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Theatrelog

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Introduction

The present issue of STQ is in a sense a continuation of STQ 27–28, published earlier this year, both issues devoted to a particular trend in theatre in the state of West Bengal in eastern India that calls itself Group Theatre. With its brief critical introductory overview of the trend and elaborate transcripts of two colloquiums featuring a cross section of the major players in this trend—actor-directors, actresses and actress-directors—the earlier issue touched more on organizational and economic issues (and the issue of gender, rarely articulated at such length, in this context) than on the creative and ideological issues inherent in the trend under review. The complementary sequel allows some of the pioneers and veterans of the trend to locate and project their individual positions in this history of a little over half a century beginning 1948. The format chosen for these personal statements was more testimonial than dialogal; the interviewer merely helping the more active interviewee in most cases. I was more a sympathetic observer—and even admirer—than a critic.

Inadequately documented, most of the work of theatre ‘workers’ (as they prefer to describe themselves) has, like most theatre works anyway, receded to oblivion, and sharing memories with the makers can be a way of reliving/reviving/reconstructing them. That was the consideration that kept me from debating/disputing/challenging the testaments. And there was of course the sheer joy of recalling the productions and performances as I had seen them. For the interviewees too there was the satisfaction of having ‘made’ experiences that lived in the memory of the viewer.

Memory is a major component in theatre history. Memory can of course be a distorting mirror with its often wish-fulfilling revisionism. Memory replayed in dialogue can however have a corrective objectivity which has been the goal of this anthology of first person narratives shared with a common viewer.

The three major provocations that have defined creativity in the so-called Bengali Group Theatre have been the strongly entrenched Victorian ‘heroic-melodramatic’ performative style as an inheritance from colonial enlightenment, acting as nostalgia and reference point; a strong humanist concern oscillating between leftist realism and modernism; and a whole series
of contradictions played out and consumed in the battle of an initially
democratically conceived group as collective and the individual artist with
his/her personal agenda, peculiar to the semi-professional culture of this
theatre, so unlike both the repertory system and the experimental little
theatres in most countries.

The professional repertory theatres, with their own playhouses and
companies booked for a production that should last for around five hundred
performances, have gone out of business in Calcutta one by one in the last
two decades. Two of the buildings have burnt down in the recent past in
intriguingly similar circumstances, raising speculation about housing
promoters burning them down to allow them to make use of the prime land
for commercial building enterprises. There has been some ceremonial
mourning for the fall of the old theatres, but not much real regret, for the old
style was dead anyway, with the old theatre in its last phase drawing on the
standing of film stars past their prime and past cinema! Readers will find
several interviewees harking back to their memories of the great old actors,
the last generation of them still acting in the 1950s; the thrill of their ‘heroic’
performances giving them their first feel of theatre—and drawing them to
theatre. In the fifties, the other theatre—what would be labelled Group
Theatre another two decades later—had already appeared on the scene, with
a different set of values.

The old acting style, on its way out, found a fresh lease of life in the jatra,
a popular, travelling, theatre-in-the-round performance tradition. Originally
predominantly musical and operatic (several jatra companies still use the
term ‘opera’ in their names), operating out of the larger district towns and
performing to large rural congregations, the jatra began changing in the
1920s, and by the 1960s, had come to set up their offices and rehearsal spaces
in Calcutta, and taken over conventions and acting styles from the city’s
decaying old theatres. The new theatre workers and audiences alike still
retain emotional affiliations with the old larger-than-life acting style, that in
its jatra reincarnation in the fifties and sixties, came to draw fresh urban
audiences and led to a revival of the jatra. Torn between the contradictory
pulls of the Old and the New, several major figures of the new theatre like
Utpal Dutt, Shyamal Sen, Shyamal Ghosh, Asit Bose, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay
and Bibhash Chakraborty chose to do stints in the jatra, more often as
playwright-directors, but sometimes as actors too—with unequal success.
After their short stints in the jatra, which exposed them to audiences much
larger than what they had been accustomed to, they came back to their own
theatre, and sought to enlarge its scope and appeal with a more mixed bag of
tricks and devices, hoping to indigenize and popularize their more elitist,
experimental products.

