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## Introductory Episode Of Bengali Theater And Liebedev

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### *Abstract:*

The practice of drama in Bengali language is the trend of the modern age. Though drama has an ancient history in Sanskrit literature, Bengali literature has not followed or imitated that genre. Acting-centric 'Jatra's in Bangladesh have given nourishment to the visual medium. Drama in Bangladesh was started by the English Businessman, in the English language, with foreign acts. A foreigner, Gerasim Stepanovich Liebedev, took the first initiative to start Bengali language dramas with Bengali actors. This man of Russian descent came to Bangladesh with a twist of fate and chose acting as a profession and arranged for acting. The theater founded by Liebedev is called 'The Bengali Theatre' (1795). The British did not take kindly to this initiative. It is said that the English conspired to burn this theater of Liebedev. In the plot of the British, Liebedev lost his immigration right to live in India and returned to his homeland. Returning to Russia, he was employed in a library and died there. The history of the later Bengali theater is the result of the dream and taste of theater that Liebedev instilled in the minds of Bengalis.

Key Words: Liebedev, The Bengali Theatre, The Disguise, Golak Bose, Bengali Drama.

### *Introduction / Background of the Study:*

The history of drama and drama performance in Bangladesh actually began in the second half of the 19th century from 1852 onwards. Even though it had a history of almost a hundred years of acting, it was an attempt by foreigners. The first establishment of theater in Bangladesh was 'The Old Play House', in 1852 AD. In this one hundred years only one theater was established by a foreigner and dedicated to Bengali, Bengali language

performances - 'The Bengali Theatre'. Bengali's first attempt not in Bengali but in English – 'Hindu Theatre'. From the year 1831, Bengalis were sometimes involved as spectators, sometimes as patrons, but no plays were performed in Bengali language. The first play in Bengali language was performed after 1850. As a result, 'The Bengali Theatre' founded by Liebedev was an isolated effort, but the dream that it evoked in the minds of Bengalis is not isolated, but can be said to be a progression. From this evolution, Bengalis became involved in the theater and established theaters in the second half of the 19th century and wrote plays at the urging of the theatre. To trace the history and development of Bengali theatre, drama, acting, one has to start with 'The Bengali Theatre' - founded by Liebedev.

### ***Statement of the Problem:***

Histories of Bengali theater have not been as interested in Liebedev's personal life, ironies, and other contributions outside theater as they have been in researching the theaters Liebedev founded and the plays he performed. As a result, this research preparation is based on the incompleteness of history. This research paper critically explores Liebedev's life.

### ***Literature Review and Research Gap:***

Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, Darshan Chowdhury, Pulin Das, Shibabrata Chattopadhyay, Jagannath Ghosh, Ashokkumar Mishra, Ajitkumar Ghosh etc. have researched the history of Bengali theatre. A close reading of their research with respect reveals that Liebedev's life in Russia has been largely ignored or avoided. How Liebedev came to be associated with drama, despite being a violinist, and how Bangladesh came to be – these topics have somehow eluded researchers. In the discussion research, Liebedev's life has been studied with importance in Bangladesh pre-history. It has also been investigated what he would do after being expelled from Bangladesh. Liebedev's contributions have been explored elsewhere than in Bengali drama.

### ***Objectives of the Study:***

The present research paper presents a history of Liebedev's life that is unknown or outside the traditional practice. In order to understand the style of drama performance in Bangladesh, it is necessary to know the overall story of Liebedev's life, not the incomplete Liebedev. Besides Liebedev's drama performance, his contributions

to Bangladesh and Bengali language should also be known. This effort to complete the practice of Bengali theater or to fill the incompleteness is therefore important.

### ***Research Queries:***

Liebedev's life and connections have been explored in the history of Bengali theater keeping the context of history in front.

### ***Methodology of the Study:***

Historical Criticism, Comparative Criticism methods have been used in the research work. Google search engine was used to establish relevant information in the study. Information obtained from book reviews of various texts has been used.

### ***Critical Analysis / Discussion / Results and Findings:***

Gerasim Stepanovich Liebedev (Герасим Степáнович Лéбедев) is a turning point in the history of Bengali theatre. English-language drama, English actors, English-audience-bound drama reaching Bengalis and subsequently a revolution-like initiative named Liebedev. His name starts with the letter 'H' in English, so 'H' is a mispronunciation in the English or English-sourced Bengali translation - Gerasim Stepanovich Liebedev in Russian pronunciation. He was born in Yaroslavl, Russia and later his father resettled in St. Petersburg. His father was the teacher of the church there. Liebedev was the eldest child of his father. He had two more brothers and a sister – Athanasius and Trephilus and a sister Antonida.



