
bridging the gaps between authors
POL

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The Importance of Theatre and Performance in the History and Formation of Identity in Bangladesh

Abstract:

Theatre activities play an important role in the history as well as the daily lives of Bangladesh, and have contributed crucially towards both national and other senses of identity. The study shall now briefly address the notable performances and theatrical traditions that have interacted with Bangalee, the Bangladeshi nation and nationalism since the British colonial era.

There are ambivalent, paradoxical, and complementary genealogies to be traced, all of which have "imagined" or "narrated" or "performed" the nation in multiple ways. Whether as part of a postcolonial project in the reconstruction of the "collective imagination" or, on the other hand, as the creation of a new aesthetic, mirroring an emergent intercultural heterogeneity, or proposing intervention for social transformation, Bangladeshi performance has formed part of a vivid tableau of complex, shifting live spectacle in Bangladesh. This study will examine theatre and performance in Bangladesh both from the point of view of artistic practice, and as an agent for change.

Keywords: theatre, performance, identity, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Theatre movements in Bangladesh have provided a vibrant response to the colonial era (1757-1947), the Pakistan era (1947-1971), the *Muktijuddho* era (March-December 1971) and sovereign Bangladesh, that included the newly independent and war-torn Bangladesh (1972-1975), the military and quasi-military regime (1975-1990), and post-military "democratic" governments era (1991-2018).[1] I now use this historical timeline in order to map the theatre practices that were taking place during each period. This history of Bangladeshi theatre is important in order for the study of identity and plurality in Bangladesh to situate a Practice Research and to demonstrate how Bangladeshi art draws from a long and rich heritage to which the artists of Bangladesh are indebted.

Theatre During the Colonial Era (1757-1947)

Two examples are central to examining theatre activities in colonised Bangla: Dinbandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo) and Mukunda Das's Swadeshi Jatra (the performance related to anticolonial Swadeshi Movement in Bangla region). The former was the first play performed in Dhaka in 1861. "Dinbandhu Mitra", as Ahmed argues, "may claim to have inaugurated modernism in Bengali theatre". It was a "bourgeois drama in the European romanticist style", blending a realist story with formal experimentation

[1] *Muktijuddho*: Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. I shall use the native term *Muktijuddho* throughout my thesis.

(2016a, p. 272). Bangladeshi Theatre scholar Syed Jamil Ahmed's study shows that *Nil Darpan* "initiated a heated public debate all over Bengal regarding the intolerable oppression of the indigo planters and marked the beginning of postcolonial resistance in Bengali theatre" (*ibid*). The latter, *Swadeshi Jatra* performances, was based on themes "such as colonial exploitation, patriotism, anti-colonial struggle, feudal and caste-based oppression" in early twentieth century Bengal (Ahmed, 2016c, p. 14), to protest the 1905 Bangla Partition which I detailed in Chapter One. It took part in the first Bangalee nationalist movement, which mainly involved "an economic strategy aimed at removing the British Empire from power and improving economic conditions in India. […] Strategies of the Swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. […] It was the most successful of the pre-Gandhian movements" (Absar, 2014, p. 442). These plays, that showed an agrarian community, clearly criticised the colonial appropriation of land and land rights.

In response to the political movement behind the creative activities of Bangalee people and their theatre industry, the British administration implemented *The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876*, which was "an Act for the better control of public performances" of a play, pantomime, and any other public drama. Postcolonial Indian theatre scholar Rustom Bharucha states that it was, "expedient to empower the Government to prohibit public dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene" (1993, pp. 21-23).

The key aim of the Act was to keep the Bangalee activists in check.[2]

Theatre After Independence from British Colonial Rule (1947-1971)

Kolkata was the centre of the Bangalee urban elite theatre after Partition in 1947. The city was the centre of economic and political activity during the nineteenth century in India. However, after Partition, Dhaka gained significance as the urban cultural centre in the eastern part of the region.

According to Ahmed, "Bangladesh became deeply entangled with cultural nationalism" when Munier Choudhury's Kabar (The Grave) was performed in Dhaka Central Jail on 21 February 1953 (2016a, p. 274). Influenced by the theme of US playwright Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead, Chowdhury's *Kabar* was directed by Sree Foni Chakrabarty and performed by the political prisoners for a group of spectators in the prison. The audience were all held together by their common identity as members of Communist Party and had come together to commemorate the crisis of 21 February 1952, which was the first major protest against Pakistani rule of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (Majumder, 2018b; Ahmed, 2016d; Biswas, 1988).