There were others too who did not join the jatra, but could still draw on its
musicality and performance qualities to enliven their own theatre. The Group
Theatre productions so long almost exclusively committed to realism of one
sort or the other, chose other subjects—folk tales, fairy tales, period pieces,
historical and mythological themes—and in some cases biographical plays on
old musicians or theatre performers in earlier times, to accommodate the
heroic or musical modes.

In the case of Utpal Dutt, interest in the jatra followed on the collapse of
his Minerva Theatre project to give the radical theatre a regular site in
Calcutta’s theatre district. Dutt’s ideological commitment to a theatre for the
people had led him to take a lease on one of Calcutta’s old playhouses in the
hope that he would be able to reach the traditional playgoers of the city, who
had once patronized and supported the old theatre in that old playhouse. The
older theatre performed at Minerva in the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries had been marked by a spectacularity that had become a Minerva
sign. Dutt, in his Minerva productions, went for an even richer spectacularity,
but obviously accomplished through a dramaturgy, fundamentally different from the earlier models both aesthetically and technically. Instead of Hamlet (Hariraj in his Indian incarnation) making his stage entry on horseback, with the horse illuminated with a chain of small bulbs stretching from its head down and along its flanks, Dutt transformed the entire stage to the quarterdeck of a World War II battleship with gun turrets from where the mutinous sailors fire salvos. Dutt’s Little Theatre Group did draw large audiences at Minerva—far beyond the ‘enlightened’ urban middle-class, which remains the usual Group Theatre audience—for its Angaar and Kalol; but flopped with its masterpiece Manusher Adhikarey. The collapse of the Minerva project however was not due to any fall in popularity as such, but to dissension in the ranks of the group and political differences with the official Left.

Dutt chose the jatra as his next field of operation—to reach the people. left without a theatre of his own, Dutt accepted offers from the professional jatra companies to write and direct plays for them. He was quite thrilled with his first exposure to this other theatre, with its last generation of great veterans, singer-actors, singer-actresses, and female impersonators, performing to ten thousand plus audiences in the open air, charged to loud applause again and again throughout a performance. For Dutt it was a discovery—and he decided to give up the limited middle-class survival strategies of the Group Theatre, and plunge into the jatra with a company of his own, with actors and actresses drawn from the Group Theatre. Dutt proved to be a historical force as a ‘modernizer’ of the jatra in the way he explored, developed and re-charged the potentials of the jatra in the texts he offered to the professional jatra companies; in the organizational discipline and democratic values he instilled in the entire work force from the production management and star actors down to the ill-paid crew; in the imaginative extension and elaboration of the austere performance space—the makeshift wooden platform open on all sides—with simple levels and rostra, and in the directorial reordering/recasting/revivification of a rich body of acting conventions and skills that the performers and their audiences had grown up with. It was his modernization /restoration of the jatra, with complete respect for its traditions, that made it possible for several Group Theatre playwrights and actor-directors to take on professional assignments in the somewhat ‘reformed’ jatra. But Dutt’s own experiment with the Vivek Jatra Samaj, a semiprofessional jatra company, failed miserably, with his actors failing to cope with the organizational and artistic demands of the form and its conventions. Dutt however carried into his subsequent dramaturgy traces and signs of the jatra, particularly in his use of singing in a choric mode, raising the more realistic performance to a surreal lift, as in a memorable scene in Tiner Talwar, set in the colonial period in Calcutta, when a performance on stage—a play within a play—playing a ‘safe’ text approved by the rigorous colonial censors, in the presence of the representatives of the Law, is suddenly changed midway in the ultimate act of defiance to a play on an early peasant uprising against the Raj, with the actors changing on stage from their period costumes and their ‘heroic’ idiom to the everyday clothes and dialect of the Muslim peasants, challenging the colonial authority, and breaking into a fullthroated patriotic song which is taken up at the ‘box’ in the auditorium by a former actress of the company, bought up by one of its patrons to be his mistress and thus lost to theatre; the ‘choric’ reach of the song drawing together two of the themes of this extremely dense play, viz. the potentials of revolt in theatre and the emancipatory drive of women in subjugation, with the suggestion that it is the emancipatory urge inherent in theatre, both aesthetically and politically, that has charged the actress to that defiant gesture of participation, to the utter embarassment of her ‘keeper’!

