Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, Debasish Roy,
Arnab Saha, Mainak Banerjee, Pinaki Roy (Eds.)

POSTMODERN BENGALI THEATRE

A Critical Assessment, with Reference to Select Playwrights' Works

With a foreword by Bratya Basu

SCW | Studies in Commonwealth Writings *Volume 3*

ibidem

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Studies in Commonwealth Writings

Edited by Pinaki Roy

ISSN (Print): 2942-2019
ISSN (E-Book): 2942-2000

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ISBN 9783838221014 (Print) | 9783838281018 (E-Book)

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ibidem Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover picture: A painting of the postmodern stage, showing four figures in black, and a tree with a hanging noose and a ladder. © copyright 2025 by Dr. Sreeparna Chattopadhyay

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2101-4
ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8101-8

Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

Printed in the EU

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Foreword

Ghosts of Postmodernism in the East, Divinities of the West

— Bratya Basu

My play *Ashalin* (Indecent) was first staged in 1996, a work I both wrote and directed. Years later, in 2018, *Mir Jafar* came to life on stage under my direction. Between these two milestones lies a journey of twenty-two years in theatre. Whether I have become rare or unprecedented in this period; whether the scales of success and failure have allowed me to blossom or caused me to wither; whether my footsteps have left any lasting impression within the sacred cavern of Bengali theatre's ever-shifting soul—these are not questions for me to answer. Let those who have read my plays, who have witnessed my work come alive on stage decide. As for me, I can only speak, in brief, of the essence that breathes within my work, that quiet, persistent spirit which has guided my craft, into the world of theatre.

In the second half of the last century, the global bipolar power structure began to collapse; the world gradually surrendered to the dominance of a unipolar power; Soviet supremacy was crushed underfoot; the sharp winds of neoliberalism and the open-market economy began sweeping across India, quietly stirring rebellion in its small, medium, and remote towns, pushing them forward, fearlessly, into the global arena of technological change. It was at that very juncture that I stepped into the world of Bengali theatre. And what else could I have done, except throw myself—passionately, and perhaps self-destructively—into this captive, sabotaged, and uncertain realm of minority art form?

I knew I had no choice but to confront challenges that could either break me entirely or carry me to the pinnacle of my artistic expression. And so I chose the difficult, scorned path that prom-

ised to set my mind free. Bigger challenges such as prevailing mediocrity and compromising quality for quantity could not dissuade me from practicing theatre. In a universe where forms, theories, beliefs, practices, passions, and identities were in constant flux and under relentless scrutiny, the arrival of a new dawn or even a sunset the next day often appeared impossible to me. I therefore turned my focus toward exploring the hyperreal, a space beyond the forms and conventions of normative theatre practice. By breaking through the boundaries established by our predecessors, I sought to make the 'Classics' more tangible to both readers and spectators—in the form of works that could embody not only the dreams of a society, but also the stark, often unsettling realities of life.

Thus, we came to see the 'ghost' coursing deep within our bloodstream, wearing us down relentlessly, yet refusing to let us die. And at some point, we too became desperate to resist the rough, morose, and painful traits of society—those obscene shadows that echo within us, clinging stubbornly, lingering like a persistent ache that gnaws away at the edges of our being. We sought to deliberately unsettle the familiar, simplistic structure of binary thought. The realisation that centrifugal re-readings are essential for any meaningful centripetal research became a turning point. It prepared us, in unconventional ways, to question the authority of state institutions. The Bengali language itself emerged as a powerful tool of empowerment for the marginalized. Thus, breaking artistic norms and accepted patterns became the hallmark of Bengali playwrights, shaping our legacy. Yet, despite being a language of profound national heritage, it has long been denied the recognition it deserves. I still believe, it is this very language that holds the subversive potential to weave together the threads of resistance and sabotage.

However, can we truly say that modernism has been achieved in Bengali theatre in India? One cannot ignore the persistent fragility of our economy since independence. Our party-centric democracy has turned politics into a breeding ground for nepotism and corruption, while rampant financial scams continue to obstruct the nation's broader development. In such a context, it

is perhaps unsurprising that traditionalism or even non-modernism has emerged as a distinctive form of modernism in many postcolonial, third-world societies. The narrative tension running from *Ashalin* to *Mir Jafar*, or from *Boma* (The Bomb) to *Ei Raat Tomar Amar* (The Night is Yours and Mine), reveals a deeper uncertainty: are these works modern or postmodern? That question remains unresolved. For people like us, who have long been collecting cultural fragments from the first world to satisfy our creative hunger, remain as unsatiated as ever. The chaos and clamour born of our intellectual discontent may well have given rise to our own theory of post-modernism: an Indianised, and perhaps instinctively theatrical, a distinct form of ideological expression.

About the Author:

One of the leading postmodern playwrights of 21st-century India, **Bratya Basu**—litterateur, administrator, professor, director, and actor—is the (present) Minister-in-Charge, Department of School Education and Higher Education, Government of West Bengal.

