

## Bengal's Changing Cultural Scenario

Swapan Mullick

Fluctuations on the Bengali cultural scene can be bewildering. Tollygunge seemed irretrievably doomed even in the last years of Uttam Kumar. But one smash hit caused a freak revival and Calcutta's little Tollywood is now roaring with activity. As were the theatre groups—but fifteen years ago. Today, they look back on their glorious past or on stalwarts who have either left the scene or have lost their old charisma. The *jatra*—the open-air opera—has, on the other hand, turned into a thriving industry and drawn away talent from films and theatre. There was a time when the recording companies flourished. Now Bengali music, both as an art and industry, has fallen on hard times.

The total picture is more confusing than is good for the cultural scene which once prided itself on its vitality. The confusion promises to persist as long as some crucial questions remain unanswered. How are good films to be made now that the State Government has withdrawn from direct production of feature films? (Its experiment proved too expensive; it yielded awards but fetched few other satisfying results). Why have theatre groups failed singularly in offering original plays or even pleasing audiences with their new productions? Is the two-way traffic between films and theatre a means of cross-fertilisation or simply a very practical method of individual survival? Why has fresh musical talent failed to appear on the horizon now that the ageing stars of the disc are beginning to look—and sound—a tired lot?

The answers are not easy to find partly because public taste seems so difficult to assess. The record companies, for instance, flourished at one time on the strength of 'surprise' offers on special occasions like the Bengali New Year or Durga Puja. This was a mixed offering consisting of classical presentations, Tagore music, recitations from Tagore, Nazrul and Jibanananda, modern musical compositions and humorous skits. Today, the best exponents of *adhunik*, including Hemanta Mukherjee, who had gripped middle-class consciousness for more than twenty-five years, find that their appeal is on the wane. The big debate is now centered on why lyric writers have been producing sub-standard work, why composers have failed to evoke a simple and refreshing response and whether established poets should now step in to rescue Bengali *adhunik* from this barren state.

The record companies still come with their Puja and New Year offerings. But there are few surprises left. They play around with the old voices, mainly by creating albums of old songs, either modern or from Tagore, Nazrul and D. L. Roy. In *Rabindrasangeet*, the late Debabrata Biswas along with veterans Suchitra Mitra, Kanika Banerjee and Subinoy Roy continue to satisfy those with real interest in the craft. Listeners with simpler tastes lap up with great delight every album of Hemanta Mukherjee's poignant resonance.

The same clear division between craft and sentiment has marked the growth of the Bengali theatre. The dividing line did not matter as long as the two different forms of drama enjoyed their respective influences. The audience was huge both for the commercial productions staged at century-old houses like the Star, Biswaroopa and Rangmahal and for the thirty to forty groups seeking dates

in auditoriums like the Rabindra Sadan, Sisir Mancha, Kala Mandir, Academy of Fine Arts and Mukta Angan. There was no real conflict except when vocal members of the group theatre considered it a social obligation to denounce the "degrading influence" and some of the alleged obscenities of the commercial theatre.

The tensions, however, were minor. The groups, for the most part, were busy putting together their new works. Bohurupee, Nandikar, Chetana, Theatre Workshop and others were as big a draw on one circuit (with names like Sombhu Mitra, Rudraprasad Sengupta and the late Ajitesh Banerjee and Keya Chakravorty) as Sabitri Chatterjee, Anup Kumar, the late Bhanu Banerjee, Supriya Devi and Mahendra Gupta were on the other. Public debates on alleged obscenities in plays like *Baarbodhu* fizzled out. There were crowds, curious crowds—waiting to be fed with forbidden pleasures like the cabaret which soon became the staple diet intended to boost box office receipts. But there was also good, old-fashioned entertainment relying on slick presentation of conventional sentiment.