(Born Place of Liebedev)

While living in St. Petersburg, Liebedev taught himself German, French, and English, and was a self-taught violinist. It was here that he met Fyodor Volkov, one of the founders of Russian theatre. Thanks to this acquaintance, Liebedev once participated in Volkov's theater.

Andreas Razumovsky had an instrumentalist appointed to Vienna from Russia – Liebedev came to Vienna with him. But Liebedev escaped from the group and traveled to Europe. He financed his travels by playing the violin. During this time he joined an English military band department. The band was soon sent to India and Liebedev arrived in India. In August 1785 he arrived at Madras (now Chennai) in India. He was honored by the Mayor of Madras after his arrival. During this time, he started earning money by participating in music events. But the conservative society of Madras stifled him and he moved to Calcutta in August 1787.

In Calcutta, Liebedev first ventured into language education. He started learning Hindi, Sanskrit and Bengali from a teacher named Golkanath Das. In return, he taught violin and European music to that teacher. During this time Liebedev established himself as a music teacher with the help of a Russian doctor. He started performing music for a fee. Liebedev was the first artist to impose or adapt Indian music to Western instruments.

Liebedev founded the first European-style proscenium theater in collaboration with some Bengali intellectuals. The theater founded by Liebedev was called 'The Bengali Theatre'. Jagannath Ganguly established the theater by renting his house at 25 Domtala (now Ezra Street) in Kolkata. This theater was first inaugurated in 1795 with the performance of a comedy play called 'The Disguise'. The performance was composed by Sangeet himself and the lyrics were adapted from Bharat Chandra Roy's poetry.

Liebedev's intention was to –

- a) Acting drama in Bengali language,
- b) Granting Bengali visitor-rights in return for visitors and
- c) Using the theater for commercial purposes.

Liebedev said in the introduction to 'Hindusthani Grammar' – 'I translate two English plays into Bengali, 'The Disguise' and 'Love is the Best Doctor.' Bengali translation. The second translated play 'Love is the Best Doctor' - written by Moliere. The play 'Kalpanik Sambandal' was performed in this theater but the play 'Love is the Best Doctor' was not performed.

Regarding the performance of the play, Liebedev himself said - 'When my translations were finished I invited several learned pundits who persuaded my work several times very attentively. After the applause of the pundits. Golocknath Dash, my linguist made me a proposal that if I chose to represent this play publicly he would engage to supply me with Nateve Actors of both Sexes and I was exceedingly delighted with the idea.'

The drama 'Kalpanik Sambandal' was first performed in this theater on Friday, November 27, 1795. This first act featured a reduced version of 'Kalpanik Sambandal'. In the second night's performance, the entire drama and three acts were performed. In this play –

- a) First act in Bengali,
- b) First act of second act in Moor,
- c) Second act in Bengali,
- d) Third act in English and
- e) Third act in Bengali.

The play starred ten actors and three actresses. About two hundred people were present in the audience.

The play was performed a second time on March 21, 1796. About three hundred spectators came to watch the performance. Encouraged by the success of the act and the increase in viewership, the act was undertaken for the third time. The third performance was canceled when the theater suddenly caught fire.

Linguist Sukumar Sen said about the translation of the play 'Kalpanik Sambadal' - 'He had mastered some of the words, phrases and idioms of the spoken language but he could not grasp the syntax of that language.' Researcher Hayat Mamud has shown that Liebedev's translation actually followed the syntax of the English language, as a result An error has occurred in the sentence structure of Bengali language. For example - 'Good my dear friend. I am overjoyed to see you - because I have something to offer to you.'

The play 'Love is the Best Doctor' has been translated for acting but no acting information is available. Perhaps this play was never performed.

When 'The Bengali Theatre' was destroyed, Lyubedeff again failed in his attempt to create an opera-stage called 'The Deserter'. Due to failure and financial problems, Lyubedov put acting ventures on hold and returned home.

Liebedev's given name 'The Bengali Theatre' carries a peculiarity - he magnifies the identity of the so-called native Bengali nation under the title of country and language speaker. No religion predominates in the narrative of his chosen plays – the subject matter is secular. Also the self-esteem of womanhood has been revealed. The social status of women in Bangladesh in the 18th century gained importance in drama.