Preface

– Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay

In order to begin our perception of postmodern drama, we may take note of postmodernism itself. Frederick Jameson envisaged the idea of a postmodern sublime. While referring to the *Westin Bonaventura Hotel* in Los Angeles, Jameson described it as 'a full-blown postmodern building', a kind of automata, an urban space that disorients, re-imagines and re-articulates our intimate traditional process of perception.

The dramatic stage as a space has been again and again experimented with, thereby creating an embattled baffling space. Postmodern theatre is contentious, forever creating an 'agon' (a field of wrestling), a semiotically, theatrically, linguistically enmeshed space. Ideology, de-structuration of theme and language, and new epistemic thresholds are essentially the characteristic features of postmodern drama.

The postmodern condition of drama is compatible with a flexible, neo-liberalist cultural praxis. Though Jameson describes it as the cultural logic of late capitalism and Linda Hutcheson considers it as complicit with modernist tradition, though striding into the postmodern, it finally becomes a social and political critique. Moving away from the stringent forms of capturing the socio-political modularities of 'reality, postmodern drama ushers in new interpretive and performative strategies.

While reifying the trajectories of postmodern drama, it is perhaps worthwhile to note Varun Begley's *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (2005) which refers to Andreas Huyssen's concept of the 'Great Divide' between modernism and postmodernism. In fact the postmodern dramatists blur and complicate the traditional normatives in performative activity.

In postmodern Bengali drama, there is a gradual blurring of the traditional negotiations. The Great Indian Dream in the post-independence era, the utopic conspectus of idealised Indian state-

hood began to wane quite rapidly. The dissipation and disruptive pessimism caused by the Bengal partition, the complication of the international politics with uncertain alliances with the U.S.A. or the then U.S.S.R. and the 1962 war with China further conduced to new modulation of critical insights even in aesthetic strategies. With the gradual distrust in all sectors of governance policy, there arose the need for reviewing and restructuring this new historical turn in postcolonial India.

On its aesthetic side, the new evolving dramatic modalities led to the discovery of significant ontologic and metonymic autonomy. The Brechtian, Pinteresque or even Weskerian models impacted largely on the splendid permeation and mix of the 'diegetic' and the 'mimetic' aspects of postmodern Bengali drama. In other words, this tension between 'actio' and 'narratio' (a point raised by Plato in the *Republic* long back) began to be most explicitly evident in the articulations of Badal Sarkar's Third Theatre, the performative strategies of Bohurupee group, experimentation of Bibhash Chakraborty, Mohit Chattopadhyay *et al*. In the prevailing interface of post-independence aspirations and the consequent anxiety led these playwrights to adhere themselves to the restrictive domain of reality as such. In the international scene, a similar trend of encapsulating realistic pronouncements could be evident. Even Richard Schechner, formulating the *New Theatre Movement* in the United States of America in the late 70s of the last century, the Melbourne production of Euripides's *Bacchae* (2007), or Paul Brown's *Aftershocks* (1991), set much premium on ideological propagandism.

In the domain of postmodern Bengali drama, playwrights like Bratya Basu, Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, Tirthankar Chanda, Hara Bhattacharya tried very definitively to break free of traditional modernist straitjackets.

Of all these playwrights, Bratya Basu, I affirm, emerges as the most notable postmodern dramatist bringing about new epistemic subversion through re-interpreting dramatic teleology, frequent use of stichomythic dialogic pattern, and formations of metahistory. Subversion of figurations as in *Mir Jafar* or *Fyodor* or the new

empiricist visions in queering the experientiality as in *The Black Hole,* the neo-historicist models as in *The Night is Ours* seem to unravel polysemic layers of dramatic activity. Even his theorising of "Company Theatre" restructures the journey into new creative experimentations and this mix of the "theoreia" and the "praxis" has been made possible through his identity as a practising dramatist.

About the Author:

Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, former Professor of English, *University of Burdwan*, and the former Vice-Chancellor of *Bankura University*, is presently the Chief Executive Director (Academics) of *Swami Vivekananda University* (Bara Kanthalia, West Bengal, India). He is Advisor to the *West Bengal Council of Higher Education*, Government of West Bengal, and the Secretary of the *I.A.S.A.* (Eastern Region).

The Editors' (General) Introduction

– Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, Debasish Roy,
Mainak Banerjee, Arnab Saha, and Pinaki Roy

We are all set to publish *Postmodern Bengali Theatre: A Critical Assessment, with reference to select Playwrights' Works*. We have tried to cover critical assessment(s) of (the works of) as many postmodern Bengali theatre-writers as possible—of course, based on their popularity, relevance, and the 'amount of translations' their works have received. We are hopeful that this anthology would be an important reference book for academicians, teachers, researchers, and students interested in delving deep into different aspects of postmodern Bengali theatre.

