produced Girish Ghosh’s *Chaitanya Lila* in which the role of Chaitanya was played by Binodini Dasi, Sachi and Bhakti by Gangamoni Devi, Laxmi by Pramada Devi, Boiragya by Pramkrishna Sil etc. In the performance many dignitaries were present to watch the play among them Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bijaykrishna Goswami, Sisir Kumar Ghosh, and Edwin Arnold deserved special mention. The Hindu Patriot commented on the performance that:

There was much to admire. The scenic effect was fair and the artistic arrangement of the parts did credit to the critical taste of the manager. The acting was satisfactory and the singing exquisite. We are bound to
say that Native Theatres are making fair progress. (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 244)

On 3rd July 1886 Star Theatre staged Girish Ghosh’s *Bilwamangal Thakur* in which Ghosh created ‘Pagolini’ a fundamental character of the mythology. The performance of Girish Ghosh’s *Rupsanaton* took place on 26th May 1887; the play was written based on the character of Bhaktamal and Nana Chaitanya. The Star Theatre of Beadon Street staged two final plays on 31th July 1887: *Buddha Charit* and *Bellik Bazar*. After this, Star Theatre was closed down, but it is remembered today for its most innovative and ground-breaking productions.

Through the performance of plays in theatre playwright Rajkrishna Roy strived to bring social reformation and founded Bina Theatre in 1887. While all the contemporary theatres started to perform female role by the professional actresses, he again started to get the role of female roles played by the male artists. Bina Theatre commenced its production with the performance of Rajkrishna Roy’s *Prahlad Charitra* in 1887. Rajkrishna Roy wrote mythological play *Chandrahas* which was performed in Bina Theatre in December 1887. The roles of the female were performed by the male performers. The playwright turned producer Rajkrishna Roy himself wrote few more plays to stage at Bina Theatre such as *Chaturali, Chandrabali* and so on. After these performances, Bina Theatre continued to produce few plays repeatedly namely *Prahlad Charitra, Harodhanu, Durgeshnandini* etc. But, Bina Theatre did not get commercial and theatrical success and a year later it was closed down. Though Rajkrishna Roy was a great artist of theatre, he failed to recognize the contemporary trend of theatres and the interest of people. His re-innovation to perform the roles of female by the male artists was excoriated by the contemporary theatre enthusiasts. Rajkrishna ruined in debt and he was forced to sell the theatre to Arya Natya Samaj.

Upendranath Das in 1876 directed few plays in National Theatre such as *Gajadananda and the Prince, Hanuman Charitra* etc. and after that he was arrested and involved in court cases. After his release from the prison he went on foreign trip and came back to Kolkata in 1887. In 1888, Upendranath Das established New National Theatre and its debut production was *Dada O Ami* by Upendranath Das. In response to this, Atulkrishna Mitra wrote *Gadha O Ami* and staged it at Emerald Theater on December
1888. In between 1888 and 1889, New National Theatre produced a number of old plays like Madhusudan Dutt’s *Buro Saliker Ghare Ron*, Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nabin Tapasini* and *Sadhar Ekadashi*, Atulkrishna Mitra’s *Hironnoyi*, Upendranath Das’ *Sarat Sarojini* and *Surendra Binodini* etc. Although the contemporary news reviewed the performances of New National Theatre positively, it failed to gather audience. Especially, the spectators did not want to watch the performances of old plays in New National Theatre and that is why it could not survive. The New National Theatre faced a huge debt and it was closed down after a year.

Amarendranath Dutt formed the Classic Theatre in April 1897 at 68 Beadon Street. Aghornath Pathok became the music director, Promothnath Das was the chief advertiser and Dharmadas Sur became the costume designer of the Classic Theatre. On 16th April 1897, on the occasion of its inaugural ceremony Classic Theatre staged *Naldamayonti* and *Bellik Bazar*. In *Naldamayonti*, Amarendranath played the role of Nal, Tarasundari as Damayonti and Aghornath Ghosh represented the character of Koli. Thereafter, Classic Theatre showed a series of performances like Nabinchandra Sen’s *Plasseyir Juddho* (*Battle of Plassey*), Girish Ghosh’s *Laxmanbarjan*, *Bilwamangal Thakur*, *Heerar Phool*, adaptation of *Devi Choudhurni*, and many more.

On 1st January 1901 Classic Theatre produced the play *Chabuk* in which many well-known artists such as Amarendranath, Ahindranath De, Atindranath Bhattacharya, Chandicharan De, Kusumkumari, Heeralal Chattopadhyay etc. had performed. On 18th January 1902 it staged Dwijendra Lal Roy’s *Praischitto*.

In January 1903, Classic Theatre decided to produce one or two old plays in each month. Accordingly, Classic Theatre staged several old plays like *Sitar Bonobus*, *Fanir Moni*, *Bilwamangal Thakur*, *Abhimonyu Badh*, *Nildarpan*, *Sitaharon*, *Krishnakumari* etc. On 21st November 1903, Classic Theatre in collaboration with Minerva Theatre produced Atulkrishna Mitra’s *Hironnoyi* which got immense success. Eventually, Amarendranath faced huge debt and on 27th July 1904 he gave the Classic Theatre on lease. Before giving it on lease, Classic Theatre staged few plays such as Ramlal Bandyopadhyay’s *Pyar*, Amarendranath’s opera *Mankunja*, *Shridhara*, Rajkrishna Roy’s *Toruni Badh* etc. With the financial support of Girish Chandra Ghosh, Amarendranath Dutt once again took the charge of Classic Theatre. After that Classic Theatre produced few plays which were dramatically successful,
among them the plays that need to be pointed out are Amarendranath’s adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* was staged on 27th November 1904, Nityobodh Bidyaratna’s *Premier Pathor* on 25th December 1904 and Amarendranath’s *Shivratri* on 4th March 1905. On 27th January 1906 Classic Theatre staged Girish Ghosh’s historical play *Siraj ud-Daulah* in which Amarendranath appeared on the stage as Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah. But, the production did not get much dramatic success. However, Amarendranath Dutt devoted himself to the development of Classic theatre; and Classic theatre made a considerable contribution to the development and expansion of Bengali theatre, and made the history of Bengali theatre bright.