[2] Surprisingly, after the Partition in 1947, the Act was not repealed in independent India and Pakistan, although it is no longer enforced in the way it was under British colonial rule. Instead, most of the states of the two respective countries have introduced their own amended versions with certain modifications.

One might say that during this period there was both theatre protesting against Pakistan rule, and also other forms of performance, notably street protest and other cultural manifestation. In 1947, students in East Pakistan held meetings and demonstrations – themselves a kind of performance – and formed the Language Action Committee. As a result, in 1948, the governor-general of Pakistan addressed a large audience in Dhaka and announced that the Bangla language could be used in East Pakistan, but that "the state language of Pakistan [would] be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead people is really the enemy of Pakistan. [...] Without one state language no nation can remain solidly together and function" (Schendel, 2013, p. 111). Looking back to the pre-independence period performing arts scene, particularly from 1947 to 1971, Ramendu Majumder, a Bangladeshi theatre-maker actively involved in Bangla language-based theatre practice since 1960s, examines the political environment of that period. In a public lecture, Majumder (2015) stated that, "[t]he theatre, music, dance and other elements of Bengali culture were not only discouraged but, in many cases, prohibited also in the name of religion by the then Pakistani rulers and their sycophants." After a series of movements and demonstrations, protestors confronted armed police. Many were injured and nine people were killed on 21 February 1952. In this context, the performance of *Kabar* in jail in 1953 carried a political importance. Therefore, both formal theatrical performance, and street performance in the form of demonstrations, were

mobilised during this period, in the interests of political emancipation.

Ahmed (2011a) provides an extensive study of the history and development of language-based cultural identity and Islamic religious identity in Bangladesh since the Pakistan period. He suggests that while during the colonial period, there were three spheres of influence – British, Hindu and Muslim – now, "there were two: one defined by religion based in the 'Pakistani' camp upholding Islamic and feudal values, and the other defined by language based in the 'Bengali' camp upholding the Bengali language and liberal democratic-humanistic values." His study illustrates that outside Dhaka, areas were upholding the "religious-based trend". This trend praised Islamic history via the performance of historical plays about the Muslim rulers of the Middle East, India and Bangla, and the independence struggle of Pakistan. On the other hand, Dhaka University-based productions mainly belonged to the "language-based nationalists' trend" (Ahmed, 2011a). It must be noted, however, that no evidence demonstrates that the *Adivasi* were present in the pre-Independence Bangladeshi theatrical performances.[3] Therefore, it was clear from the start, on examining theatrical performance, that the choice was between Muslim or Bangla-language dominance, or both, but that plurality and diversity were not evidently embraced in this brief period before the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country.

[3] *Adivasi*/ "আদিবাসী": indigenous; I use the term *Adivasi* throughout this study.

Theatre as Resistance During the *Muktijuddho* (March-December 1971)

The independence struggle for Bangladesh greatly influenced theatre-makers and their performances. According to Majumder (2015), theatre became a vibrant art form in the country during this period. Indeed, one could almost go so far as to say that the *Muktijuddho* "served as a treasury of never-ending wealth for Bangladeshi playwrights". The themes of many plays were based on the history as well as the impact of the liberation war. The history and the impact of the *Muktijuddho* were the themes of many plays since the independence of the country. "The sense of resistance was portrayed in plays which dealt with the subjects of fundamentalism, communalism, and social injustice." "Theatre is", Majumder explains further, "a strong weapon to fight against all these odds in our society. It is indeed a matter of pride that our theatre makers are socially committed and use their creativity in order to move towards a society free from all injustice and oppression" (2015). For example, when the country was in turmoil in 1971, with people were being brutally killed and tortured every day, the politically-committed theatre-makers incessantly performed their creative resistance in order to mark their emerging identity.

Ahmed's study reveals three wartime plays: Biplobi Bangladesh (Revolutionary Bangladesh), Pratham Jatra (The First Journey) and Agacha (The Weeds). Biplobi Bangladesh was written by Khairul Bashar, and "portrays a war-torn image of the country", described in graphic detail. "Pratham Jatra was written

by Narawan Biswas, shows a middleclass Bengali family, having fled from war-torn East Pakistan, passing their days in economic hardship in a refugee camp in India after their Indian relatives refused to shelter them". Agacha, a rod puppet performance, was a series of improvised skits featuring the victory of the *Muktijuddho* in 1971 (2006a, p. 70).