The groups put all their energies into adaptations of Brecht and other sources. Till the mid-seventies, they thrilled the growing number of young enthusiasts with exciting experiments. Bohurupee preserved its reputation even after the shock departure of Sombhu Mitra and later of his wife Tripti Mitra. Nandikar offered some of the finest adaptations of Brecht in plays like *Ek Poyshar Pala* under the inspiring leadership of Ajitesh Banerjee and Rudraprasad Sengupta. Utpal Dutt's devastating political statements in plays like *Tiner Talwar* and *Ebar Rajar Pala* made People's Little Theatre one of the most respected groups in the State. Then came the more recent units like Chetana whose *Jagannath* sent fresh waves across the theatre world with its brilliant inter-weaving of the images of film and theatre and a memorable performance by its director, Arun Mukherjee.

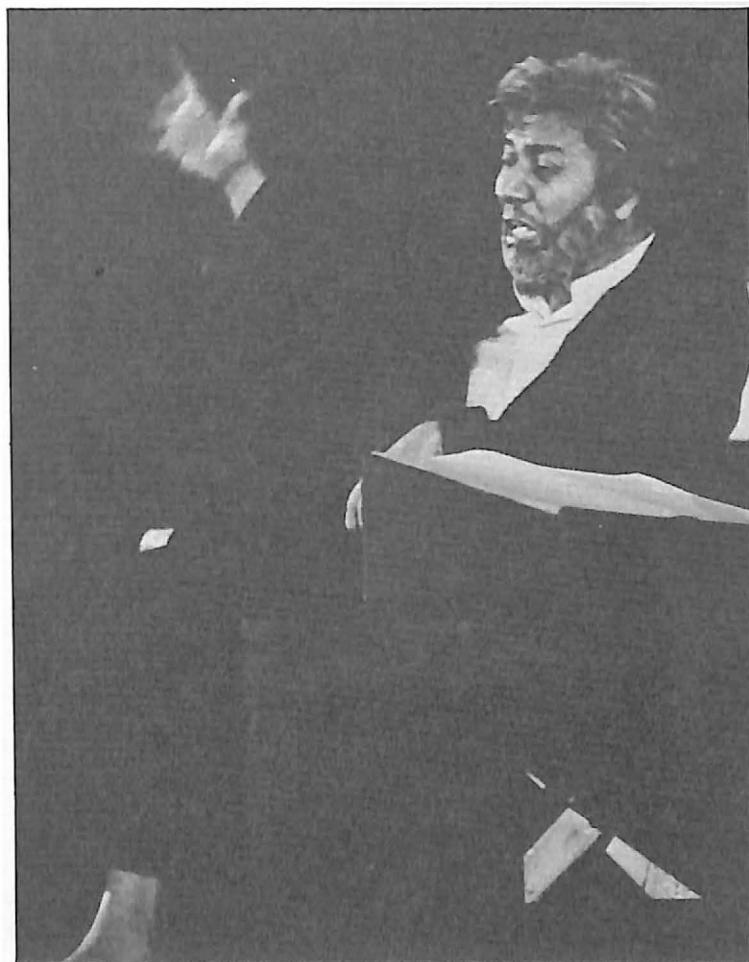
But all that is now a thing of the past. The Bengali group theatre, for reasons which can hardly be convincingly explained, has run into one of its bleakest phases. Nothing could provide grimmer evidence of this than the fact that most groups have failed to score with their new productions. The only plays which have won reasonable success are Bohurupee's *Aguner Pakhi*, *Ajker Shahjehan* presented by People's Little Theatre and the solo performance by Saonli Mitra (the talented daughter of Sombhu and Tripti Mitra) in *Nathboti Anathboti*.

So barren has the theatre scene become that when Nandikar organised a week-long National Theatre Festival in June, most groups offered their old productions. Even these were a sell-out—which only goes to prove that, whatever the reason, the present plight of the group theatre does not stem from any ebb in public enthusiasm (which was equally strong even in the case of plays from Bangladesh and from States like Rajasthan and Manipur).

Fresh talent continues to emerge in groups like Tritirtha whose *Debangshi* opened the National Festival. And, of course, the West Bengal Government does its duty through the instituting of awards and grants. But this is small comfort in the face of today's depressing reality: auditoriums are now comparatively easy to book and, except in rare cases, the balcony of the Academy of Fine Arts remains closed. More disheartening is the impression among serious theatregoers that Theatre Workshop's *Chak Bhanga Modhu* (1971) and *Jagannath* (1977) were the only two plays in the last fifteen years which rose to great heights.