Guruprasad Mitra in April 1901 took the Bengal Theatre of 9 Beadon Street on lease and named it Aroura Theatre. After the formation of Aroura Theatre, Nilmadhab Chakraborty became the manager of Aroura Theatre. The former performance artists of City Theatre and Minerva Theatre came and joined Aroura Theatre. The Aroura Theatre began its production with the performance Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s play *Dakhsina* and a day after also staged Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s *Junia*. On 25th August 1901 Aroura Theatre produced two plays i.e. K. P. Vidyabinode’s *Alibaba* and Girish Ghosh’s *Bellik Bazar*. In 1902, Guruprasad Mitra removed Nilmadhab Chakraborty from the post of manager and he himself became the manager of Aroura Theatre. On the other hand, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi joined Aroura Theatre and under his direction produced Manmohan Roy’s *Rijia* was produced in which the role of Rijia was dexterously performed by Tarasundari. The performance was theatrically successful and the theatre critics admired the production of the play. Suresh Chandra Basu’s *Poritosh* was staged on 13th December 1902 which was the last performance of Aroura Theatre. Subsequently, Girimohan Mullik took the responsibility of Aroura Theatre and renamed it as Unique Theatre; and consequently the chapter of Aroura Theatre in the history of Bengali theatre was closed on 1902.

Girimohan Mullik formed the Unique Theatre and started its production with Satish Chandra Chattopadhyay’s play *Ratnamala* on 6th June 1903. In the performance of the play, Satish Chandra, Tarasundari, and Susil Bala performed. In 1903 it staged several plays; the subsequent plays were Amrit Lal Basu’s *Torubala, Bibahobibhrat, Bijaya, Nur Nihar* etc. On 22nd November 1903 Unique Theatre produced Dwijendra Lal
Roy’s *Tarabai* and on 23rd December Girish Ghosh’s *Bilwamangal Thakur*. In 1904 Unique Theatre produced few old plays. On 23rd March 1904 it staged Satish Chandra Chattopadyay’s *Jahannara* which was written on the basis of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and it was the last performance of Unique Theatre. Howsoever, Unique Theatre did not get theatrical and commercial success and it could not make triumphant model in the history of Bengali theatre but it definitely made some contribution to the development of Bengali theatre.

Amarendranath Dutt took the charge of Minerva Theatre from Prionath Das on lease for three years on 10th May 1903. He reorganized the theatre and arranged the electric light in Minerva Theatre for the first time and he assigned Durga Das as the new manager of Minerva Theatre. The Minerva Theatre began its journey with the production of Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s play *Raghubir* on 7th November 1903. The performance of the artists was skillful. The role of Raghubir was played by Amarendranath, Ram Madhav as Antaro, Khagendranath Sharkar played the role of Jakor and so on. On the arrival of Lord Curzon in Dhaka on 1st February 1904, Nawab Bhadur Salimullah invited Minerva Theatre to Dhaka for performance. The Minerva Theatre staged plays at Dhaka for the entertainment of Lord Curzon. In August 1904, Ardhendu Mustafi with Tarasundari and soon after Girish Ghosh, Nagendra Bala, Susil Bala and many other artists joined Minerva Theatre. In the direction of Ardhendu Mustafi in 1904, Minerva Theatre produced a number of plays like *Rijia, Kapal Kundala, Sitaram, Nildarpan* etc but *Pratapadiya* of K. P. Vidyabinode got unprecedented theatrical success. Dwijendra Lal Roy’s *Rana Pratap Singha* was staged at Minerva on 22th July 1905 in which the role of Rana Pratap was played by Aparesh Mukhopadhayay. On 6th September 1905, Lord Curzon declared the decision to divide Bengal and to protest his decision Minerva Theatre produced Girish Ghosh’s play *Siraj ud-Daulah*.

On 28th May 1906, Minerva Theatre first ever arranged the electric fan inside the theatre. In May 1906 Minerva staged Girish Ghosh’s *Mirkashim* and on the first day of its performance it earned one thousand and eighty rupees and for the next twenty five days the play was repeatedly performed. After the performance of Girish Ghosh’s *Durga Das* in Minerva Theatre on December 1906, Girish Ghosh expressed disagreement to an issue with the governing body of Minerva and consequently Girish
Ghosh left Minerva Theatre in the beginning of 1907 but in the end of the year he again came back to Minerva. Dwijendra Lal Roy’s Nurjahan was staged at Minerva on 14th March 1908 and Sorab Rustam was performed on 19th September 1908. Dwijendra Lal Roy’s two most famous and celebrated plays Mebar Paton on 1908 and Sahjahan in August 1909 were performed at Minerva Theatre. After the performance of Sahjahan, D. L. Roy became one of the most celebrated and popular playwrights of twentieth century Bengali Theatre. Thereafter, Minerva successfully staged few other plays of Girish Ghosh and D. L. Roy like Chandragupta on 22th July 1911, on 16th September 1911 Punarjanmo of D. L. Roy; and on 18th November 1911 Girish Ghosh’s Tapobol. On 12th February 1912 Girish Chandra Ghosh passed away. In the last twelve years of his life Girish Ghosh spent at Minerva Theatre and the last major plays of his life were staged at Minerva Theatre. The time period 1905 to 1912 was golden era for the Minerva Theatre, as in this period, four playwrights Girish Ghosh, K. P. Vidyabinode, Dwijendra Lal Roy and Atulkrishna Mitra continuously wrote plays for the Mnerva Theatre.