Many of the spontaneous performances of that period are unfortunately not documented. Their scripts or tangible evidence of their existence are either lost, or not preserved. However, they remain in the memory of those who saw and wrote about them, notably the theatre scholar Ahmed, on whose writings this study leans heavily (Bharucha, 1993). In addition, some evidence of the then emerging patriotic themes of Bangla plays have documented in this study, notably Bidyut Kar's Bikkhubdho Bangla (Agitated Bangla), performed on 24 March 1971. A group of young theatre-makers performed in a village named Raykail in the Sylhet region (Goswami, 2021). In addition, two open-air theatre productions named Ebarer Songram (This Revolutionary War) and Swadhinotar Songram (The War of Independence) written by Momtazuddin Ahmed, were staged in Chittagong in March 1971 (Uddin, 2013, pp. 132-145). Another example is provided by the fact that, right after the war began, a group of young Bangalee writers, singers, theatre-makers and recital artists joined Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (the Independent Bangla Radio Centre) based in Kolkata. With the help of the Indian Government, the artists regularly presented stories, songs and news, which was broadcasted all over Bangladesh during the *Muktijuddho*

in 1971. According to artist-activist Kamal Lohani, Kalyan Mitra's Jollader Dorbar (Court of Executioners) was one of the popular radio drama series at that time (Lohani, 2021). Such theatre-maker-initiated movements are extremely important for an understanding of the challenges as well as other contemporary struggles of the soon-to-be-born nation, but have been long forgotten. The interviews and archival research, have been able to unearth these examples of the thriving resistant, activist theatre scene at the time.

Newly-Independent and War-Torn Bangladesh (1972-1975)

Notable plays include Jay Din Faguno Din (Gone are the Spring Days) by Milon Choudhury and Subachan Nirbasone (Words in Exile) and Ekhon Duhsamay (Bad Times Now) by Abduallah Al Mamun (Heera, 2018). The theatrical productions during this era mainly addressed the mixed feelings of frustration, deprivation, the black market and famine, which were condensed into the representation of the newly-independent, war-torn Bangladesh.

In the Post-Independence era, the theatre was one of the most high-spirited and effective forms of artistic expression in Bangladesh. Many non-profit and non-professional theatre groups were created all over the country, shaped by the Kolkata-based Group Theatre Movement. The regular staging of plays became a new phenomenon in the cultural life of Bangladesh. According to Ahmed, "[s]uch organizations, which produce plays entirely in Bengali, and which emphasize collective egalitarianism against the dominance of

celebrity performers, began to emerge in the country in 1972, […]" (2016a, p. 272).

In an analysis of the post-Independence theatre movement of Bangladesh, South Asian theatre scholar Bishnupriya Dutta observes the national aspirations, identity, and the euphoria of Independence, which was explored by playwrights when the movement spread across the country. Dutta states, "[a] wide range of plays was produced from the early 1970s to the early 1980s reflecting politically sensitive issues related to the liberation war. [...] By the mid-1970s, other groups had come into being and taken on nationalist themes" (2007, p. 45). The post-independence period was one of nationalist pride in the newly established Bangladesh, and also disappointment in the economic failure and the traumatic aftermath of the war.

The Military and Quasi-Military era (1975-1990)

On 19 November 1980, in reaction to the Bangladeshi military regime's political failure, to economic grief, socio-economic deprivation, restoration of the Islamic force and rising religious fundamentalism, a group of theatre makers formed Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation. They successfully spread their vision of a secular, plural Bangladesh across urban settings in the country through their non-profit theatre movement.

The dictatorial regime in Bangladesh was amply represented in theatre all around the country. Indeed, the expression *natak hok gono-manuser hatiar* ("Let the theatre be people's means of protest") indicates the

importance of theatre as activism during this period.[4] For instance, street theatre was a vibrant expression for 1980s theatre-makers in Bangladesh.[5] Street plays performed in urban settings, which boldly expressed artists' ideological and political opinions against the military and quasi-military regimes. In 1980s, along with university students and political activists, theatre artists came out into the streets, joined the demonstrations, played an active role through performing numerous satirical, farcical and comedy plays based on the contemporary situation, and identified themselves as activists rather than the entertainment artists. This continued until a popular uprising and return to parliamentary democracy in 1990.