We humbly admit that due to the paucity of space, works of a number of postmodern Bengali playwrights could not be critically assessed. However, that does not mean that they are, in any way, less efficient. We extend our apologies for this.

Other than assessments of (productions of) select playwrights of eminence, four essays on the different technical aspects of postmodern Bengali theatre have also been included in the present anthology.

We conclude by admitting that this anthology is a very small tribute to Prof. Bratya Basu, who—presently—is one of more important names in the field of international theatre. We also register our thanks to the owners and management of *Ibidem Verlag (C.U.P.)* for undertaking to publish this anthology, and contribute to the growing body of critical approaches to theatre.

Introduction

– Pinaki Roy

It has had been for a couple of years that the idea of editing a critical-anthology on the contents, proceedings, nuances, and technicalities of (what is presently identified as) 'Postmodern Bengali Theatre'. Undertaking the 'project' had become necessary for two important reasons. First of all, one could not but wonder at the fabulous height to which Bengali theatre has been taken in the 2020s, especially by noted playwrights (and litterateurs) like Bratya Basu, Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, Hara Bhattacharya, Tirthankar Chanda, and Satya Bhaduri, among others. Second, unknown to the remarkable developments in/of the Bengali stage, the West had—especially since the onslaught of the *A.I.*—declared that the 'theatre is dead' without—as is the 'usual practice'—looking into what was happening in the eastern part of the hemisphere! "Theatre is not dying, but we are killing it...", Zella Selvoy-Devan exclaims exasperatedly in an article for the *Northwest Theatre Workshop* published in end-2023. In the same year, in August, Tom Berger, writing for the much-accessed *Onstage Blog*, muses on "The Death (again) of Theatre and the Future"! The U.S.-based podcast-hosts 'Cara' and 'Charlie' had even started a website named 'Theatre is Dead'! The mood, as we could perceive, was grim and pessimistic, as far as the Western theatre-critics were concerned!

But, here in West Bengal, we had a hearty laugh! *Once again*, we were being *essentialised* as 'non-performers in the field of theatre'! We did not care! As postcolonial Indians—and Bengalis, at that—we had already known enough to pooh-pooh such 'anxious'—though inconclusive—claims and thoughts! Asian theatre was/is not dead. Not at all! Indian theatre is thriving! Bengali theatre is, presently, at its healthiest best! The 21st-century Bengali theatre had/has all the necessary ingredients and powers to thrive! It has—identifiably—lacked only in critical assessments

which would carry different aspects of its development, nuances, contents, and technicalities to 'world-readers': *die gelehrten Leser der Weltliteratur*! And it *were* best done in English because, right now, 2 billion people (out of the total world population of approximately 8.5 billion) can read and speak in English. This is a consequence of England's 'glorious imperial past', as we might say...but, at least, they united the world through their language! This continues even in the 21st-century!

It was in this atmosphere that five people came together to plan an anthology of critical writings on postmodern Bengali theatre. Except the writer of this introductory essay, all the four others are eminent personalities in their own fields, other than being recognised theatre-activists, orators, critics, or academicians. But still they managed their time to do the editorial works on their part, and what has come out is a 'sizable work' focussing on different aspects of postmodern Bengali theatre. Most importantly, Bratya Basu—the eminent theatre-personality, litterateur, thespian, director, film-actor, and administrator—agreed to write a 'Foreword' for the project! It immediately accumulated more steam! Basu is undoubtedly one of the more recognised names in (the international) theatrical 'arena' right now! His observations and suggestions (were and) are definitely important for the editors.

The 'project'—even after being sanctioned by *Ibidem Verlag*—had its (proverbial) tumbling blocks! First of all, there were several discussions regarding the 'coverage(s)', and the time from when to begin the assessments. Though it is sometimes assumed that Shambhu Mitra's *Chand Baniker Pala* (1965) is the first postmodern Bengali play *proper*, a significant section of the theatre-critics vouch for the 'Third Theatre'-plays by Badal Sircar as heralding the beginning of 'postmodernism on the Bengali stage'. So, we narrowed ourselves down to Badal Sircar as the (so-called) 'first point of reference'! But, from then onwards, a huge list of postmodern Bengali playwrights struck us confused! We could not, initially, decide upon whom to choose in our 'quest' to assess the postmodern Bengali plays. Two choices were immediate and automatic, nevertheless! One was Bratya Basu, and the other, Ujjwal

Chattopadhyay. There is hardly a nook and corner of the 21st-century Bengali stage that does not resonate with their names (and references to their works)! Thereafter, other than Badal Sircar, Basu, and Chattopadhyay, we decided upon (writings on) Tirthankar Chanda and Hara Bhattacharya. These two theatre-writers have also earned their places of eminence upon the post-modern Bengali stage. We left the playwrights of the *I.P.T.A.* out of our assessment not based on any other 'factor'; it was primarily because their plays were realistic and totally focussed upon contemporary society, rather than exhibiting the postmodern trends. We had decided to focus on *postmodernism in Bengali theatre*—hence, the plays which do not fit the description (of 'postmodern') had to be left out. Moreover, the paucity of space did not permit the present editors to include critical assessments on all the Bengali playwrights who demonstrate postmodernist characteristic features in their respective writings. It is not that they are any less talented as dramatists! It is never so! Only there was the *factor* of 'limiting our choices' hanging upon us!