The slump may be due largely to the fact that the biggest sources of inspiration are drying up. The last big occasion when Sombhu Mitra was seen on the stage (an occasion that immediately prompted night-long vigils for tickets) was *Galileo*. This was a production which also witnessed the unique phenomenon of six major groups coming together. But the experiment did not last although Sombhu Mitra was widely acknowledged to have given one of the best performances of his career. Since then he has gone into virtual retirement. One also hears little of Tripti Mitra except that she has founded a theatre school and staged *Raktakarabi* after a brief stint in the commercial theatre and a more adventurous effort to stage Mahasweta Devi's widely read novel *Hazar Churashir Maa*.

Most of the bigger groups are breaking up. All this has taken a heavy toll. But if the Bengali theatre still has excellent chances of rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes, it is mainly because the Bengali middle-class, constituting a huge segment, absolutely loves going to and talking about plays.



*Sombhu Mitra in Galileo.*  
(Photo: Nemai Ghosh).

Theatre audiences become a veritable multitude for a *jatra* performance in a rural setting. Five decades ago, it was part of a bit of local *tamasha* and sport for the babus. Today the *jatra* is an industry with an annual turnover estimated at a mind-boggling Rs. 50 crores. Princely patronage has been replaced by a well-oiled machine. Lights, music and props have become the focal points of a technological revolution. Men who sang and roared their lines for sheer pleasure are now marketable commodities engaged in a fierce contest of groups, money power and individual ratings.

The old mythological sources, still capable of captivating an audience of 10,000 under a tarpaulin on the sprawling grass, have given way to more progressive themes. These include historicals with contemporary relevance (the reformist ideas of Rammohun Roy and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, for instance), soul-stirring biographicals (a special interest of the veteran Shantigopal who has brought Hitler, Napoleon, Spartacus, Lenin, Prometheus and Vivekananda to the common man), plain gimmicks and "modern" adaptations ranging from the exploits of a "dacoit queen" to a sympathetic portrait of the misadventures of Billa and Ranga. For all its new features, the *jatra* is not considered a means of urban enlightenment in the same measure as the group theatre or the "new cinema" and there are many who also regard the new gimmicks as detrimental to its roots. Nevertheless the climate of changing values is adequately reflected in the work of the more eminent film and theatre personalities—among them Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Banerjee, Tapan Sen, Bibhas Chakravorty and now Vasant Chowdhury and Supriya Devi who are engaged in the colourful blending of education and entertainment.



*Shantigopal, as Hitler, in his own Jatra production.*  
(Photo: Tulu Das).



*Mrinal Sen shooting Tasveer Apni Apni.*  
(Photo: Sital Das).

A similar effort at mixing education and entertainment at the most elementary level has spurred the revival of the Bengali cinema. An industry which was dormant and almost gasping for breath until a few years ago ironically derives most of its inspiration from the spectacular success of a film called *Shatru*, literally soaked in coarse violence and melodrama. In a way, it is a pity that film-makers from Mrinal Sen to Utpalendu Chakravorty should be making Hindi films either for the commercial screen or for television while the Bengali cinema rides high on potboilers.

Till one or two years ago, there was another side to the coin which took the Bengali cinema to the forefront of the Indian scene and eventually to the West. Now there are compelling reasons for a change. Satyajit Ray, of course, has been forced out of action for health reasons. His next involvement with celluloid will be in the television series by his son, Sandip Ray. For the series, Satyajit Ray will write the scripts and compose the music. There will be thirteen separate stories (many of them by Satyajit Ray himself) to be fitted into 23-minute slots. Work has just begun and the entire programme, sponsored by a commercial house, will be telecast, probably from January 1986, under the title *Satyajit Ray Presents*.