At the end of the year 1905, Atish Chandra Chattopadhyay took the building of Unique Theatre of 9 Beadon Street on rent and named it National Theatre and started a new journey. He himself became the manager of National Theatre and Jowharlal Dhar was assigned with business managership. The National Theatre began its production with the performance of Ramlal Bandyopadhyay’s Adristho and soon after performed his Chader Haat. After a year of National Theatre’s commencement, Atish Chandra was replaced with Jowharlal Dhar and Jowharlal Dhar became the chief manager of the theatre. In 1906 National Theatre staged several plays such as D. L. Roy’s Durga Das, Manmohan Goswami’s Sansar, Girish Ghosh’s Bilwamangal Thakur, K. P. Vidyabinode’s Alibaba and many more. From 1907 to 1910, National Theatre showed plenty of performances among them these productions remained remarkable – Chatrapati Shivaji by Monmohan Goswami on 21st September 1907, Girish Ghosh’s Bilwamangal Thakur on 16th November 1908, Kohinoor by Chunilal Dev on 13th April 1910, and so on. After the production of the play Kalyani, National Theatre was closed down on 17th October 1910.

After the closing down of the Classic Theatre of 68 Beadon Street, Sarat Kumar Roy purchased the theatre. In 1907 Sarat Kumar Roy established Kohinoor Theatre and
Girish Chandra Ghosh was employed as manager of the theatre. The performance artists who joined Kohinoor Theatre were Kshetromohan Mitra, Mohindranath Mandal, Aparaesh Chandra Mukherjee, Din Babu, Tarasundari and so on. Dakhina Ranjan Roy became costume designer and music director and Dharmadas Sur became the stage manager of Kohinoor Theatre. The Kohinoor Theatre ran for five years that began production in 1907 and ended in 1912. The Kohinoor Theatre staged around forty plays in five years such as seven plays of Girish Ghosh, Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s ten plays, three plays of Atulkrishna Mitra, Haranath Basu’s three plays, Rabindranath Tagore’s one play, Durga Das’ two plays, Sourindramohan Mukherjee’s one play, Bhupendranath Bandyopadhyay’s one play, Harimohan Bandyopadhyay’s one play, Haripodo Muherjee’s one play and Nityobadh Vidyaratna’s one play. The Kohinoor Theatre began its theatrical journey on 11th August 1907 with the production of K. P. Vidyabinode’s Chadhibi which was a patriotic play, written at the time of partition of Bengal. Haranath Basu’s Mayur Singhasan, Durga Das’ Sonar Sansar, and Haripodo Muherjee’s Rani Durgaboti were staged at Kohinoor in 1909. In 1911, Kohinoor Theatre produced several plays such as Sailendranath Sharakar’s comic play Sokher Jalpan and Modhur Milon, Harishchandra Sanyal’s Biswa Mitra, Sourindramohan Mukherjee’s Groher Fer, Atulkrishna Mitra’s Jeneria and Praner Taan etc. The Kohinoor Theatre was closed down after the performance of K. P. Vidyabinode’s Sahjahan on 21st July 1912.

Manomohan Parey purchased the Kohinoor Theatre and formed Manomohan Theatre in 1915. The Manomohan Theatre lasted for nine years from 1915 to 1924. The Manomohan Theatre began its production with Girish Chandra Ghosh’s Kalapahari and Suresh Roy’s Rooper Faad on 7th August 1915. Thereafter, Manomohan Theatre produced several plays such as Nishikanto Basu Roy’s Bappa Rao on 11th December 1916, Surendra Bandyopadhyay’s Panipath on 6th October 1918, Pachkori Chattopadhyay’s Parodarshi on 25th December 1919, Surendra Bandyopadhyay’s Hindu Veer on 10th January 1920. Beside all these performances, Manomohan Theatre staged several other plays. In the year 1924 Manomohan Parey went to Kurseong and Manmohan Theatre was taken on lease by other theatre company.

The Great National Theatre was set up in the stage of Bengal Theatre in 1911. Theatre artist Amarendranath Dutt took Bengal Theatre on rent and reformed it and formed
Great National Theatre. The Great National Theatre once again began its theatrical journey with the active participation of many distinguished veteran theatre artists and activists. The Great National Theatre first produced *Jiboney Maroney* which was an opera by Amarendranath Dutt. In Great National Theatre the performances took place thrice in a week i.e. Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday. In 1911, Great National Theatre produced several plays; chronologically the performances were *Bibahobibhrat* and *Balidan* staged on 18th June 1911, *Bejai Ragor* on 1st July, *Meghnath Badh Kabya* on 23rd July, *Baji Rao* on 29th July, *Rana Pratap Singha* by D. L. Roy on 28th July, *Raj Laxmi* on 9th November and so on. Amidst all the performances, the production of *Baji Rao* was the most successful production. About the production of *Baji Rao*, the Amrita Bazar Patrika of 19th August 1911 advertised that “Today will be staged the new drama Baji Rao, which has already made a sensation in the city” (qtd in Bandyopadhyay 288). When massive spectators started to gather in Great National Theatre to watch the performances, Amarendranath Dutt closed the theatre. Due to lack of enough seating facility Amarendranath closed down Great National Theatre and purchased Star Theatre and started a new theatrical journey with it.