Contribution of 'The Bengali Theatre' and Liebedev to Bengali Theatre:

a) The first attempt to perform drama in Bengali language was 'The Bengali Theatre' and entrepreneur Liebedeff.

b) He founded 'The Bengali Theatre', a mixture of English and Russian theatre.

c) Acted with Bengali actors and actresses.

d) Girls participated as actresses in plays.

e) Gave the Bengali audience a taste of theater and drama instead of travel.

f) His novel attempt – the system of watching performances in exchange for tickets.

g) He made a combination of domestic and foreign tunes in the selection of music.

h) As a translator, he was impressed by the popularity of contemporary Bengali Bharatchandra Roy's 'Vidyasundar' and included two songs from that period. The two songs are –

1. "He who does not see how the soul ...."

2. "Gun Sagare Nagar Rai..."

j) Although it was translated, the first play was written in Bengali language due to his efforts.

k) Arranged performances in Bengali-Moor-English with emphasis on multilingual audiences – a testament to his foresight and language skills.

l) As there is no Bengali drama for acting, he used translated drama.

m) The play of the theater is short but its role is historical.

Liebedev translated a portion of Bharatchandra Roy's poem 'Annadamangal' into special Russian. He also prepared a Bengali dictionary. This dictionary was printed in 1801. He wrote to the Russian Ambassador in London about publishing the works of Bharatchandra Roy in Russia.

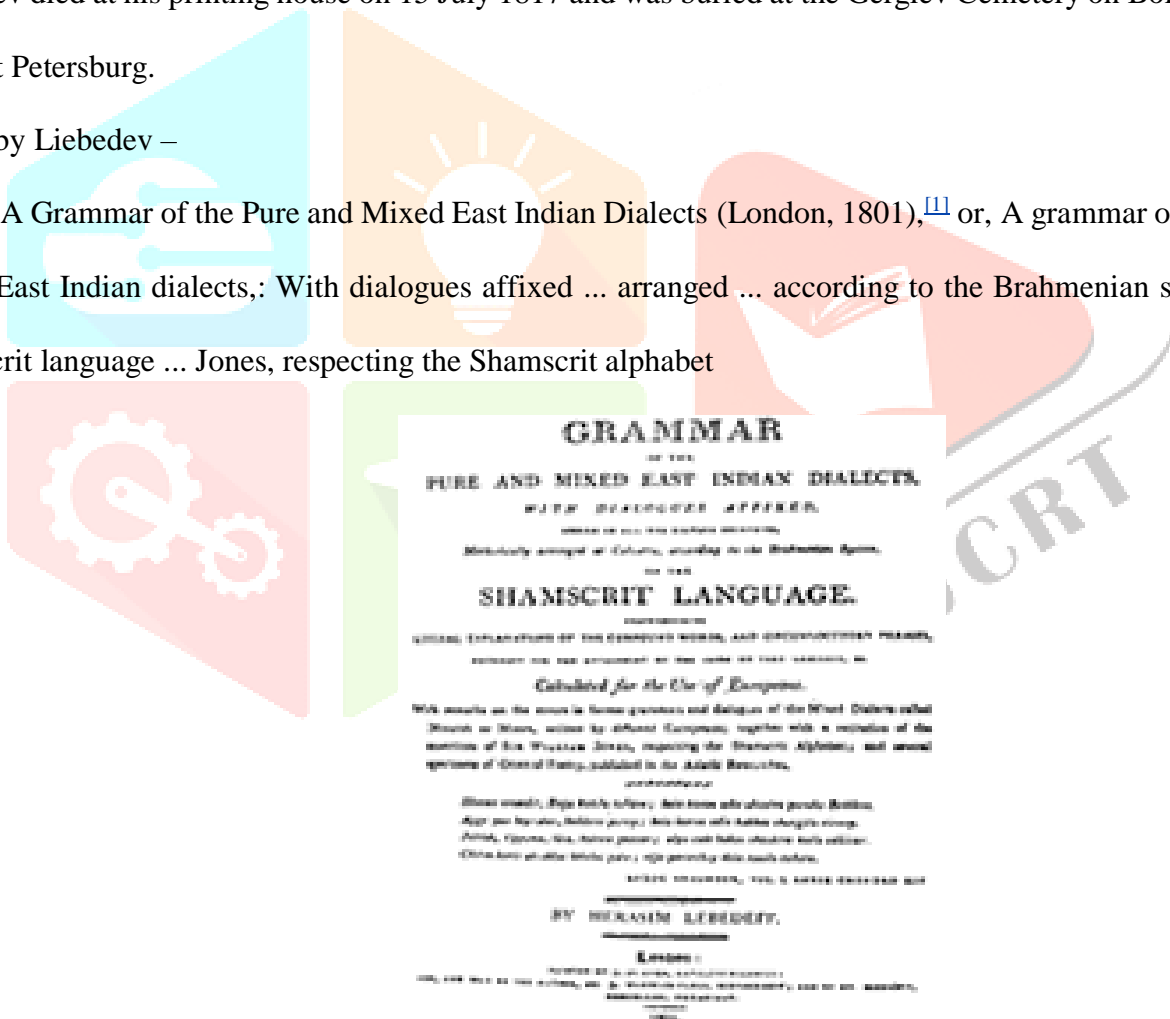
The British administration did not support Liebedev's activities and resented his sympathetic stance towards Indians. He lost a court case against the theater's stage manager, Joseph Batish, and was financially devastated.