Television has already become a medium for Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha. Sen's *Tasveer Apni Apni* turned out to be disappointing—after the change in his artistic outlook, with the emphasis on sensitive depiction of the human situation in such films as *Kharij* and *Khandhar*. His next venture has been put off but it will most certainly be in Hindi and is slated to get off the ground towards the end of the year. Sinha's *Aadmi aur Aurat* won the National Award for the best film on national integration and its simple treatment, laced with just the right amount of melodrama designed not to offend the sensibilities of an enlightened audience, perhaps suited the needs of the TV audiences. Even so, Sinha, always a big draw with the audiences at home, feels more comfortable making full-length feature films. A veteran of over thirty films, he maintains modest standards of art and considers it more worthwhile to please filmgoers with what he believes to be honest entertainment.

For the younger group, more deeply committed to serious social comment, it has been an altogether different experience. For about five years, they had survived on State support. Compared with the State subsidy programme, which turned out to be counter-productive (bad or incomplete films), direct production (on budgets up to Rs. 17 lakhs for certain ventures) yielded award-winners like Utpalendu Chakravorty's *Chokh*, Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha* and Goutam Ghose's *Dakhal*. It caused this talented young trio to shoot into prominence and took them with their films to the big festivals. The films included such minor works as Utpalendu Chakravorty's documentary on the *Music of Satyajit Ray* but, altogether, gave convincing proof of the fact that a younger generation would soon come of age—if it hadn't already.

But trouble soon arose over the commercial release of these films. The State



*Mamata Shankar and Goutam Ghose in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's Grihajuddha.*



*From Saikot Bhattacharya's Duba.  
(Photo: Samar Das).*



*Smita Patil and Sadhu Meher in Utpalendu Chakravarty's Debshishu.  
(Photo: Jyotish Chakravarty).*

Government had its own procedures in which the commercial distributors were not interested. Eventually, after a long and agonising wait, the Government had to depend on its own Film Development Corporation to release these films. *Chokh* brought encouraging results but there were many others which turned out to be expensive losses. The only big hope at the moment is Saroj Dey's *Kony*, which has already bagged a National Award for the best film with wholesome entertainment and aesthetic value. It is said to have successfully depicted middle-class sentiments and drawn superb performances from Soumitra Chatterjee and a new girl (Sreeparna Banerjee) in unfolding the story of the struggle of a young swimmer and the inspiration she draws from her coach.

However, in terms of expenditure from the public exchequer, the losses could hardly be explained in terms of awards and support of young talent. For all practical purposes, the direct production programme has been withdrawn. The young directors are virtually left without financial support from conventional sources. It is all to the good that a private producer in Calcutta did eventually come forward to allow Goutam Ghose to make *Paar*. It had its problems in the production and later stages. But all that has now been wiped out by its all-round triumph—the National Award for the best Hindi film, the acting awards for Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah and now, most important, its excellent performance at the box-office.

Ghose's record is perhaps the most inspiring feature of the "new cinema" in Bengal. Otherwise, there is the not altogether happy picture of Buddhadeb Dasgupta making *Andhi Gali* in Bombay (and drawing some controversy before its public release) and Utpalendu Chakravorty relying for his "stinging attacks" on the National Film



*Buddhadeb Dasgupta briefing Dipti Naval for a scene in Andhi Gali.*  
(Photo: Samar Das).

Development Corporation which is producing *Debshishu*. But he continues to be Bengal's young hope when many others aspiring to belong to the rank have begun to fall by the wayside. Aparna Sen, as director, did not appear to share the aspiration for the simple reason that *36 Chowringhee Lane* and now *Paroma*, had a different sort of social objective. And Aparna, in any case, presented the curious combination of the commercial theatre, the B-grade celluloid dramas which she acted in and the refreshingly different human portraits in the films she directed.

The big question is whether the difference can be sustained in the face of the overriding demands of the commercial industry. The Government is more cautious with its support programmes and is concentrating mainly on a new Film Centre (housing, auditoriums, an archive and a film library, among other things) and a colour laboratory at Salt Lake. The time has come for the "new cinema" to survive on its own steam. The doubts have, to some extent, been cleared after *Chokh* and *Paar*. The aims of this cinema, fortunately, remain strong as ever. But there can perhaps be nothing better than the gradual success with which these aims become a vital part of the mainstream cinema.

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