With the euphoria slowly receding during the 1980s as the autocratic and dictatorial rule increased, "a feeling of disillusionment gave way to a critical attitude that sought to explore in theatrical terms the political, philosophical, and psychological issues left shelved during the years of nationalist struggle when other problems had priority", as Dutta's study reveals (2007, p. 45). In addition, her study shows that plays by Bertolt Brecht were staged during this period. Close readings of the political subtext of the staging reveals that they provided astute reflections and interpretations of contemporary Bangladesh.

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[4] *natak hok gono-manuser hatiar:* "নাটক হোক গণমানুষের হাতিয়ার"; translated from Bangla by Farah Naz.

[5] *Poth-natak morcha* (Street Theatre Front) founded during the anti-dictatorship movement in the 1980s. *Bangladesh Poth-natak parisad* (Bangladesh Street Theatre Council), founded in 1992, is the largest theatre organisation in Bangladesh.

There were two other significant mass performance manifestations evidenced during this period: *Mukta Natak* (*Liberated Theatre Movement*) and *Gram Theatre Movement* (*Village Theatre Movement*).[6] *Mukta Natak Movement* was an initiative of the Marxist theatre-maker, Mamunur Rashid, along with his theatre troupe Aranyak Natya Dal in 1984. "Mukta Natak performed political activism which was basically inspired by a vision of social change based class struggle" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 153). *Gram Theatre Movement* was initiated by Selim Al Deen, a Bangladeshi playwright, in cooperation with the theatre group Dhaka Theatre. The central aim of this group was to sustain the *Bangla natya* – Bangla theatre – and its diverse forms of expression, in rural areas of the country. This initiative is still active and regularly generates many programmes Indeed, Ahmed demonstrate that the early 1990s carry significance for Bangladeshi theatre, since during this period urban theatre-makers were "deeply engaged with a 'theatre of the roots' in shaping a design aesthetics […]". In other words, *Bangla natya* performance traditions and styles were championed in the urban theatre practice (2016a, p. 276).

It is to be noted that urban theatre in Bangladesh is dominated by the proscenium arch auditorium, and even the National Theatre's main stage is a proscenium-arch playhouse. "Nevertheless,", states Ahmed, "the fact

[6] *Mukta Natak Movement* / "মুক্ত নাটক আন্দোলন": *Liberated Theatre Movement*; *Gram Theatre Movement*/ "গ্রাম থিয়েটার আন্দোলন": *Village Theatre Movement* (Ahmed, 2014).

that the complex also offers two studios with the provision for flexible staging, shows that the post-colony of Bangladesh is confidently moving away from colonial-imperial heritage" (*ibid*). Thus, there are performance spaces today that can accommodate *Bangla natya* as it is traditionally staged, in the round.

Ritual Performance in Bangladesh

Waz mahfil and *kirtan* are religious performances, which are also considered to be artistic performance, much like theatre. Performance scholar Richard Schechner argues that it is difficult to separate "art" from "ritual". By presenting the example of two US church services, he considers that "religious services with music, singing, dancing, preaching, speaking in tongues, and healing", are also a form of performance (2002a, p. 26). At a *kirtan* - a Bangladeshi Hindu or Buddhist ritual, participants go into a trance, to the dance, music and song. Radha Krishna's love and separation are narrated, and the qualities of the Hindu deities and their deeds are recounted, along with the Buddha's life stories. Study shows that before the Partition in 1947, both Bangalee Hindus *and* Muslims attended *kirtans*. Moreover, the national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, himself a Muslim, wrote a number of acclaimed *kirtans* (Sayeed, 2021).

Another religious ritual in Bangladesh is *waz mahfil*. In the case of this ritual, as Ahmed observes, lay devotees gather to listen to an Islamic scholar elucidating one or more religious issues believed to be of importance. Often held in the evening, sometimes running through the entire night, the *waz mahfil* is a very

popular form of religious education. By asking questions and seeking responses, the scholar constantly encourages his audience to participate in the discussion. “Therefore, when led by a skilful speaker, a *waz mahfil* may mesmerise the participants, arousing the deepest devotional fervor” (Ahmed 2006b, p. 73). Schechner states, “[i]ndeed, more than a few people attend religious services as much for aesthetic pleasure and social interaction as for reasons of belief” (2002a, p. 26). This is certainly the case for these two religious rituals in Bangladesh, which cross the dividing line between religious practice, and theatrical art form.

