

DARJEELING DISTRICT: A SIGNIFICANT SUMMATION OF MODERN BENGALI THEATRE

A Silent Contribution in Indian Theatrical Culture

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Abstract : West Bengal is a state in Eastern India. It does not have any administrative partition named North Bengal or South Bengal, though geographically Northern districts of West Bengal like Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong, Coochbehar, Alipurduar, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur are known as North Bengal. The theatre art of North Bengal is nurturing the prosperity of Bengali theatre since 1870. History mentions that Bengali theatre commenced its creative journey with great Russian director Lebedev way back to 1792. The rich history of mainstream drama and theatre of Bengal is not only centered on Kolkata. The contribution of Darjeeling district surrounded by Himalayan mountains in the north is undeniable in the history of Bengali as well as Indian drama. The modern mainstream Bengali drama of north Bengal was started in Darjeeling district in 1914 with “Raja Harishchandra” play which staged by Mitra Sammelani. It is not possible to ignore this huge contribution of 114 years in any way. From early 21st century, the theatre art of Darjeeling has been exploring new avenues with the proliferation of the internet and advanced technologies; it's reaching to a wider audience and getting the attention of intelligentsia as well. The work done earlier in the Darjeeling district has incited to do more spacious work in now a days. The development of theatre culture in Darjeeling enriching Indian theatrical heritage more and more. This paper, thus, aims to highlight the scenario and amelioration of modern theatre art of Darjeeling and its worth in Indian theatre. I have put it here this continuous dramatic practice from the twentieth century to the twenty first century. It is an important part of the entire Indian theatre.

IndexTerms - Darjeeling, Theatre art, technology, Indian theatre, Bengali theatre, modern, twentieth century.

I. INTRODUCTION

The journey of acting has started long before the invention of a vocalized form of 'speech' or language. In the early age of our civilization people used to manifest their thoughts by acting or gesturing. Then, our society became more refined or cultured and acting got the acknowledgment of an art. After that, acting got influenced by geographical, historical, social, political and religious situations. Gradually it evolved and many components, gestures, dramatic motions were included. West Bengal is a state in eastern India. North Bengal is the north-western part of Bangladesh which parts in West Bengal. North Bengal is rich in folk performance. Darjeeling is located in the lesser Himalayas at an elevation of 6700 ft. The entire hilly region of the district comes under Gorkha Territorial Administration except for Siliguri town. Darjeeling district has great fame in the drama performance, especially at Siliguri. Drama performances have been being performed at Siliguri for more than 100 years till now. We got the proof in the article 'Centennial of theatrical practice in Siliguri' which is written by Partha Pratim Mitra and published on 2nd November 2014 in Uttar Banga Sambaad. Long before the emergence of the city, the civic theatre was hoisted in the township area. The theatrical journey was started in 1909 by the Mitra Sammelani thought their first play 'Harishchandra' was staged in 1914. The journey of theatre in siliguri has passed hundred years. So on December 13, 2014 "Harishchandra" was staging for celebrating the centenary. The second epoch of drama performance at Siliguri ran from 1925 to 1935. In 1957 the first group theatre started in Siliguri. It was the first group theatre in Darjeeling District. In the decade of the seventies, eighties and nineties, the group theatre has increased rapidly. It is found in the article 'Bengali theatre and theatrical culture in Darjeeling' which was written by Shree Nanu Mitra and published in 'Madhuparni Patrika' in 1996. In twenty and twenty first century the dramatic culture of Darjeeling district has become quite rich, which can be called a significant progress in the whole of India's culture.

II. FINDING AND ANALYSIS:

When talking about the dramatic culture of Darjeeling, it is mainly meant to the drama and theatre of siliguri. The dramatic culture has reached 104 years. This journey started with the oldest drama group Mitra Sammelani. It is known from the book 'Siliguri' written by Siboprasad Chattopadhyaya that a group named 'Friends Union' was started in 1901. After that the name of the group was changed and 'Mitra Sammelani' was established. Mitra Sammelani was established in 1909, but in the year of 1914, Harish Chandra was the first drama acted by this groups. At that time only a stage was built with wood and tin walls at the time of establishment. But at one time during the show, there was tremendous storms and rains. All the visitors came to the stage after being wet in rain. That night all members of Mitra Sammelani decided to build a permanent stage. As a result of that decision, the first theatre stage with auditorium was created in 1924. Some railway workers and educated people used to organize plays in this theatre hall. Some of the high officials and some owners of tea gardens of terai region supported this kind of dramatical shows. The drama was held at the time of different kind of festivals. Three days of Durga puja, people were used to engage with dramatic presentation.