Plays and productions that drew on the conventions of the old theatre and the jatra to step beyond realism include Mareech Sangbad and Ramjatra, both directed by Arun Mukherjee for Chetana, Madhab Malanchi Kainya and
Jochhanakumari, both directed by Bibhash Chakraborty for Anya Theatre; and the later revivals of old theatre classics like Balidan, Sadhabar Ekadashi and Sirajuddaulah.

One of the essential contradictions in the aesthetics of the Group Theatre has been the strong hold of a left-oriented realism that somehow rarely goes the whole rigorous way and tends to dissipate its initial drive in facile sentimentalization. One can go into the fundamental cultural tendencies that stand in the way of authentic theatric realism and improvise other possible modes more in tune with the general mindset of the community. But the fact remains that some of the finest playtexts written in Bengali in the period are not in the realistic mode at all, and some of them have gone through the embarrassment of being read/treated as realistic texts. While Bijan Bhattacharya is rarely staged with any degree of creativity, both Mohit Chattopadhyay and Manoj Mitra, whose early works in the sixties were marked by probing insertions in the middle-class mind and sensibilities in an intensely poetic/imagist mode that called for visually allusive scenography, non-representational, non-naturalistic performance, and a manner of speaking that would play on the poetry rather than on conspicuous emotions or sentiments, were forced to retreat to more acceptable, realist variants, barely retaining their difference. Chattopadhyay has recently written a new play—Maner Katha ['The Mind Speaks']—in which a man battles with his own rebellious right hand, opening out a rich moral scenario, spelling a return to his original dramatic idiom.

Leftist politics, turned governmental in West Bengal in the seventies (West Bengal has a Communist-led United Front government for more than twenty years), has lost its militancy over the years, and is content with a generally uncritical or superficially critical realism. The Group Theatre has found a friendly and supportive patron in the Left Front government in the state, and prefers to operate within the given parameters of an official Marxist aesthetics, oblivious of the critical/creative possibilities laid bare by the new readings of Marxism and its rich potentials in a changed worldscape, particularly on the ethical-justicial plane. In the process, realism, divested of all its revolutionary potential, degenerates into sterile conservatism, sentimental discussion and banal moralization. There is the need of a political shake-up and a return to politics—in a politically aware/oriented culture—for a return to theatre. It is a fresh political reading of theatre alone that can provide a viable and meaningful political strategy to address the continuing dichotomy of the individual and the collective in the theatre company in the Group Theatre culture; for the unquestioning submission to the demanding system modelled on the Bohurupee structure defined way back in 1948 (with the dominance of the actor-director guru over a subservient group with little involvement in decision-making and ideological choices, and little sharing in any common philosophical exchange) has taken away from the group whatever emotional bonding or loyalties it may have envisaged as the possible life force or commitment.

For the last couple of years, there have been many public debates all over West Bengal on issues related to the Group Theatre, which remains the most visible and active mainstream theatre activity in the state. But all these debates have been concerned with the sole question of possible strategies for survival in a quite precarious situation. The debates go round and round in endless rigmarole, with almost nobody looking beyond to a different philosophy for theatre altogether—and the new theatric text.

The present issue of STQ, with its anthology of first person narratives offered by some of those who initiated and have led the Group Theatre till a few years ago, should give present ‘workers’ in the Group Theatre a sense of history, and a perspective for a more critical reading of this history, which in its turn could lead to a search for a new philosophy for the Group Theatre.