The Post-military “Democratic” Era (1991-today)

After the overthrow of the military regime in 1990, many proscenium, experimental and street theatre productions were staged on the themes of rising sectarianism, the free market economy and industrial development. Group theatres are non-profit repertory companies, where members volunteer their time in the evenings, weekends, and holidays to produce theatre productions with professional competence. The groups regularly perform their plays in rented theatre halls and sometimes on the festival circuit. Majumder asserts, “theatre in Bangladesh is a theatre of love, theatre of passion” (2012, p. 3). Majumder (2015) finds the following major trends in contemporary Bangladesh theatre: plays based on the Independence movement, social satires, protest and resistance, reinterpretation of myths, narrative tradition, and translation and adaptation.

Today, the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation is a network of over 400 non-profit city/town-based groups of theatre makers (BGTF, 2019), "who are mostly middle-class students and professionals belonging to the media, advertising agencies and other private services" (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 272), which afford them salaries in order to sustain their theatrical activities. Ahmed's study shows, the groups bring professionalism to the work that they produce and are run by the "voluntary contributions of its members, box-office receipts, revenue accrued from advertisements published in souvenir [programmes], and occasional sponsorship from national and multinational industrial and trading companies" (*ibid*). He adds, "[o]ccasionally a few directors, designers and performers are paid, but it is not enough to produce a body of full-time theatre practitioners" (*ibid*). Contemporary Bangladeshi group theatre activities are described in Majumder states elsewhere:

> Bangladesh does not have a professional theatre as far as earning a living from the theatre is concerned. In such a social and economic context, one cannot afford to earn one's living only from theatre performances. However, there are a number of artists who earn their living from television plays regularly put on air on many television channels in the country. (2012, p. 1)

However, many non-governmental organisations are active in their use of theatre techniques, including

Theatre for Development, Theatre in Education, and Therapeutic/ Psycho Theatre. These are used especially in rural areas in Bangladesh by Proshika, Ain O Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Transparency International Bangladesh, Save the Children, Help Age, Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts to name a few, for the purposes of improving health, wellbeing, education and livelihoods.

It is also important to mention the development of theatre academia and the state of research in the country. Extensive examinations of *Bangla natya* include Deen (1996), and Ahmed (1995 and 2000). These consider the seventy-plus genres of the theatre tradition that still exist in rural areas of the country (Ahmed, 2006b). Among these traditional theatre practices, "nearly fifty are rooted in the various religious beliefs and faiths of the people; the rest are absolutely secular in nature" (Majumder, 2015). Deen is the founder of the Drama and Dramatics Department at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, and a pioneer in researching the traditional and folk theatre of Bangladesh that originated a thousand years ago. His major study is entitled *Maddyajuger Bangla Natya – Medieval Bangla Theatre* – and was published by the Bangla Academy in 1996. Deen has also published many other Bangla-language books and scholarly articles. Ahmed, for his part, is the founder of the Department of Theatre and Music at the University of Dhaka, and is a noted researcher and theatre-maker. His Bangla-language *Hajar Bacar: Bangladesher Natak O NatyaKala* – a critical appreciation and history of Bangla Theatre dating back a thousand years – was published by

The Bangladesh Academy of Fine and Performing Arts in 1995, and his other major publications include *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* in 2000.

In spite of this critical and academic attention, over the years most forms of traditional/folk theatre have been in decline and "some are at the point of extinction" (Majumder, 2015). In order to attempt to combat this, at present, six "public universities in Bangladesh offer BA and MA programmes in theatre and performance studies. Most of the students who graduate from these universities are unable to sustain themselves by working full-time in theatre" (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 272), but at least they have gained knowledge of local and ancient performance traditions, in the hope that they will be preserved in embodied memory.

The Socio-Political Role of Theatre in Present-Day Bangladesh

Since 2000, I have been actively participating in academic, amateur, semi-professional and non-governmental theatre activities in urban settings, and I have remarked that the era of "diversification" and plurality that dominates theatre practice in the twenty-first century, is constantly confronted with the *Bhoyer Songskriti* ("climate of fear"), where citizens in Bangladesh are terrified of sectarian violence (Riaz, 2018, p. 11). Riaz claims that *Bhoyer Songskriti* is introduced, developed, and normalised in society by producing and reproducing fear. It is such an environment of fear, intimidation and force that exercises power in Bangladeshi society. It is not always

necessary to enforce fear through physical force or violence since the perception of force and violence is enough to create an ambience, or "climate", of fear (pp. 11-13).