When the artists and activists of Bengal Theatre went to Grand National Theatre, on the stage of Bengal Theatre Kshetromohan Mitra set up Thempian Temple. Kshetromohan Mitra took the stage on lease and he himself became the manager of Thempian Temple. Of the performance artists Manindranath Mandal, Jogesh Chowdhury, Ramkali Bandyopadhyay, Thakur Das Chattopadhyaya, Purna Chandra Ghosh and so on came and joined Thempian Temple Theatre. The Thempian Temple began its production with the performance of Harimohan Mukhopadhyaya’s *Noor Mahol* on 7th August 1915. The major plays which were staged at Thempian Temple were almost all those staged at Grand National Theatre. Moreover, Thempian Temple also produced Rabindranath Tagore’s *Raja O Rani*, Haripado Mukhopadhyaya’s *Rani Durgaboti*, Narayan Basu’s *Hamir*, Ramlala Mukhopadhyaya’s *Roma*, Nirmal Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s *Mukhey Modhu* etc. The Bengali News commented on the production of *Noor Mahol* that the scene views were all new and good, particularly noticeable among them being the pond in the interior of the place. The Temple had made a promising start. Besides, the Thempian Temple successfully staged numerous other plays such as Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode’s *Alibaba, Palashir Juddhoh,*
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Bioscope, Hamir, Joydev, Greptaar, Aaladin, Meghnath Badh, Baji Rao and many more. However, the Thempian Temple made a sizeable contribution to the realm of Bengali theatre and its development. The Thempian Temple stopped its theatrical journey in April 1916.

At the closure of Thempian Temple at the stage of Bengal Theatre, Presidency Theatre was formed in the same stage in 1917. P. C. Chatterjee became the managing director of Presidency Theatre and Bhubonesh Mustafi, Abinash Chattopadhaya, Golapsundari, Charusila and many other new artists joined Presidency Theatre. The Presidency Theatre initiated its theatrical journey with the productions of Nishar Swapno which was written by Satish Chattopadhaya based on Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and his Bangali Palton was staged on 10th October 1917. The premier productions of Presidency Theatre were appreciated by the Indian Daily News. In 1917, The Presidency Theatre staged a number of plays like Girish Ghosh’s Prafulla and Bioscope, Amrit Lal Basu’s Raja Bahadur, Rajkrishna Roy’s Mirabai, Amarendranath Dutt’s Sri Krishna, Barodaprasanna DasGupta’s Hasunuvana and so on. The last productions of Presidency Theatre took place on 10th March 1918 with the performances of Rabindranath Gupta’s Karmo Veer, Atulkrishna Mitra’s Hironmoyi and Girish Chandra Ghosh’s Dol Lila.

There was a massive flood in Bengal in 1920 which was followed with the formation of Rambagan Women Society by Raja Bala. The society worked for the welfare of the flood affected people across the Bengal. For the welfare of flood affected people of North Bengal, Rambagan Women Society took Star Theatre on rent and staged Rajkrishna Roy’s Naromedh Jaggo on 26th November 1920 and earned one thousand and seven hundred rupees which was donated to flood affected people. Thereafter, with the support of Raja Bala Bodridas Chetri, the society formed The Rambagan Female Kali Theatre. Jibonkrishna Ghosh gave the financial support to the theatre and Jogindranath Ghosh directed the performances of Rambagan Female Kali Theatre. On 20th November 1922, the Rambagan Female Kali Theatre staged Girish Ghosh’s Bilwamangal Thakur and Heerar Phool at the stage of Manomohan Theatre. During this period the performances of Rambagan Female Kali Theatre were Malini, Alibaba, Khasod Dakhol, Baruna, Palin etc. The Rambagan Female Kali Theatre was a unique theatre in the history of Bengali theatre because it was the first theatre in united
Bengal which was run by the women. The Rambagan Female Kali Theatre is remembered nowadays by Bengalis with respect and dignity because it was the first venture of women of Bengal in the domain of theatre.

J. F. Madden’s Bengali Theatrical Company built Cornwallis Theatre in 1921 and Bengali Theatrical Company became the patron of Cornwallis Theatre. Madden declared that on Saturdays and Sundays instead of showing cinema, Bengali Theatrical Company would stage plays at Cornwallis Theatre. Nripendra Chandra Basu, Sattendranath De, Manomohan Goswami, Kusumkumari Dasi, Gopal Bhattacharya etc. joined Cornwallis Theatre as performance artists. The inaugural ceremony of Cornwallis Theatre took place with the production of Agha Sahib Kashmiri’s Aporadhi K? (Who is the Culprit?) which was translated into Bengali by Sattendranath De. In the mean time Sisir Kumar Bhaduri joined Cornwallis Theatre after leaving his job as a lecturer in Vidysagar College. Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode wrote the play Alamgir for Cornwallis Theatre and the play was staged in which the role of Alamgir was played by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri and it created a history. After successful performance of Alamgir, the Cornwallis Theatre staged Raghu Veer and Chandro Gupta in 1922 and in both performances Sisir Kumar Bhaduri played the title role. In 1922, there was a dispute between Sisir Bhaduri and Bengal Theatrical Company on an issue and consequently he left Cornwallis Theatre. The Bengal Theatrical Company brought Nirmolendu Lahiri and he became the director of performance of Cornwallis Theatre. On 10th March 1923 under the direction of Nirmolendu Lahiri K. P. Vidyabinode’s Bidurath was staged. Through the productions of Cornwallis Theatre, a new and modern technique of production came to the Bengali theatre and it marked the end of Girish tradition in the performance of Bengali theatre.

During this period the public stage of Kolkata exercised substantial influence on the development of Bengali drama. Representative dramatists of this period, like D. L. Roy, Girish Chandra Ghose, Amrita Lai Bose, Rabindranath Tagore and Amarendra Dutt were all professional actors or connected in some way with one or other public theatre of Calcutta. Major plays of this period deal with social and cultural issues of the day. The plays are also characterized with patriotic and historical elements.
**Major Group Theatres of Bengal**

In West Bengal a special kind of theatre tradition developed from 1940s onward i.e. group theatre which was opposite to commercial or professional theatre. The purposes of group theatres were to use the proscenium stage and convey the social and political messages to the masses. It was not entertainment oriented theatre and its primary objective was not making money but making the people socially conscious. Unlike the commercial theatre, the major emphasis of group theatre was on the group itself which was generally formed with the combination of amateur or non-professional participants and the members of the group. All the members performing in a group theatre indentified with their same social motives and that’s why all of them got together and performed. However, group theatres were not financially feasible and major artists associated with group had alternative professions.