At that time five act play was performed and the duration was very long. The acting would have been played all the night. The acting was ended in the morning. Set design is also an important part of almost any theatre production. At that time roll seen was used for scenic design. Lamps were used as light and candles were used as foot light. But after a while lights of Dey Company started to be used. Carbide sticks were being used as foot light, instead of candles. The notable actors of that time were; Dr. Birendranath Chakrabarty, Atul Chandra Roy, Manmatha Nath Sarkar, Kartik Chandra Dey, Sarat Chandra Dutta, Jatirindra Nath Gupta, Abani Nath Bhattacharjee, Dayal Paul, Birendra Nath Roy Sarkar, Binoy Dasgupta, Kamal Sanyal, Sudhir Chattopadhyay, Kshitish Gupta, Sachin Mukhopadhyay, Nirmal Maitra, Shourish Mitra, Anil Bhadra, Panna Sen, Dr. Loknath Chattopadhyay, Amio Sarkar, Samar Sarkar, Biplob Kumar Basu, Arun Gupta, Dr. Himangshu Kumar Gupta, Prabhat Ghosh. At that time who played the role of women were; Sachin Nandi, Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay, Amulya Dutta. Amar Nath Bandopadhyaya was the in-charge of the stage craft and make up. Since 1954, women also started acting in theatre. They were Sarbasree Sabitri Roy, Pari Basu, Devika Bandopadhyay, Swapna Roy, Mukti Karmakar, Manika Sengupta. The names of the famous plays of that time were 'Debala Debi', 'Sarala', 'Jaydev', 'khas dakhal', 'daksh yagga', 'Chandragupta', 'Parapaare', 'Chandidas', 'Bilwa mangal', 'Karnarjuna', 'Sita' etc. The drama selected in the first era of Mitra Sammelani was mostly historical and mythological drama. In 1925, Gandhiji attended a domestic conference at Mitra Sammelani on the way to Darjeeling. After the death of Chittaranjan Das at Darjeeling in 16th June 1925, Mitra Sammelani handed over the sale money of 'Debala Debi' to the Deshbandhu Memorial Fund.

In 1947, India was divided into three parts. For that reason, many migrated people started living in Siliguri, many of them love culture and education. In 1948, the second performance stage was made in Deshbandhupara. The name of the auditorium is 'Arya Samiti'. Famous actor Tulsi Lahiri played his drama 'Chhera taar' at Arya Samiti. Some railway workers started a new theatre group 'Sehgal Institute'. But in the mid of the fifties, it was closed. Siliguri Junction railway institute organized dramatic and cultural events till 1970-71. The first group theatre 'Katha o Kalam' was formed in 1957. The main organizers of 'Katha o Kalam' were Bijon Choudhury, Bimal Ghosh (Chomong Lama), Shankar Bandopadhyay, Mihir Dasgupta. The most famous creative productions of this groups were 'Ferari Fauj', 'Kallol', 'Ajey Vietnam', 'Padma Nadir Majhi', 'Laal Lanthan', 'Laksmipriyar Samsar'. At that time, 'Laal Bazarer Control Room' was a famous street theatre written and directed by Shree Asit Bhattacharjee. The major production of 'Kallol' group were 'Antoni Kabiyaal', 'Tiner Talyaar', 'Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro', 'Sharat Chandra'. In 1961, another group named 'Milemishe' was established. Their famous play was 'Charitrahin' written by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay. 'Karnik' was started their theatrical journey in 1969. The famous directors and actors of that group were Shree Vinayak Deb, Dilip Bhattacharjee, Rupak Chaudhury, Dhiren Bhattacharjee, Salil Sengupta, Chaya Mitra, Krishna Maitra. In 1972, Shyamal Majumdar founded 'Damama' group. Amal Chakrabarty was a great director of this group. Their famous street play was 'Buri Balamer Tire' and other plays were 'Pratisruti', 'Avimanyu', 'Tajmahal'. Another group was 'Rangan', Chandra Sekhar Dey was the organizer and director of this group. Famous play of this group was 'Titas Ekti Nadir Naam'. Shree Basu Sarkar created and directed in a group named 'Chorus'. In 1977 'Ingeet' group was established. Prasanta Majumdar was the soul of this group. 'Dharma Yoddha', 'Anibikshan' were successful production at that time. In 1977 'Gana Natya Samgha Uttardhwani Branch' was started with Sadabrata Kar, Shakti Aich. 'Gulshan', 'Daani Zamin' were notable productions. 'Uttal' group established in 1978 founded by Bhaswati Chakrabarty, Gautam Chakrabarty. Palak Chakrabarty is a famous director and actor of this group. Their famous production 'Swapner Jay'. 'Balaka' was established in 1978 by Deboprasad Ghosh, Kalyan Dasgupta, Biman Dasgupta and famous productions were 'Alakanandar Putra Kanyagan', 'Kinu Kaharer Thetar'. In 1979 'Sphulinga' group was established by Shree Sanjay Chakrabarty. In 1979 'Mukta Mancha' an open stage was founded where theatre groups performed their plays regularly at that time. 'Ritwik' was established by Malay Ghosh, Swapan Dutta, Gautam Laha, which is still continues their dramatic activity. In 1984 'Nandanik Natya Sanstha' was established with the help of Mintu Chakrabarty, Ajay Saha, Swapan Chakrabarty, Paramita Bhattacharjee, Jharna Chakrabarty, Shaswati Sen. In 1988 'Thoughts Arena' was founded by Partha Pratim Mitra, Partha Sengupta, Shantanu Chakrabarty, Jyotirmay Bhattacharjee. The great director of this group is Shymaprasad Bhattacharjee. Their famous production was 'Spartacus'. 'Mnjuri Natya Sanstha' was established in 1989 by famous theatre personality Shree Prabhakar Chakrabarty and their productions were 'Nonajal', 'Thakurdaa'. 'Prayash' was created by Manju Das and popular play was 'Shasti'. In 1993 'Bhawna' was founded by Shree Bomkesh Ghosh, Shree Kuntal Ghosh, Tapas Hajra, Shaibal Majumdar, Kallol Dey and their plays were 'Prachir', 'Apratirodhya'. In 1992 all groups were organized together 'Theatre Development Council'. The celebration of birth centenary of Tagore, one month long theatre festival was organized at Baghajatin Park. North Bengal based solo drama competition was organized in 1965, 1967, 1969, 1972. In 1987 a theatre auditorium named 'Dinobandhu Mancha' was established by West Bengal Government with new amenities. In 1933 'Pother Shese' which was written by Nishikanta Basu Roy, held at Thanjhora tea garden on the occasion of Durga Puja. Naba Natya Club was established in Bagdogra by sanyasisthan tea garden owner Purna