There were other *factors* too...and this cost us some time...but we have definitely gained by waiting! Most of the contributors to/of this critical anthology are people of eminence in the field of academics and theatre-criticism. At any given time, they would have several writing-projects to complete. But they promised us that they would send us the essays, nonetheless! We waited! And as they say, *sweet is the fruit of waiting*! Gradually the essays began to reach us! We were ecstatic. We wanted to edit a 'good and voluminous critical-anthology'...and here they were...the essayists were trying to offer their very best! It was in the second week of August 2025 that the last (of the invited essays) came to us. We immediately swung into action! Some editorial works had to be done on some of the essays—but that was done not to 'uplift the quality' of the essays, but rather, to put in some extra commas, dashes, and quotation-marks that the essayists, in their sincere efforts to write excellent assessments, had inadvertently dropped here and there! And it was, finally completed!

One might wonder why there are nine essays on Bratya Basu's plays, three on Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's, and one each for

Badal Sircar, Hara Bhattacharya and Tirthankar Chanda's plays. The editors of the present anthology of critical assessments have their own explanations for this. An essay on Badal Sircar by one of the editors (of this anthology) has both assessed and covered a *sizable* number of plays written by the pioneer of (Indian) 'Third Theatre'—if not *all*! It is the same issue with the essays on Bhattacharya's and Chanda's plays. We have one more point to add! This publication seeks to *add* to the growing body of critical assessment of postmodern Bengali plays—not *ruminate* or *repeat* what is already there. There are several—if not numerous—writings on Sircar's plays. Mainak Banerjee's essay on Sircar—here—provides an *overall* assessment. Three exhaustive studies on Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's plays have covered a majority of his theatrical productions. Chattopadhyay—it must be mentioned—is an extremely powerful playwright, effortlessly combining myth, legends, archetypes, and elements from the folklores with his incisive (and often hilarious) insights into postmodern existence. Hara Bhattacharya and Tirthankar Chanda are (what could be called) 'postmodern social realists'—with a crystal-clear sense of history and 'historicity'! Nevertheless, due to the scarcity of critical approaches to the works by Bhattacharya, Chanda, and Chattopadhyay—especially those written in English—exhaustive analytical exercises related to their theatrical productions proved to be quite difficult for the editors and prospective authors. *Es war eine anspruchsvolle Aufgabe mit zahlreichen Herausforderungen*! It should, however, be mentioned that recently quality critical approaches to plays written by Chattopadhyay, Bhattacharya, and Chanda are being published in different journals, magazines, and newspapers—but mostly in Bengali. These essays need to be immediately translated for wider international and intra-national readership. There is one more point to be added. It is true that the anthology does not contain separate assessment(s) of Mohit Chattopadhyay whose *Kantha Nalitey Surjo* (1963), *Neel Ronger Ghora* (1964), and *Mrityu Sambad*(1969) are often cited as 'plays that initiated the trend of postmodernism in Bengali theatre in the second half of the 20th-century'—but Chattopadhyay is 'omnipresent' in this anthology through numerous (indirect/direct) references—and a

separate 'treatment' might have been deemed 'superfluous', if not 'supernumerary'!

One should mention, nevertheless, that Bratya Basu's writings have got both a remarkable 'amount' of international readership and a growing body of assessment in both Bengali and English (and in other languages as well)! To recall: since the early 1990s till now, he has written a large number of quality plays, and they have been widely translated. They have been also been internationally released, and very widely and numerously performed. Hence, his dramatic *oeuvre* required a larger number of contributions, many of which have focussed on his individual plays. Basu is—to say the least—one of the more powerful playwrights of postmodern India who have not only produced strikingly-original plays but also adapted (and Indianised/localised) from famous names in Western writings like Shakespeare, Synge, Miller, Shaffer, Wexley, von Mayenburg, and Arriaga. Celebrated names from the body of Indian literature have found mention, following, and adaptation in Bratya Basu's theatre as well—and these include Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Shibram Chakraborty, Rajshekhar Basu, Vijay Tendulkar, and Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, among others. His three novels—*Adamritakatha* ('The Tale of Ada and Amrita', 2022), *Dyutakrirak* ('The Gambler', 2023), and *Udbasito Mandas* ('The Raft Afloat', 2025)—while truthfully depicting different issues and problems related to the Bengali theatre of the 19th and 20th centuries, also reveal the writer's keen sense of and interest in history—something which has wholesomely contributed to the remarkable popularity and appreciation of his biography on Bertolt Brecht—*B.B.* (2025). His collection of poems was published by *Signet Press*, Kolkata, in 2023. Besides, he has directed (one is set to be released in 2026) six films until now (other than acting in approximately 30 films), and these (along with his plays, novels, and poetry) perceptively add to his own perspectives on the angst-ridden postmodern existence. Other than being a prolific litterateur, theatre-director, filmmaker, critic, professor, and administrator, he is a polyglot and a polymath. *Es ist nur natürlich, dass diesem mächtigen und wunderbaren Mann eine große Anzahl von Aufsätzen gewidmet ist*!