*Samik Bandyopadhyay*

*September 2001*
Kumar Roy (b. 2 March 1926), actor-director, playwright, translator, leads Bohurupee; former Professor of Drama at Rabindra Bharati University. Came to direct plays in 1956 with two one-acters—Chaurjananda and Natyakarer Bipatti; moved on to full length productions with Mrichhakatik, Galileo, Rajdarshan, Nindapankey, Sinduk, Ekdin Ekrat. Recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1983) and Dinabandhu Purashkar (1994).
Kumar Roy. Personally, I feel my coming into the world of theatre was in the best of times and also in a way, in the worst of times. It was the best of times because a longing I had nurtured from a very young age—to be actively involved in theatre, besides my academic interests and my interest in politics—was very intense and hadn’t died out even in the face of adversity. And it was the worst of times because of the trauma of partition and having to come away from our native place.

I met a very dear friend of mine, Ritwik Ghatak, in front of the [Calcutta] University and he took me to Sombhu Mitra and introduced me to him. This was just after Sombhu-da had left the IPTA [Indian People’s Theatre Association] and produced Nabanna, i.e. the version he did after he quit IPTA, and he was thinking in terms of forming a new group. I went to him at a time when the preliminary planning had just been completed. So that was how I came here and the atmosphere was overwhelming. But the times were bad because of the riots and the trauma of it all.

[Samik Bandyopadhyay. Did you come to Calcutta after Partition?]

I came earlier. I used to travel back and forth. I did my intermediate from Ripon College here in Calcutta and just as I was preparing to enrol for graduation, the riots broke out. I left and went to Rajshahi Government College [now in Bangladesh]. The country was partitioned while I was there. I came away after that.

My interest in theatre was primarily because I loved acting. I had directed plays in college, like we all do; but when I came here, during the formative stages of Bohurupee (when the group hadn’t yet been given a name), the thought of directing was somehow wiped clean from my mind. I didn’t feel the need because we were held in thrall by an overwhelming personality. He had already created history with his production of Nabanna [premiered 13 September 1948, Rangmahal]. Subsequently he produced plays like
Pathik [premiered 16 October 1949, I B R Mansion Institute], Chhenra Tar [17 December 1950, New Empire] and Ulookhagda [12 August 1950, I B R Mansion Institute]. At that point of time, I was only trying to develop my capabilities as an actor; I didn't even think beyond that. Also, because of a background in directing plays in college, I had developed a kind of involvement—watching Sombhu-da direct, following him very closely, trying to understand and internalize the instructions he gave, the details he worked into the plays. It was a learning phase.

We witnessed among other things, the confused political situation in the country soon after independence. All of us had thought better times would prevail with the British leaving our country. Independence was, at that time, the most cherished of our wishes. But it soon became evident that independence was of no tangible benefit. We could see that. As a result, somewhere deep down, this hurt our sensibilities. We had hoped, for example, that independence would ensure social justice at least. But for some reason, and there might have been hundreds of them—perhaps partition of the country was one such—there was this constant sense of a loss, of incompleteness. So within all this, one's political self was also at work—assessing the situation and brooding over it.

I must mention here, that before coming to Calcutta and meeting Sombhu-da or joining Bohurupee, I hadn't even imagined that theatre could have a social role. It is in Bohurupee that I observed that theatre could achieve much more than public meetings and demonstrations and be a forum for conveying social and political messages. This realization was very important for me. So I was also becoming conditioned to a certain extent. I was beginning to realize the importance of theatre.

Meanwhile Bohurupee had produced plays like Pathik, which was done immediately after Nabanna, and Ulookhagda and Chhenra Tar. Nabanna and the other plays like Chhenra Tar had been produced when the wounds of Partition and the Famine of 1943 [1350] were still fresh. We had lived through the times and the gruesome scenes that we witnessed every day were as stark as ever in our memory. A basic commodity like salt, which used to be sold at two paisa per seer/Rs 40 for a maund, suddenly began selling at Rs 80 for a sackful; foodgrains like rice suddenly became very expensive. The prices seem quite acceptable today, but in those days it was unthinkable.