Group Theatre has to keep itself busy in various experimentations even by working through the expensive medium of the proscenium theatre. It has to be keep in mind the sense of responsibility that a theatre should have kept, because the food that is served only to satisfy the taste-buds, without adding to the nutrition, is not only immoral but also a social crime. (Bhattacharjee 121)

The group theatres of West Bengal also served as a great appliance to Indian independence struggle. The plays of Bengal have a deep rooted relation with folk theatres of India and more specifically to West Bengal, in genres like Baul Songs, Kabigan, Chhau, Jatra, Kirtan Dance and Paalagaan which were primarily performed in the open ground of that contemporary Bengal. The most prominent group theatre personalities of Bengal were Sombhu Mitra, Badal Sircar, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Utpal Dutt, Bijon Bhattacharya, Tripti Mitra, Usha Ganguly, Manoj Mitra, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Debasish Dutt, Arun Kumar Sarkar, Kaushik Sen and so on.

In 1942, a group of progressive minded people got together and formed Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in Kolkata. The group was set up in the background of Second World War and the great Bengal famine of 1943. In 1943, All India People’s Theatre Conference was held in Mumbai and consequently Indian People’s Theatre Association decided to form committees of IPTA all over the India.
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The Conference of People’s Theatre Association represented the aims and objectives of IPTA and the technique of representation of performance was to make the people conscious about their rights and duties. The motto of IPTA formation was to make the people conscious about their social rights and also to raise the people against all kinds of injustices. Some of the founding members of IPTA that deserve special mention are Bijon Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt, Prithviraj Kapoor, Ritwik Ghatak, Salil Chowdhury, Sombhu Mitra, Balraj Sahni, Khawaja Ahmad Abbas, Jyotirindra Moitra, Jagdish Faryadi etc.

Although the IPTA was led by intellectuals, it was intended to serve the uneducated masses. Hence, it relied on age-old indigenous institutions, including religious and mythological plays, wandering bards, folk dances, and village mimes and clowns, used in a direct, simple approach intended to propagate anti-fascist ideology and espouse the cause of world democracy. (Waltz 32)

As far as the performances of IPTA were concerned, it staged plays of several regional languages of India like Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Gujarati, and English etc. One of the most important performances of IPTA was Bijon Bhattacharya’s Bengali play Nabanna which vividly displayed the food crisis and famish of post famine Bengal of 1943. The play was performed in Kolkata under the direction of Sombhu Mitra and it created a revolution in the history of Bengali theatre.

At least one drama and dramatist of note emerged from the mass of material on the subject in Bijan Bhattacharya’s Nabanna (New Harvest, 1944), which depicts the life of a starving Bengali peasant during the great famine. Perhaps partially because of the skill of Sombhu Mitra, who is still one of India’s leading directors, the production of Nabanna also assured the IPTA’s popular success. (Waltz 33)

The other notable performances of Bengali drama by IPTA were Jabanbondi by Bijon Bhattacharya, Nava Jiboner Gan by Jyotirindra Moitra and so on. After five years i.e. 1947 the main group of Indian People’s Theatre Association dissipated into several branches and worked independently. However, the main group of IPTA continued to carry the legacy of the original IPTA and staged plays.
At present the West Bengal branch of IPTA is run by the West Bengal State Committee of IPTA. Sisir Sen is the president and Gora Ghosh is the present secretary of West Bengal unit of IPTA. There are many theatre personalities like Shakti Bandyopadhyay, Bablu Dasgupta, Pijus Sarkar, Kankan Bhattacharjee, Sankar Mukherjee, Tapan Hazra, Suvendu Maity, Abhoy Dasgupta, Ratna Bhattacharjee etc who are associated with the West Bengal branch of IPTA. Since 1967, the West Bengal unit of IPTA has staged hundreds of plays, and is still performing. Some of the noteworthy performances are Bis e June by Biru Mukhopadhyay, Bastav Sastra and Buno Hans by Hiren Bhattacharya, Ganpat Kahar by Sudip Sarkar, Light House by Jayanta Chakraborty and many more.

After the dispersion of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1947, a group headed by Sombhu Mitra formed Bohurupee Theatre Group in 1948 and he was associated by Bijon Bhattacharya, Ahindra Chowdhuri, Kumar Roy and Tripti Mitra etc. The major plays which were staged by Bohurupee Theatre Group were under the direction of Sombhu Mitra. The Bohurupee Theatre Group began its journey with the production of Rabindranath Tagore’s Char Adhyay (Four Chapter) which was basically a fiction later adapted for stage in 1951. Initially Bohurupee struggled very hard and produced several plays successfully. The Bohurupee reached it high-water mark with the production of Rabindranath Tagore’s Raktakarabi in 1954 which got massive success. Other subsequent plays of Tagore which were produced by Bohurupee were Dakghar in 1957, Muktadhara in 1959, Bisarjan in 1961, Raja in 1964, Ghare Baire in 1974, Malini in 1986 etc. The playwright Badal Sircar’s major plays including Baaki Itihaash, Pralap, Tringsha Shatabdi, Pagla Ghoda, Shesh Naai etc. were performed by Bohurupee Theatre. On 28th February 1982, the Bohurupee staged Rajdarsha (An Encounter with Royalty) by Manoj Mitra in Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata under the direction of Kumar Roy. In the performance, Dineshchandra was the music director and Sakti Sen was the costume designer. Dilip Ghosh was the stage director and the management of light on the stage was also done with his high skilled theatrical technique. Kumar Roy appeared on the staged as Lambador Bhatta, Soumitra Basu played the role of Abhiram, Dilip Roy as Chandraketu, Madhumita Mukherjee played the role of Yashomati, Namita Majumdar as Kubja and so on. The performance artists in Rajdarshan were high skilled and competent with artistic caliber. The performance was theatrically very successful and it managed to fill the
auditorium with enough spectators. Besides, the Bohurupee Group has given many other successful performances such as Aguner Pakhi in 1984, Mr. Kakatua in 1987, Nabanna in 1989, Nindapanke in 1990, Piriti Paramanidhi in 1994, Phullaketur Pala in 2002, Dipadanda in 2005 and till date Bohurupee has been giving several successful performances.