There are four essays on different technical aspects of post-modern Bengali theatre in the anthology as well. These essays would help the readers—especially those who are 'being initiated to the world of theatre-criticism'—in having a clear-cut idea about the theory related to postmodern Bengali theatre, and its present 'state' and 'conditions'. The 'Preface' has been written by Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, right now a name to reckon with in Bengal's academia. The 'Foreword', above all, has been written by—to repeat—one of postmodern India's greater playwrights: Bratya Basu.

Supervised, suggested, and commented upon by other four editors of this critical anthology, I am hereby writing the 'Introduction'! I shall not make it longish—the contents of the anthology would speak for themselves. This anthology would surely fill in a considerable portion of the lacuna that exists in the field of literary criticism of postmodern Bengali theatre. As the popularity of postmodern Bengali theatre increases day by day, so would be the researches on its various aspects. Academicians, teachers, researchers, and students would access this anthology alike to learn more and more about the late-20th and early-21st-century Bengali theatre. Their researches would definitely open up new horizons in the field of drama-criticism.

Most of the essays in the present anthology have been edited to fit in the 'requirements' of *M.L.A.*-style of citation. Especially the 6th edition, as far as possible! However, as the anthology is not a *Ph.D. thesis* or an *M. Phil.-dissertation*, there are places where citations or mentioning of page-numbers have been done away with for the sake of continuity and lucidity. This may please be forgiven, if one *were* to expect an 'impeccably prepared research-work on postmodern Bengali theatre'!

On behalf of all the editors of this anthology, I humbly thank Prof. Bratya Basu for agreeing to write the 'Foreword', to all the contributors, to the illustrator of the cover-jacket, and, of course, to the owners and management of ***ibidem*** *Verlag* for undertaking steps towards publishing this anthology.

Postmodern Bengali Theatre:
The Technicalities

From Sacred Allegory to Secular Resistance: The Evolution of Nationalism in (Select) Plays of Girish Chandra Ghosh, Sachindranath Sengupta, and Bratya Basu

– Manojit Mandal and Rajarshi Roy

Introduction: Framing the Secular Turn:

The relationship between religion and nationalism has long occupied a central, and often uneasy, place in colonial and postcolonial India. Echoing Fredric Jameson's formulation that all third-world literatures must be perceived as 'national allegories' (Jameson 69), literature, and, under such circumstances, religion too, could not remain insulated from the demands of the *here-and-now*. Likewise, from such proximities, often nativist discourses of communalism would come to forefront, as has been in evident from the Hindi-Urdu debate in colonial India after 1857 (Rai 41-42). From the symbolic use of 'sacred geographies' (Ramaswamy 152) to the invocation of mythological heroes, nationalist discourse in India has frequently relied on religious idioms to forge a sense of collective belonging. Therefore, nationalist identity in postcolonial and colonial India had always been contingent upon a form of implicit communalist discourse (or, at best, a form of 'otherisation' at the behest of religious beliefs). Bengali theatre, as one of eastern India's more politically-charged artistic forms, too has historically participated in this process. Yet, over the course of more than a century, one witnesses a striking transformation in how the nation is *imagined*, and, thereafter, *performed* on the Bengali stage. The present essay traces that transformation through what may be called a 'secular turn' within the nationalist discourse in theatre: a shift not simply in content, but in the very structure of political imagination. Focusing on three plays that span distinct historical moments—Girish Chandra Ghosh's *Satnam*(1904), Sachindranath Sengupta's *Gairik Pataka* (1930), and Bratya Basu's *Mir Jafar* (2021)

(two produced in colonial India, and one in the postmodern 21st-century when India is a force to reckon with)—this study explores how the so-called 'Bengali political theatre' has reconfigured its relationship with religious symbolism in order to engage more directly with questions of ethics, history, and material power.

The 'secular turn', as explained above, is not to be confused with a departure from religious themes or an appropriation of materialist/'neo-corporate' ideology. Rather, it marks a deeper, more complex reorientation of nationalist discourse: one that mobilises and critically interrogates religious nomenklatura to open up space for political reflection and economic critique. In other words, secularism in these plays is not defined by absence but by *subversion*: a tactical dismantling of theological essentialism and its replacement with a mode of national consciousness grounded in historical materialism, ethical universality, and anti-capitalist critique.