chandra Mitra, proprietor of bangdubi tea garden Prabodh chandra Sarkar, kamalpur tea estate owner Mohit Haldar, Hrishikesh Sikdar. Their first play was 'Sabitri' written by Manmatha nath. 'Mantrashakti', 'Bilwa Mangal' were another plays of that group. On the occasion of dipawali, Shimulbari tea estate organized a play 'Misor kumari'. The first nepali drama 'Harishchandra' was performed by Himachal Samiti in 1951. Siliguri Theatre movement was influenced by communism at that time. The physiognomy of Darjeeling district's theatrical practice by new idea, new thought, new presentation in a very short time. Many talented youth impressed all viewers of Bengal as well as other part of our country by their performance skill.

The contribution of 'yatra pala' in the foothills of Darjeeling district can not be forgotten. From 1931 to 1940 E.B railways organized 'Dhop yatra' during durga puja. Between 1961 and 1980 yatra festival was organized at Baghajatin park, sehgal institute area and Ramakrishna samiti. Two yatra teams were formed in Siliguri; 'Udayan opera' by Yamini ranjan Das and 'Bandhab samaj' by Haren Nandi.

In the twenty-first century, the biggest pioneering and important work of the theatre of Siliguri is to start theatre festival 'Siliguri Natya Mela'. Since 2002 Siliguri Natya Mela has been playing a very important role in the upliftment of theater art in North Bengal. In 2018, Siliguri Natya Mela has completed 17 years. Dinobandhu Mancha, a stage with good infrastructure and facilities, has been re-arranged neatly in a new way for a drama performance. In 2014, theatre of Siliguri completed 100 years of theatre practice. In 13th December 2014, honorable theatre director and actor Bomkesh Ghosh reproduced 'Harishchandra' in this centenary celebration. Another new stage named Rabindra Mancha was inaugurated in Shaktigar in the first week of October 2017.

Nowadays many theatre groups regularly play and perform dramas at Siliguri. Names of such theatre groups are Mitra Sammelani, Ritwik, Srijansena, Theatre Academy, Ingit, Balaka, Natyanga, Passionate Performers, Thoughts Arena, Shishu Natyam, Uttal, Damama, Karnik, Bharatiya Gana Natya Sangha, Uttarihawa, etc. An exceptional theatre group named Srijansena always performs exceptional productions with director Mr.Partha Pratim Mitra. They practice both proscenium and street theatre. In the protest of rape, they performed a wonderful street play. On 17th June 2007, Srijansena organized free health checkup camp in collaboration with Siliguri Journalist Club. On 9th April 2006, Srijansena held a discussion on cultural awareness among today's young generation at Dinobondhu Manch. They organize an annual program named Sahaswar. On the day of the centenary of the Russian revolution, Srijansena organized a play entitled 'Amrita Saman' written and directed by Partha Pratim Mitra. Actors of this group are Anisha Chakrabarty, Somnath Chattopadhyay, Ramen Roy, Smita Chakrabarty, Kaushik Rajak, Alok Roy, Debanjan Paul, Debomitra Chakrabarty, Sudipta Rakshit, Tunisha Roy. North Bengal is the setting of this play with a combination of folklore and old age drama. At that time they played a documentary named 'Dhroho Uttar -a' for 30 minutes. Srijansena staged "Hypatia", a play based on the Hellenistic Neoplatonist philosopher. Passionate Performance organized drama festival on 24th February 2017. They presented a play named 'Faizal'.