In Chhenra Tar the partition of the country assumed a new dimension of importance. Perhaps you remember the fakir's song in Nabanna in which he sings of the harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. When Chhenra Tar was produced, the first spate of communal riots had taken place with the seething tension between the two communities coming out into the open and questions about the communal problem being raised. The whole post-Partition/ post-Independence experience had left a bitter taste in the mouth. Chhenra Tar centres round the struggles of a Muslim couple and their family, with a number of characters drawn from their community and both the bad and the good aspects of a society coming into play. It was a play worth doing and I personally liked it because I found in it a balanced treatment of issues.

Bohurupee opened for us a whole new way of thinking; a way of looking at things from a different perspective altogether. This I'll never ever deny. How one has assimilated it, whether one has chosen to imbibe it within one’s method of working, or totally rejected it, is a totally different issue and I won't go into it. But I'll definitely say this, that all of us received a whole new intellectual training while working with Bohurupee.

During the production of Char Adhyay [21 August 1951, Srirangam], a new dimension was added to the way in which the nuanced language of the text was consciously worked into the acting style. This was an important exercise because the language used in the text isn't the language people speak—it is a very dense, literary language—and it was a challenge to use that language to make the characters appear real, and it worked! It was a new kind of challenge and we could feel that the magic of the language had seeped into the acting and had touched a chord in the hearts of the audience.

So this went on; we did classics, and also plays by young contemporary playwrights.
Above and below. Mrichhakatik, the first Bohurupee production of a Sanskrit classic, attempting to link it to the present, with traditional costumes and additional texts. Photograph © Bohurupee.
There was a kind of a heady feeling doing [plays by] Rabindranath [Tagore] because it was a challenge to make the language of the text sound familiar and approachable to the audience. Raktakarabi created a different kind of history in 1954, then came Bisarjan [1961] and Raja [1964]; in the mean time we had done Muktadhara [1959]. These plays helped us rediscover Rabindranath and helped enrich the mind of a person like me. By this time Bohurupee had established itself as a group which produced plays with a distinctive literary flavour.

Sombhu-da had produced plays till 1971. He was there [with Bohurupee] till 1978, acting in plays; but after 1971 he didn’t direct a single new play.

[S. B. A void was being created.]

That’s right, a void was being created, and in a way one was getting mentally prepared. It is easier for me to stand
detached at this point of time and look back with some objectivity . . . but this preparedness was quite unconscious, to tell you the truth. Just think, in such a situation, the group wasn't supposed to exist at all. Groups (or even political parties) don't, normally—they crumble under pressure. The discipline that had been instilled in the group was still there and there was a kind of pressure because of it too. To our surprise, we found that the group did not split. So we thought we should do something constructive and ensure its smooth functioning. The group had some sort of an infrastructure with a number of young enthusiastic people working with us. The great personalities who were with Bohurupee at its inception were no more with us—Ganga-da [Gangapada Basu (1910–71)] had passed away, and so had Maharshi [Manoranjan Bhattacharya (1889–1954), actor, actively involved in armed resistance against the British while still a student, subsequently coming into acting in 1910; popularly known as ‘Maharshi’ after his appearance as Maharshi Valmiki in Sisir Bhaduri’s Seeta; founder of theatre group Bohurupee with Gangapada Basu and Sombhu Mitra].

It was in such a situation that we decided to produce Mrichhakatik. We really consider ourselves fortunate in being able to take such a decision at that point of time. The decision was historic in a sense, because if we had done some other play, it would have been difficult to keep the group together. On the one hand there was a great consolation in being able to do such a play, and on the other, it proved to be a good cementing factor in terms of our organization. Bohurupee didn’t have a tradition of doing Sanskrit plays and we knew we had to produce it from scratch, as we didn’t have a model before us. So there was quite a good degree of freedom involved and each of us contributed towards making a competent production.