This reveals an evolving dramaturgical strategy: from spiritual allegory as a metaphor for civic unity, to a form of 'secular symbolism' that enlists religious forms while stripping them of theological determinism, to full-fledged critiques of nationalism itself as a site of betrayal and economic collusion. In *Satnam*, Girish Chandra Ghosh invokes the vocabulary of subaltern Sikh spirituality not as a call to religious identity but as an ethical metaphor for moral awakening under colonial rule, which arguably strikes a parallel between the British and the earlier Mughal hegemony where "such representation of the humiliating processes of colonial subjugation through the public forum of the stage exhibits a firm nationalist commitment toward dramatising concerns that reveal the contradictions between the colonial government's claims about its 'civilising mission' and its practices" (Bhatia 38). Here, the sacred becomes a secular allegory—a means to envision collective resistance and integrity beyond communal divides. Sachindranath Sengupta's *Gairik Pataka* takes a more explicit turn: in reimagining Shivaji (in the background of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's house-arrest) as a proto-nationalist freedom fighter, and in reinterpreting the saffron flag as a symbol of sacrifice rather than sectarian identity, the play performs a deliberate act of

secularisation. It is an act of translation of religious forms into nationalist iconographies motivated by the exigencies of anti-colonial mobilisation.

The most radical iteration of this secular turn emerges in Bratya Basu's *Mir Jafar*, which no longer seeks to reinterpret or appropriate religious semantics but to dismantle the very mythologies that sustain nationalist exceptionalism. Basu reads history through the lens of feudal decadence and capital-flows, casting the betrayal of Siraj-ud-Daula not as a moral failure but as the outcome of structural realignments under early colonial capitalism. The *British East India Company* appears not simply as an imperial power, but as a prototype of the modern corporation—faceless, profit-driven, and strategically in collusion with local collaborators. In this interpretation, the enemy is not the religious 'other' but the abstract and enduring logic of economic exploitation. The play thereby secularises nationalism to its critical limit: by exposing how the sacred allegories of betrayal, heroism, and nationhood are often hand-in-glove with the very forces they oppose.

The writers of this essay have deliberately selected the three plays named for analyses. Each represents a moment in the historical development of Bengali political (read 'reactionary') theatre, but together they chart a larger arc which moves from the ethical imagination of a nation of colonised people, through the symbolic reinvention of religious heritage, to the structural critique of nationhood in an era of neoliberalism. This arc, we suggest, is not linear but dialectical, unfolding in response to changing political conditions and aesthetic imperatives.

Through textual analysis and historical contextualisation, the present essay contends that the secular turn in Bengali theatre of late, as exemplified by Bratya Basu's *Mir Jafar*, is more than a stylistic or thematic shift. It is a mode of cultural resistance—a kind that reimagines the nation not as a sacred essence to be recovered, but as a political field to be contested, shaped, and transformed. In an age where religious majoritarianism and corporate nationalism often work in tandem, this dramaturgical project remains as urgent as ever.

Allegory and Ethical Unity in Girish Chandra Ghosh's *Satnam*:

Girish Chandra Ghosh (henceforth 'Girish Ghosh') was a part of a Bengali intellectual epoch that ranged from the time of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra, till the politically turbulent times of the 1905 *Bengal Partition*. Thus, as a public intellectual, he was a product of the interregnum—between that of quasi-moderate attitude towards the British colonial project and that of the nascent radical mobilisation towards the British crown, noticeable in the early days of the *Swadeshi Movement*. Likewise, any scholar-historian who would attempt to study the trajectory of his artistic development and the changing nuances of his discourse would be surprised to find that he had, contradictorily, attempted to appropriate the cult of Shakespeare and yet towards the end of his career had involved himself in producing dramatic narratives that were radically anti-colonial (Mandal 83). However, the 1890s proved to be a roughly unsuccessful period of churn for the thespian-director, as the political turbulence of the period could hardly appreciate the subtler implications of Shakespearean dramaturgy. It has been argued elsewhere that this was because of the fact that "since the early 1890s, the intensity of Bengali engagement in directly translating/adapting Shakespeare started to comedown in comparison with the earlier two decades and so was the popularity of the performances of such recreations. Simultaneously, plot of the plays taken from 'nationalist' narratives started to increase" (Mandal 89). However, there is a need to unpack the complexity of this claim: what did 'nationalist' narratives (read allegories) of this age actually constitute of?