When IPTA dispersed in 1947, Utpal Dutt led another faction of artists and activists. Utpal Dutta, having a noticeable Marxist bias in his attitude to life, wrote and staged some immensely popular political plays, which became almost a craze among the theatre-loving audience of Calcutta during the sixties and some of those plays have retained their popularity till now. (Chakraborty 104)

Accordingly he established another amateur theatre group in 1949 which he named Little Theatre Group (LTG) in 1950. Initially, LTG produced English dramas but later it staged Bengali dramas too. “The LTG produced translations of European classics like Macbeth and took them on tour of rural villages” (Banerji 224). The first production of LTG was Waiting for Lefty by American playwright Clifford Odets in the beginning of 1950. The performance of Waiting for Lefty was done under the direction of Utpal Dutt. Thereafter, Little Theatre Group staged Shakespeare’s Othello on 30th April 1950 at New Empire Hall. The Statesman commented about the performance on 1st May 1950 that “Utpal Dutt’s performance of Othello touched greatness in two scenes, when the Moor defends his love of Desdemona before the Venetian Senate, and in his last speeches after Desdemona’s murder” (qtd in Mukhopadhyay 42). In the same year LTG produced G. B. Shaw’s The Dark Lady of the Sonnets and Androcles and the Lion. On 26th November 1950, the Little Theatre Group first staged Bengali play which was Siuli Majumdar’s Bengali translation of Henrik Ibsen’s play Guest. Under the direction of Utpal Dutt in this performance, Kalindi Roy, Pratap Roy, Karuna Bandyopadhayay, Sailen Sen etc performed. In the years 1951 and 1952, Little Theatre Group produced several English plays like Shakespeare’s The Merry Wives of Windsor, Macbeth, Othello, G. B. Shaw’s Arms and the Man etc. On 18th June 1953 LTG produced Rabindranath Tagore’s Achalayatan at St. Thomas Hall and in May 1955 LTG staged Tagore’s Kaaler Jatra at Ranji Stadium. Jyotirindranath Tagore’s Alikbabu which was based on Moliere’s
play *Tartuffe* was staged on 7th March 1958 and LTG’s last performance was *Sodhbodh* in May 1958 under the direction of Ravi Ghosh. Moreover, the Little Theatre Group produced several other English and Bengali plays in various places.

In the middle of 1959, Utpal Dutt took the historical Minerva Theatre on lease for ninety nine years. The Little Theatre Group’s professional journey began with the production of Madhusudan Dutt’s farce *Buro Saliker Ghare Ron* at Minerva Theatre on 3rd July 1959. “As for the LTG, Dutt took upon himself the task of making the transition in the realm of aesthetics: from critical realism to revolutionary realism. The subsequent period saw Dutt getting more and more involved in political theatre” (Pal 117). According to the tradition of professional theatre, LTG started to stage plays thrice in a week i.e. Thursday, Saturday and Sunday at Minerva Theatre. After the production of Utpal Dutt’s play *Angar (Coal)* on 31st December 1959 at Minerva, LTG created a history. This was the first Bengali drama in which the labor class became the central character of the plot. The production of the play *Angar* got huge theatrical and commercial success and after this Utpal Dutt never turned back as a director and playwright. Satyajit Ray, the famous director and writer commented about the performance of *Angar* that “Angar is distinguished by a weighty theme, admirable teamwork and astonishing craftsmanship. I recommend Angar as a rare and moving theatrical experience” (qtd in Mukhopadhyay 95). On 28th May 1961 Little Theatre Group staged Utpal Dutt’s *Ferari Fauj (The Runaway Soldier)* which depicted the revolutionary rebellion of 1930s Bengal. Thereafter, on the invitation of Soviet Government Utpal Dutt toured Soviet Union and after returning to Kolkata he wrote the play *Titas Ekti Nodir Naam*. The play was staged at Minerva on 10th March 1963 with the musical assistance of Nirmalendu Chowdhury and excellent performance of playwright Bijon Bhattacharya. On 28th March 1965 LTG produced Utpal Dutt’s *Kallol (The Waves)* at Minerva which itself made a history. “The play Kallol, about the naval Mutiny in Bombay in 1946, opened in March 1965, and the press campaign whipped up against it concentrated mainly on the role of the Congress in the Mutiny” (Dutt 50). The play was based on the Naval Mutiny of 1946. Under the direction of Utpal Dutt the play was staged at Minerva and after this performance it created a huge hue and cry and tumultuous environment in the capital. This time Dutt was arrested on 23rd September 1965 and he spent seven months in Presidency Jail. LTG’s next venture was the play *Teer* which was written and directed by Utpal Dutt.
himself. On 16th December 1967 *Teer* was staged at Minerva and because of its revolutionary appeal Dutt was again put in incarceration. Besides, the Little Theatre Group staged several other plays of Utpal Dutt at Minerva Theatre. In the beginning of January 1969 Utpal Dutt and his entire team of Little Theatre Group toured Assam and staged several plays of Dutt all over the state. The Assam tour of LTG was very successful and the team came back to Kolkata after few months. On 16th November 1969 LTG produced its last production at Minerva on the occasion of birth anniversary of communist leader Vladimir Lenin. The play *Leniner Dak (Lenin’s Call)* was written by the playwright Utpal Dutt and he himself directed the performance at Minerva. However, the real popular success and reputation of Utpal Dutt as a playwright, director and performance artist came with the Little Theatre Group of Minerva Theatre which created a history in Bengali theatre.