In 1797, the British government revoked Liebedev's residence permit in India. He left India almost empty-handed, financially distressed. He was forced to stay in Cape Town for several months, unable to return to Europe for want of money. During this stay in London he published a book 'Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Languages'. This book was a morphological analysis of several Indian languages – languages with which Asian and European languages were interrelated.

Returning to Russia, he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He established a printing press in St. Petersburg equipped with Devanagari and Bengali scripts, the first in Europe. He published his second book Unbiased Observations on Brahmin Rituals and prepared two more books but could not finish them due to illness. Liebedev died at his printing house on 15 July 1817 and was buried at the Gergiev Cemetery on Bolshaya Okhtar in Saint Petersburg.

Books by Liebedev –

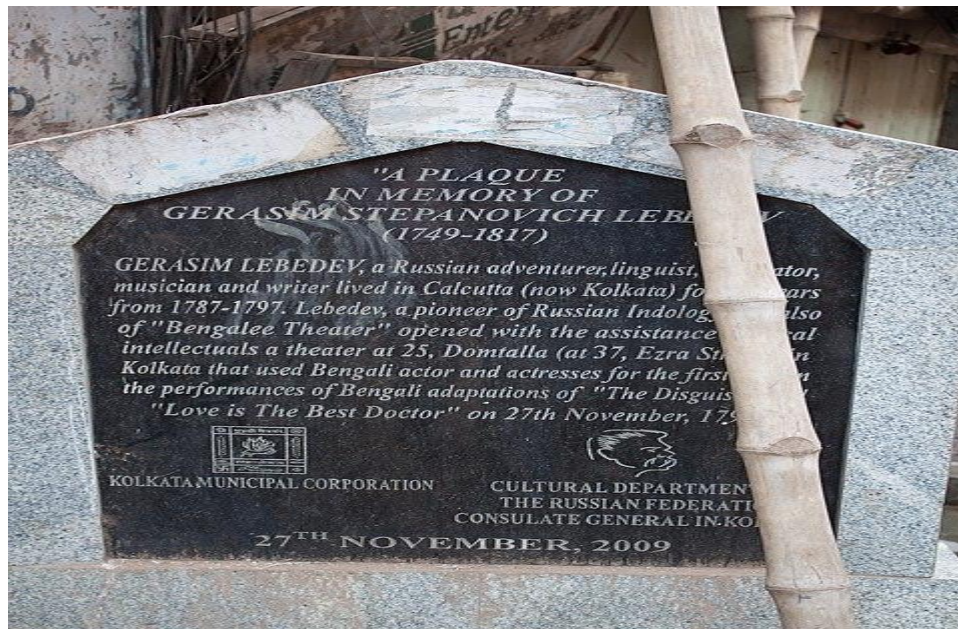
A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects (London, 1801),<sup>[1]</sup> or, A grammar of the pure and mixed East Indian dialects,: With dialogues affixed ... arranged ... according to the Brahmenian system, of the Shamscrit language ... Jones, respecting the Shamscrit alphabet



An Impartial Contemplation of the East Indian Systems of Brahmins (St Petersburg, 1805)<sup>[1]</sup> or An Impartial Review of the East Indian Brahminical System of Sacred Rites and Customs<sup>[3]</sup>

A Collection of Hindustani and Bengali Arias





### Conclusion:

The glorious chapter in the one hundred and fifty year history of Bengali general theatre actually began with 'The Bengali Theatre' founded by Liebedev. The theaters founded by Liebedev were the first to offer general admission in exchange for tickets. This theater was the first to arrange plays in Bengali language. The initiator of these was the Russian citizen Liebedev. The aim of the present study is to complete the history of general theatre by comprehensively evaluating his life history and contribution.