The 1890s, especially the early years of the decade proved of to be of significant communal violence across the important commercial metropolitans of the Raj such as Bombay (presently 'Mumbai'), Rangoon (now 'Yangon') and even in certain parts of the then United Provinces. These riots, especially the ones that happened in Bombay during April-August 1893, and 1894 were linked to a fast-radicalising 'cow-protection movement', the roots of which go nearly four decades back to the issue of playing music before mosques. What changed within the nature of these sporad-

ic violent events in four intervening decades was that by 1894, the discourse of 'cow-protection', which had its own communal underpinnings, was—in fact—hijacked from the rural unlettered peasantry class by the reformism-oriented bourgeois Hindu classes, which translated in acceptance of the *Ganpati Festival* into the nationalist discourse. Till the period of 1893-94, the *Ganpati Festivals* largely remained family affairs. However, in the period mentioned, it was to be appropriated as a 'cultural innovation' of sorts to unite Hindus of all classes and sects. This moment in the *fin de siècle*, is—in our opinion—a watershed moment in the colonial-era politics, and later postcolonial popular politics in India. Mobilisation surrounding the *Festival* in 1894 and beyond that was highly charged, and, naturally, offered a visible shift from the earlier highly domestic kinds of rituals. What was also different about the public ritual observances of this period was the propagation of a cultural discourse of alterity which was based on the need for Hindus to unite. Naturally, to aid such a discourse paraphernalia pertaining to older mythic heroes, warriors and chieftains who fought against 'foreigners' were also brought into circulation through "petitions and memorials, songs, pamphlets, posters, and speeches" (Tejani 30). What complicated this issue further were the conflicts of these imageries that were invoked in favour of Savarna Hinduism, but were infact "the articulation of a regional Hindu identity inflected with an upper-caste idiom in the late nineteenth century was enormously contested and existed alongside a range of interpretations of Maratha history and social identity." (qtd. in O'Hanlon; Tejani 30). Simply put, the communal tenors of alterity were *ipso facto* applied onto local historical events to incite/invoke a form of notional/ national unity amongst Hindus, even though the early agents of the cow-protection movements who remained attached to this project had their own identities and rituals sanitised from the discourse. The *Ganpati Festivals* remained a 'quasi-public' observance during the rule of the Peshwas. However, after 1818, its popularity declined mostly owing to lack of significant patronage (Kaur 18). Again in 1894—after the communal riots of August 1893—it was surprisingly resurrected with active patronage from foreign-educated reform-oriented

Marathi Brahmans, the most notable of whom was Bal Gangadhar Tilak (henceforth referred to as 'Tilak'). Tilak—who had joined the *Indian National Congress* in 1890, after assiduously campaigning for reforms within the traditional Hindu mores as a part of the *Poona Sarvajanik Sabha*, and later, for the *Deccan Education Society*—proved to be a lynchpin between the local subnationalist discourses of Maratha nationalism and that of educated, privileged and slightly Eurocentric discourses of the Indian National Congress. Likewise, "this new Ganpati festival was consciously modelled as a mirror image of the Shia festival of Muharram in which Hindus had customarily participated. By publicly mobilising western India's favourite deity, Tilak sought to bring low- and high-caste Marathas into the same political as well as physical space, and to have them identified as Maratha Hindus" (qtd. in Deshpande 1; Tejani 54). Having observed the parallel, it would not be the first time that Tilak would repudiate his earlier pro-reformist stance to mobilise public opinion: in 1891 too, he had publicly agitated against the *Age of Consent Bill*, which intended to raise the age of marriage from ten to twelve, in the name of gubernatorial interference into local customs.

Fast forward to 1904—a decade after Tilak's involvement in the *Ganesh Chaturthi Festival* of 1894 that led to violent riots in which an estimated 100 people were killed—we see Girish Chandra Ghosh producing and staging his play *Satnam* in Calcutta (now 'Kolkata') with the Partition of Bengal being considered for legislative ease in 1905. The play—based on the well-documented *Satnam Uprising* in Haryana in 1672, and its crushing defeat in the hands of Aurangzeb, received contradictory reception from the audience, which led to one of the performances being abandoned midway. It evoked a strong environment of communal furore, owing to the playwright's representation of Aurangzeb and his followers in poor light, and the controversy was such that there was an active public discourse amongst the privileged Muslim citizens of Calcutta, who dubbed Girish to be communal. What was even more significant about this event was that the explosive nature of the controversy actually forced the dramatist to listen to

the objections raised and make sweeping changes to the script of the play and follow it with a note of apology:

> The playwright nurtures immense respect for the Muslims, and that he believes, they are bestowed with all those qualities which the Hindus should idealise. Hindus and Muslims are now habitants of Hindustan, share its happiness and sorrow. Hence, history of conflicts howsoever had occurred between the Hindus and the Muslims in the past, must not anger any community. Rather, such revisits to history can amend mistakes from both the communities [...] (Bhattacharya 26) (Mandal 90).