In the end of 1969 the glorious chapter of Little Theatre Group at Minerva Theatre came to an end. In 16th October 1971 Utpal Dutt did the official registry and set up People’s Little Theatre. The People’s Little Theatre produced Utpal Dutt’s *Tiner Talowar (The Tin Sword)* at Rabindrasadan Manch on 12th August 1971. The playwright himself directed the performance and he appeared on the stage as Benimadhav, the central character of the play. Dutt’s wife Mrs. Shobha Sen played the role of Basundhara, Chanda Chattopadhayay as Moina, Asit Basu played the role of Prionath Mallik etc. They made the performance sublime with their skilled craftsmanship. This groundbreaking play was banned by the state government accusing it of preaching revolutionary lesson to the masses through its performance. After the successful productions of *Tiner Talowar*, in 1971 Utpal Dutt wrote *Surya Shikar (Hunting the Sun)*. The play was written on the background of the Gupta Era specifically the reign of Emperor Samudragupta and the play was set in Ayodhya. The play *Surya Shikar* was staged by PLT at Kolkata and it was performed as a jatra play by Loknatya Group. Thereafter, PLT produced Dutt’s *Barricade* on 25th December 1972 at Kala Mandir. This was a purely political drama exhibiting the dictatorship of 1930s Germany. The People’s Little Theatre staged Utpal Dutt’s *The Great Rebellion* at All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society auditorium, Delhi on 10th February 1973 as *Tota (The Bullet)*. The play was based on the anti-colonial movement of India and it depicted the role of Moghal Emperor Bahadur Shah Jafar. The performance was directed by the playwright himself and among the artists Sova Sen played the role of
Kasturi, Raja Roy as Kalu, Jnan Saha as Tularam, Satya Banerjee as Heera Singh, Anil Mandal as Bhakt Khan etc. and Utpal Dutt also adroitly played the role of Bahadur Shah Jafar and made the performance exciting. A special performance of the play The Great Rebellion took place at the historic Red Fort of Delhi on the occasion of twenty fifth year of Indian Independence on 19th February 1973. On 16th May 1974 PLT produced Dutt’s Duswapner Nagari (The Nightmare City) at Kalamandir, Kolkata. The play was centered on the Governmental hooliganism and the danger of individual freedom under the contemporary state Government. After its first performance at Kalamandir it created a huge uproar in the city of Kolkata. In the performance, Utpal Dutt played the role of Lakshman Palit, Samir Majumdar as Monibhusan Mitra, Mukul Ghosh as Mriganga Roy, Ashu Saha as Piklu etc. On 26th August 1974 when the play Duswapner Nagari was being performed at Star Theatre under the direction of Utpal Dutt, in the presence of police officers several goons came and stopped the performance and beat up the artists. All the contemporary news and print media severely condemned the incident. The Blitz, one of the contemporary print media, reported on 14th September 1974 that “This land of Nightmares is a pure piece of fiction and has nothing to do with Utpal Dutt’s play Duswapner Nagari which was not permitted to be staged in Calcutta by hooligans because it attacked the ruling party establishment” (qtd in Mukhopadhyay 159). Amidst uncertainty and political turbulence, on 26th February 1976 Utpal Dutt wrote the play Lenin Kothai (Where is Lenin?). The play was performed at the stage of Minerva Theatre under the direction of the playwright himself.

In 1975, Dutt responded to the internal emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi’s Congress central government, producing three powerful plays, Barricade, Duswapner Nagari and Ebar Rajar Pala, that criticized the government for restricting civil liberties and trying to restrict free speech. The Congress-led state government officially banned the plays, but they continued to draw large crowds. (Banerji 226)

However, Utpal Dutt and his People’s Little Theatre have huge contribution to the domain of Bengali theatrical literature and Dutt’s era made Bengali theatre glorious and sublime.
We started the group Sundaram in 1957. We were in the first year then of our graduation course at Scottish Churches College. The actual initiative for the setting up of Sundaram lay with a friend of mine, Parthapratim Chowdhury, later a filmmaker. (Mitra 250-251)

In 1957, one of the eminent playwrights and theatre personalities of Bengali theatre Manoj Mitra established Sundaram Theatre Group and he was assisted by the renowned director Partha Pratim Chowdhury. For the last several decades Sundaram Group had been successfully producing plays under the direction of Manoj Mitra and Partha Pratim Chowdhury. The Sundaram Group staged more than forty original Bengali dramas. The major plays written by the playwright Manoj Mitra were produced by the Sundaram Group. The important productions of Sundaram Group are *Jai Nei Bharatey, Sajano Bagan, Galpo Hekimshaheb, Sobhajatra, Mesh O Rakshas, Naishobhoj, Ranger Haat, Aschorijo Fantosee, Chhahyar Prasad, Mrityur Chokhe Jol, Parabas* etc. The play *Sajano Bagan (Banchharam’s Orchard)* by Manoj Mitra was produced by Sundaram Group on 7th November 1977 at Mukta Angan, Kolkata. The playwright Manoj Mitra himself directed the performance and Debasis Dasgupta was the music director. Ananta Das was the costume designer and Ajay Duttagupta was the stage manager of the performance. In the performance Manoj Mitra played the role of Bancharam, Manab Chandra and Deepak Das the role of Nakori Dutta, Aranyo Ghosal the role of Gupi, Shakti Ghosal as Moktar etc. On 28th March 1994, Sundaram Group staged *Galpo Hekimshaheb (The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb)* by Manoj Mitra at Academy of fine Arts, Kolkata under the direction of Manoj Mitra. On the stage Manoj Mitra appeared as Wali Khan, Dipak Das as Hakimshaheb, Subrata Chowdhury as Bakkar, Debabrata Das as Fakir, Kaberi Basu as gangamoni, Fawzia Siraj as Mohor-Bai, Diptendra Mitra as Maulavi and so on and made the production successful with their expertise craftsmanship. The Sundaram Group produced Manoj Mitra’s *Chhayar Prasad (The Palace of Shadows)* on 23rd June 1997 at Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata. Manoj Mitra directed the performance and Khaled Chowdhury was the stage manager. Among the performance artists Manoj Mitra represented the role of Dwaipayan, Deepak Das as Bindusar, Ashim Deb as Narasundar, Rita Chakraborty as Queen, Subhra Basu Das as Shubhadrangi and so on. Moreover, Sundaram Group produced several other plays of Manoj Mitra and also other plays by different Bengali playwrights and even today the group is staging Bengali dramas.
Usha Ganguly in 1976 founded the Rangakarmee Group Theatre in Kolkata. The basic motto of the foundation of Rangakarmee was to raise the social issues such as all kinds of injustices and oppression, social evils etc through the performance. The group was known for its Hindi productions but it produced Bengali dramas too. The major productions of the group are *Mahabhoj, Lok Katha, Holi, Khoj, Shobhayatra, Manasi, Rudali, Vama* etc. *Rudali* was basically a fiction of Mahasweta Devi and later it was adapted for the stage by Usha Ganguly. The play *Rudali* was performed by Rangakarmee Theatre Group on 29th December 1992 at Sisir Manch, Kolkata.