With specific reference to theatre, artists face strong resistance from intolerant political circles, as well as religious fundamentalists. From his lived experience, Majumder (2018a) explicitly states, "[i]n rural Bangladesh age-old Jatra, a popular folk theatre, has been replaced by religious gatherings where sermons are given and where dance, music, and theatre are not permitted, according to Islam. Instead, reactionary ideas are preached."[7] Majumder (2018a) notes that, "religion is also being abused by many political parties, and now, fundamentalism reigns over reason", resulting in the fact that in many areas, especially rural regions, it is almost impossible to perform theatre.

The secular forces are losing their influence on society. When it comes to freedom of expression regarding religion or politics writers feel insecure about expressing their thoughts. Self-censorship is the norm today. In such a context, it is unsafe for a theatre group to perform a play which could raise questions and debates in some sensitive areas (Majumder, 2018a).

With my Practice Research, this study sought

[7] Jatra/ "যাত্রা": a traditional Bangla theatre genre, which originates in Hindu ritualistic performance depicting Krishna.

Similar instances can be found in African performance scholar Osita Okagbue's study, where he demonstrates the struggle for cultural dominance between indigenous religious and cultural practices such as *Bori* and Islam in present-day Northern Nigeria (2008, pp. 270-271, Okagbue's italics).

ways to explore and challenge contemporary issues and experiences. The responses I received from the Dhaka-based on-stage and off-stage performers, via a series of informal text messages and voice calls, and from one theatre director's personal interview, provided invaluable insights for me about how theatre-makers feel intimidated and fearful. During a student movement in Dhaka in 2018, two performers I have worked with in the past – a renowned film-television-theatre artist and an emerging theatre and dance artist – explained why they declined to stage their performance-as-protest.[8] The former directly answered, "[n]o, I cannot perform", while the latter, ignored the request. Later, in the comparative safety of a friendly and private moment both revealed that they say that they did not wish to take part in protest performance because one supports the ruling party, and another feels forced to support it. Moreover, both are the recipients of the Government's Ministry of Culture fund, and therefore they fear being excluded from the ruling party's "list of favourites", and therefore losing their funding.

[8] Sunday 27 July 2018. A speeding bus killed two school children in the capital city Dhaka. The Dhaka streets were filled with young protesters chanting "We want justice" and demanding improved road safety. For eight days, the young students protested with processions, sit-ins, slogans, songs, by controlling road traffic and inspecting driving licenses. C. R. Abrar, a Bangladeshi researcher and academic, writes, "[t]he teenagers' protest touched the hearts of millions. Mothers brought in snacks and bottled water for them. [...] By the fourth day of the protest, ordinary people—parents, guardians, and admirers—joined the rallies" (2018). The "road safety" movement formed not to bring down the present government, but to raise questions and demand accountability.

Therefore, before this research project even started, it was victim to forms of censorship, or self-censorship, since artists were reluctant to be involved either because they were on different partisan sides, or else because they were fearful of intimidation or even violence, if they were seen to oppose dominant politics and religion.

In an informal discussion with me in 2019 in London, theatre activist C stated, "we, the artists, and cultural activists, support the Awami League.[9] Therefore, we cannot perform anything that goes against the party because we do not want to create a negative public impression of the Awami League to the people" (2018, my translation). The Awami League has a visible and vibrant connection with theatre-makers and artists. When the Awami League formed a government for the first time in the post-military era (1996-2001), under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, on 30 January 2001 it withdrew the colonial *Dramatic Performances Act 1876*, which had controlled theatre, through a Bill in the National Parliament, setting a unique example in post-colonial South Asia. Furthermore, the Awami League created a separate Ministry for Cultural Affairs in 2014 and amplified its funding for the performing arts and fine arts for the first time after independence (though the amount of budget allocated for this ministry is less than one percent of the total budget of the country). But while C, whom I interviewed, expressed their support for the Awami League, they then stated, on the other hand that, ideally, artists should be non-partisan. "So, you can say,

[9] C is used to anonymise the interviewee.

we are compromising our art" (2018, my translation). C is a theatre-maker who protested the rape and murder of a young civilian girl in an army cantonment of Bangladesh with his street theatre production of 2016. Nevertheless, C explained that, after the overthrew of the military government, theatre gradually lost its characteristics of resistance against injustice and prejudice in Bangladesh. For the main part, theatre today avoids political or religious controversy, owing to the "climate of fear". Moreover, as soon the theatre receives government funding, its inherent character of resistance tends to disappear, since it remains in fear of having its funding cut. Government-commissioned, or government-funded theatre productions are mostly centred around the *Muktijuddho*, and by implication support the Awami League, which was behind the struggle for independence in 1971. Some funded works are focused on the remaking of traditional folk performances. However, funded theatre productions do not tend to raise questions about the current political context, or challenge the ruling party's policy.