This utterance from Girish Chandra Ghosh is significant for two reasons: first, it attests the volatility of the circumstances given that Ghosh was known to be a highly idiosyncratic individual in his personal capacity who had little respect for public opinion after the failure of his attempts at adapting Shakespeare; second, and more importantly, it established him as one of the key figures amongst Bengali intellectuals of the time who would not shy away from borrowing cultural signifiers of non-Bengali (*abangalee*) origins to establish his narrative. The second point slightly alienated him from the highly educated, privileged and often-urbane Bengali political class of the time both inside and outside the Congress. However, this would also bring him in close alliance with other nationalist leaders. This shift in cultural alliances was most resplendent in the performance of his next play *Siraj-ud-Daula* (1905), which was a subtle appropriation of Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second* (1595), and portrayed Siraj-ud-Daula, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, in a sympathetic light. Instead of earlier anti-Mughal stance, Ghosh's shift to the clear and present dangers of the Partition of Bengal by harping on how Siraj-ud-Daula had been, in fact, betrayed by a conspiracy of the *British East India Company* garnered strong praise from literary and political classes alike. It is said that, Bal Gangadhar Tilak had watched one of the performances and had congratulated the dramatist for his work. His other two plays that followed—*Mir Kasem* (1906) and *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1907)—too proved to be much successful, even though as scholars with the privilege of introspection, we will have to doubt the artistic and the historical authenticity of both the plays following the *Satnam*-controversy.

However, having said that, we must acknowledge that between 1894-1905, both Tilak and Girish would face episodes of success and failure in their respective careers, which translated Girish's own forced shift from use of religious exclusivity to superficial use of religious idioms and iconographies as dramatic devices and Tilak's own gradual acceptance of democratic methods of freedom agitation, it would still be perhaps not wholly erroneous to add that these shifts showed a broader necessity of adopting secularist principles and discourses within literary and political public opinion of the time.

Symbolism, Resistance, and Secular Patriotism in Sachindranath Sengupta's *Gairik Pataka*:

With Jawaharlal Nehru's clarion call for the *Poorna Swaraj* in 1929 at the Lahore-session of the *Indian National Congress*, Indian freedom struggle moved into a new decade with significant chaos on the international political scenario. Prompted by the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929, the *Great Depression* of 1930 became a reality that not only deflated the so-called 'American Dream', but had significant repercussions in European politics of the period. The *American Crash* deeply affected Europe within a few weeks. The economic crisis hit more or less every European country, one after the other. The 'most severely injured nation' was Germany since it had been largely dependent on the American loans. In the panic of the Crash, American investors withdrew their money from German industries, which unavoidably led to bankruptcy. At the same time, German and other European exports to the U.S.A. dropped to almost zero (Galbraith and Runger) (Klapsis190). This scenario gave birth to a rhetoric of significant alienation amongst the middle-class, which ultimately meant their capitulation to the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* (Nazi Party) of Adolf Hitler. One research-publication notes that in the period between 1928 and 1932, their electoral shares had risen from 2.63 percent to 18.25 percent in 1930, and, finally, to 33.0 percent in 1932 ("Das Deutsche Reich..."). What followed this were Hitler's chancellorship and the ultimate decay of the Weimar

Republic. This was not the case for Germany alone; even in other European countries apart from Italy: even in Eastern Europe. The rise of far-right radicalism and their electoral fortunes in the aftermath of the Economic Depression all over Europe was most likely influenced by the unpopularity of the Internationalist pacifist discourses in the aftermath of the Peace Treaties signed in 1919-20—following the conclusion of the First World War. Their success remained the greatest where economic conditions remained deplorable for longer period of time:

> People who had little or even nothing to lose were naturally more easily attracted by parties that appeared to be ready to destroy the existing social and economic system and put a new one in its place (de Bromhead *et al.*) (Klapsis 192).

It was under such circumstances, and, most importantly, under the declaration of the *Poorna Swaraj*, that Sachindranath Sengupta chose to write *Gairik Pataka* ('The Saffron Pennant', 1930) as a dedication to the iconic leader and Congress activist, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. But the subtext of this dedication is slightly more complicated than it is apparent to us. Written during the time of Bose's house-arrest for his involvement in the *Civil Disobedience Movement*, the play mobilises the history of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's conflict with the Mughal administration of Aurangzeb in 1657. What was even more significant in this case was Sengupta's own involvement with the revolutionary group *Anushilan Samiti*, which was created in March 1902 by the revolutionary-leader Barindra Kumar Ghose and his illustrious elder-brother Aurobindo Ghose. Aurobindo Ghose, who had been the principal of the National College (known today as the 'Jadavpur University') during the time when the Partition of Bengal was being considered and Girish Chandra Ghose was staging his nationalist trilogy on stage, could be identified as one of the forerunners of the radical group (of which Netaji would later be a part) within the Congress. However, following repeated incarceration by the British government owing to his involvement with the *Anushilan Samiti*'s (nationalistic) exploits, he left active politics in 1910 and set up a religious commune in Pondicherry to propagate Hindu