33years ago another group of theatre named Ritwik started its journey with Malay Ghosh. They organize annual theatre festivals and regular drama practices. On 29th November 2017, they started their annual festival with seven performances of other North-eastern groups like Darpan, Jhargram Anandam, Chandpara Acto, Bhumija Bangladesh, Baharpur's Ritwik, Gobordanga's Silpayan. They performed their own production 'Ekhan Parijaat' written by the founder of Ritwik, late Malay Ghosh. According to Shri Malay Ghosh's dream of taking all the theatre groups of North Bengal to a single platform, Ritwik Natya Gosthi organized the North Bengal Natya Samaraho in October 2017. On 6th March 2017, Ritwik offered two productions on Dinobondhu Mancha - "Mahaprasthan Pothe", "Sompadok". In 'Mahaprasthan pothe' a new explanation of Mahabharata has come out. They staged their production "Haat Badal" directed by Suvankar Goswami on 24th December 2017. The stage planning and its shifting and use of lighting were quite artistic and unique. We noticed here the frustration in the harsh reality when faith has been obstructed. Actors of this group are Pranab kumar Bhattacharjee, Suvankar Goswami, Sucharita Ghosh, Sitangshu Goswami, Swarup Dutta, Kushal Basu.

North Bengal University presents drama and plays in various events. On December 28, 2017, students of the department of mass communication of North Bengal University organized a street play "Aparajita" in Bagdogra. The students themselves wrote the script.

In October 2017, Balaka Natya Gosthi celebrated their 38th anniversary. In this celebration, they performed two plays directed by Kalyan Dasgupta. Their two plays are "Sandhya Tara", "Four Hours".

In January 2018, Passionate Performers performed a new drama, Girish Karnad's 'Tughlaq', at Dinobandhu Mancha, directed by Amitabha Kanjilal. The lighting and the stage design were very good. It's a good experiment by Amitabha Kanjilal, one of the new generation directors of Siliguri. "Shunya a Buke" is also another good production of this group.

Natyaranga theatre presented Rabindra Nath Tagore's short story "Shasti" by rajbangshi language in 2013.

Siliguri Theatre Academy staged their productions like "Banaraj", "Jalghari", "Dwikhandito", "Prachir" in the 21st century, which were directed by the famous director and actor Kuntal Ghosh. 'Jalghari' was based on maoist problem.

In an effort to save and promote the Santali language, first one-act drama competition in the language was held in Darjeeling district. It was held on January 19, 2018, in Siliguri with the initiative of the Disadvantaged Class Welfare Department of the state. 25 groups participated in this competition. On 8th February 2018, Ashish Vidyarthi and Nadira Babbar came with their productions. They participated in the drama discussion in Siliguri at "Moutaat" which was the first tea themed café of Siliguri. Every year, all group theatres of siliguri organize play performance together on the occasion of world theatre day. From 27th to 30 march drama performances organize at Baghajatin park and Dinobandhu mancha auditorium.

The dramatic practice held in Siliguri was completely for entertainment purpose. But now the situation was changed. The new generation wants to accept it as a profession. But due to lack of publicity it was not possible. Now everyone has to try to change the situation.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Whenever there is a discussion about modern as well as Bengali theatre in India, Darjeeling is always neglected in that discussion .Hence, being resident of Darjeeling district, I find that its necessary to portray the contribution of this district in modern Indian theatre. In this paper, I try to focus on the following key areas:

- i. Although the history of modern drama is rich enough and despite having a important geographical location, the reason for not being promoted the theatrical culture of Darjeeling.
- ii. Make a draft of the number of contemporary plays performed in Darjeeling and then inform everyone about this large history.

The method i have taken to complete this research are:

- i. Field survey.
- ii. Collecting information from various magazines and books.
- iii. Collecting interviews of dramatists, theatre directors, viewers,

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Though Bengali and Nepali folk theatre culture is rich in Darjeeling District , Mainstream plays also have a rich history. Here only a few example are given. Theatrical history of Darjeeling and the current condition are even more broad. Theatre of Darjeeling has given a new modern creative looks to the Bengali theatre as well as Indian theatre. I have tried to make unionized documentary of whole theatrical practice. Hopefully this journey goes so long successfully. There are many ingredients to enrich the culture sense of India.

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