In 2019, Bangladeshi theatre literally became a site of conflict when cultural and political activists protested about the fact that two plays were taken off stage. As part of their protest, the activists occupied the lounge of the National Theatre in Dhaka. The productions were *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* (*Life and Political Reality*) by Shahidul Jahir, directed by Syed Jamil Ahmed, and produced by the Spordha repertory, and *Stalin* by Kamal Uddin Nilu, a noted Bangladeshi theatre director and designer based in Norway. The latter was produced by the Centre for Asian Theatre repertory.

Both plays were accused of the distortion of history. Both of these productions encountered opposition because they were seen to criticise, whether directly or indirectly, the ruling party and their allies.

These events afforded me an opportunity to explore the socio-political role of theatre and how governmental approaches affect the role of theatre in society. Theatre scholar Nadine Holdsworth states, "[t]heatre at a basic level is intrinsically connected to nation because it enhances 'national' life by providing a space for shared civil discourse" (2010, p. 7), where anyone and everyone can equally discuss and debate, agree or disagree. As the examples this study have provided in this section demonstrate, this is not currently possible in Bangladesh. However, this study has found a way, to express ideas of plurality, hybridity and cosmopolitanism.

Theatre Destabilising the Narration of Nationalism

The study seeks to destabilise these monolithic and homogenous conceptualisations of nation, and to embrace the diversity and plurality that are the reality of contemporary Bangladesh. Holdsworth argues, "people have constructed group formations to distinguish 'us' from 'them', whether territorial, linguistic or around bloodlines or religion, for example" (2010, p. 9). Today "nation" is the most powerful marker of this identity and belonging in Bangladesh, but this study pursues to challenge this with theatrical practice.

In recent years, campaigns for national identity or ideas about which ethnic group has the "right" to dominate the nation, are the sources of the most bitter

and bloody conflicts, as this thesis has amply demonstrated. However, the nationalist narrative has been destabilised by various theatre productions that revolve around the lives and struggles of the country's indigenous and marginalised communities, who have not been recognised in the nationalist narrative. These include *Aikti Marma Rupkotha* (*A Marma Fairy Tale*), based on the daily life and rituals of the Marma community by Selim Al Deen ; *Mimangchina* (*A Colourful Flag of The Mandi Elite's Crematorium*), a story that relates the socio-politics and impact of globalisation on the life of a young woman who belongs to the Mandi community by Afsar Ahmed; *Birsa Kabya* (*The Song of Birsa*), that presented the war of the Mundas people that was waged against British colonisers by Masum Reza; *Rarang* (*The Distant Drum*), which showed the struggle of the Saontal people and their war against British colonisers and their local collaborators by Mamunur Rashid; *Paital* (*The Rhythm of Footsteps* and *Mulluk* (*The Motherland*), which featured the unheard stories of oppression, exploitation and discrimination that the tea plantation workers have been facing since the inception of British colonial India by Tofazzal Liton and Bakar Bokul, respectively.

In 2013, during the creation of a play named *Chaka* (*The Wheel*), written by Selim Al Deen, which I directed for MA students in the Theatre Department at the University of Dhaka, the on- and off- stage performers conducted an investigation in a village in Rajshahi (the northern part of Bangladesh). The aim was to know more about one of the central characters of the play, a real-life figure who belongs to the Saontal