Ganguli’s stage is set in earthy colours of brown and terracotta. The props—a couple of wobbly cots, a pot of water, a sagging clothesline with drab clothing, along with the costumes of the actors reflect the abject poverty and desperation of the family. (Mukherjee 218)

The production was directed by Usha Ganguly and she was also the costume designer and music director of the performance of *Rudali*. Usha Ganguly represented the character Sanichari, Afarsari Begum as Somri, Geetanjali Chugani as Parbatia, Yama Shroff as Bikhni and so on. The production of *Rudali* was theatrically and commercially got success and later the adapted version of *Rudali* was performed by several groups.

Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay and Asit Bandyopadhyay on 29th June 1960 came forward and set up Nandikar Theatre Group at Kolkata in which they were accompanied by Dipen Sengupta, Satyan Mitra and Ajoy Ganguly and Rudraprasad Sengupta. In the early stage, Nandikar Group produced primarily adaptation of English and foreign plays. In the beginning of 1970, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay and Asit Bandyopadhyay left Nandikar and Rudraprasad Sengupta became the chief director and a new theatrical journey of Nandikar began. The major productions of Nandikar Group are *Shesh Sakshtakaar, Feriwalar Mrityu, Gotraheen, Ei Sahar Ei Samay, Dulia, Jaha Choi, Nachni* etc. and till date the Nandika Group is performing plays in Kolkata as well as abroad.

Noted Bengali theatre personality and film actor Kaushik Sen on 29th May 1992 established Swapnasandhani Theatre Group in Kolkata. The Swapnasandhani Theatre Group was known for the acting and direction of Kaushik Sen. The group successfully
produced several plays for the last two decades and now-a-days Swapnasandhani is performed on regular basis at Sujata Sadan in every Saturday. The major productions of Swapnasandhani are *Bhalo Rakshosher Galpo, Daakghar, Suprabhat, Bhoy, Birpurush, Thana Theke Aschi* etc.

However, modern Bengali plays are chiefly characterized with the social problems, political commotion, domestic issues, 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).

Bengal has always been a pioneer in the field of rich theatrical culture and tradition from the very old age. In Bengal, Kolkata is a prime hub for a large number of theatres and theatre groups and these theatre groups display performances with delicacy, sturdy social messages, entertaining and inventive themes. Before the “Siege of Calcutta” in 1756 by Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, there were theatres in Kolkata but the theatrical activity of Bengal massively grew after the arrival of the British Company. At the initial stage of Bengali Theatre the Russian musician Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff and then the British people having theatre enthusiasm significantly played the key role to establish and develop the Bengali Theatres.

To understand why urban Indian theatre is in this state today, one has to go back to the nineteenth century, when what is called modern Indian theatre first made its appearance, independently in Bombay and Calcutta. It is no coincidence that these cities were both creations of the British maritime trade with no pre-British Indian history. The populations of these cities had benefited from British education and had prospered financially under British rule. It was inevitable, then, that the entertainment they sought for themselves should also be modeled on English theatre. (Karnad 334)

And after that the local Bengali Bhadralok of Kolkata and the zamindar class came forward massively and took interest in theatrical activity. Many distinguished Bengali playwrights such as Ramnarain Tarkaratna, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Dwijendra Lal Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Utpal Dutt,
Badal Sircar, Mohit Chattopadhyaya, Manoj Mitra etc. have greatly contributed to the development and progress of Bengali Theatre through their writing of dramatic literature. Similarly, the performance artists with their skilled artistic craftsmanship on the stage also played a very crucial role to the development of Bengali Theatre. Moreover, the Kolkata based Bengali elite class people also played a very significant role as they greatly invested money and wealth to set up theatres or natyasalas all over the Kolkata city and its surroundings. The technicality or theatricality of the theatre performances developed gradually and at present Bengali Theatres show performance with high skill theatricality. Some of the well-known Bengali Theatres that deserve to be specially mentioned for their contribution to the growth and development of Bengali theatre are National Theatre, The Hindu National Theatre, The Great National Theatre, Star Theatre, Minerva Theatre etc. Besides all these theatres and theatre groups, there are huge number of theatre groups which are staging plays regularly with the most innovative technique and theatricality in Bengal.

In the subsequent chapters, I would critically analyse select plays of Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra to explain and exhibit reformative and revolutionary structures in these playwrights in terms of the depiction of the society and politics. It will also bring out the nuances of the texts and highlight the issues they have dealt with in their works.
Works Cited