Adivasi community. The students learnt about the ongoing violence and intimidation of the Saontal community in Rajshahi. In an unstructured discussion, the Saontal activists I, J and M informed the students that since British colonial rule, the Saontals have been forced to leave their home, land, and religion.[10] Many Saontal community members converted to Christianity and Islam. At one point, the Saontal activists revealed the perpetrators behind this domination to be the local police administration, the local politician-backed Bangalee-Muslim community, and Christian missionary. During a walk to a Saontals prayer hall, H, a Saontals man, suddenly stopped and indicated a paddy field, saying, "all you see was ours, but is no more. We are here but nowhere. There is no justice or laws for Saontals in Bangladesh" (2013, my translation).[11] H took a long pause. Then he said, "people come, sit and talk to us, and listen to our struggle and at the end of their work they go back to the city. There are very few people who speak for us and stand for us" (*ibid*, my translation). The MA students' aim, therefore, was to carry the voices of these indigenous people back to the urban centre, and to articulate and stage them. Not denying the fact that our visit to the Saontal village was for artistic purposes, it still shaped the public performance of *Chaka* as a piece of resistance to dominant society, that sought to destabilise the narration of nationalism. This, and other activist theatre groups in Bangladesh today focus on representing contemporary issues such as public life,

[10] I, J and M are used to anonymise the interviewees.
[11] H is used to anonymise the interviewee.

property, security, dignity, and resistance as a means by which to destabilise assertions made by the ruling party, political elite, and religious nationalists. For example, Jahangirnagar University Theatre performed a devised production named Chakravyuh (Battle Formation) on the street in order to protest against the joint action of the ruling party's student wing and the police force on the student movement which was demanding road safety in 2018; Nagarnat Theatre in Sylhet performed Bhumi-Putro (The Son of The Land) written by Arup Baul against the aggression of the ruling party's followers to the Saontal community in Gaibandha District in 2017; Shikaree (Hunter), written by Mannan Heera, was a vibrant street theatre production that protested against the rape and murder of a young college student and a local theatre activist in an army cantonment in Cumilla District in 2016; Ami Malaun Bolchhi (I Who Speak, am Malaun) an itinerant performance piece devised by the theatre students of Dhaka University, was performed in response to the violence against the Hindu community following a manipulated Facebook post in 2015; Bottala theatre company regularly perform Jotu-Griha (Home of Lac Dye), that addresses the injustice, intimidation and sexual harassment in the garment industry; finally, Dokkhina Sundari (The Beauty of the South), a play based on Bangla pantheism, was performed in the National Theatre of Scotland's Tin Forest International Theatre Festival as part of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games cultural programme in 2014. The play was written by Shahman Moishan, directed by myself and performed by theatrEX Bangladesh. It was created in reaction to the official decision to building a power plant

in the Sundarbans territory, which is considered to be the "green wall" of Bangladesh's coastal area and the world's largest mangrove forest.

It is clear that theatre and performance have been inextricably intertwined with Bangalee and Bangladeshi identity for over a century, and that resistance to repression and homogeneous nationalism has provided a major impetus for theatrical creation.

Conclusion

I conclude this article by referencing a personal interview that I conducted in 2014 with Tim Butchard, Secretary of the Charles Wallace Bangladesh Trust (CWBT). As recipient of the CWBT artist residency, I was asked why I introduce myself as a *natya-karmi* (theatre activist) rather than a *natya-shilpi* (theatre artist).[12] My answer was that theatre in Bangladesh today is created not for profit, but as part of a social movement. However, Bangladeshi theatre-maker Avijit Sengupta articulates, "the concept *andolon* (activism) is disappearing from view for Group Theatre nowadays. Instead, there's a focus on *chorcha* (artistic practice)" (2007, p. 171, my translation). Recently, the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation's influential leaders advised its member organisations "to foster" their member-artists' identity as *mancha-shilpi* (stage artists) instead of *natya-karmi*, or theatre activists. Meanwhile, state-

[12] The interview took place in Dhaka. As a recipient of the CWBT Artist Residency award in 2014, I spent eight weeks in London exchanging skills and ideas with Chickenshed Theatre.

scripted nationalism is continually and explicitly performed in daily life in Bangladesh.

Inspired by the political engagement of young theatre-makers and encouraged by it, Charlotte Higgins, the theatre reviewer for *The Guardian*, writes, "[t]here is a young generation of theatre artists for whom art and politics, or art and activism, have cohered", thus, "[t]heatre is politics, in its blood and bones" (2015). Higgins continues, "[n]o art that is made can avoid reflecting its time and the particular political, social and economic circumstances of its making. **Theatre**, however, is the art form that does this most easily and consciously" (*ibid*).

In spite of the threats and fear that the theatre makers have encountered in Bangladesh, feel that they will continue to find ways to make their art activist.

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