While we were pleased about the choice of the play, we also knew that if we followed the directives in the Natyashastra, it would be totally unsuitable for audiences today. At the same time, we were tempted to include some of the directions in the Natyashastra. We had to ensure that the audience didn’t feel as if they were seeing a museum piece, or that the movements on stage were merely some exercises that the actors and actresses were performing. We were also aware of the limitations and advantages of the proscenium stage and knew we had to adapt the play in a way that would be suitable for the modern theatre-goer.

We did a meticulous selection of the elements we would take from the ancient dramatic tradition because we had to ensure that none of them created any disharmony in the production.

Another important factor was designing costumes. Working in/with Bohurupee I had a fair idea of the nature of costumes and sets that Bohurupee productions would have. And I was fortunate because I grew up in a family where there was a general interest in the arts. From a very young age I had been exposed to a lot of music, literature, painting and theatre. I had an innate aesthetic sensibility. I used to draw from the time that I was a child and I had the habit of going through books on painting and sculpture from my childhood. Books on sculpture particularly fascinated me.

While designing costumes for Mrichhakatik, I relied on my memory of those books on sculpture, rather than on a lot of library work (of the kind that I did during the production of Raja Oidipous, when I did a lot of reference work in the British Council and the National Library). I was in charge of the costumes in Raja Oidipous [Bengali translation of Sophocles’s Oedipus Tyrannos, fifth century BC]. I am indebted to Khaled Chowdhury [b. 1919, stage designer, music collector, folklorist and book designer, one of the earliest members of Bohurupee] for this. He had designed the costumes for Swargiya Prahasan [premiered 22 May 1955, New Empire] using jute/hessian painted with natural earth colours made by the indigenous methods—and this gave the costumes a touch of antiquity. I consider myself fortunate in being able to be with Khaled-da while he was at work, whether he was designing the sets or costumes (he used to stay nearby). So all that experience had seeped into me and I could put that to use while designing for
Mrichhakatik. We got Suren [Chakravarty] of CLT [Children’s Little Theatre] to do the costumes for us. Khaled-da used jute. We used canvas instead, but the sculpturesque quality was preserved in the costumes—the _nibibandha_ [a wide decorative belt for the waist for women], the folds adorning the front of the lower garment, the _uttariya_ [a loose drape for the torso]. We used real turbans from the museum at Amarkantak as models for the turban. We had access to some of the photographs of turbans in the library in Bohurupee. From the productional aspect, this made a lot of difference.

I had also read up a lot of books and I had come across Rabindranath’s correspondence with Amiya Chakravarty [(1910–86), poet and scholar, for many years Literary Secretary to Rabindranath Tagore, and later, Professor of English at Calcutta University, and Professor of Comparative Eastern Religions and Literature at the Boston Institute of Theology] in which he says: I have read this play long ago; I’ll have to read it once again. In a subsequent letter, Rabindranath comments: this play lacks plausibility and it seems that the audience in that age was easily satisfied.

I knew this. Now the question is, why did I do this play at all? You know that when you decide on doing a play, or even when you select a novel or a story from which you want to do a film version and make a preliminary reading of the basic material, you are drawn to a particular element in the story. It is this particular aspect that you work on gradually and develop in the text. In spite of the fact that the play lacked dramatic plausibility, there were some elements in it that appealed to me, and this prompted me to go ahead with the play. I thought, if I could bring the elements I liked before the audience, it would surely be a success.

The most important thing about the play was the way the theme of gratification of desires is handled. Man longs for so many things; and between the longing and its fulfilment, one has to go through so many levels. I felt that this element of desire/longing and its gratification had two aspects—the personal and the social. On a personal level is the whole question of relationships: Charudatta and Vasantasena are in love and it is natural that they will seek fruition amidst several constraints on personal and social levels. I am not going into the intricacies of the caste/class structure of those times and its implications in the play. The social level interests me more. A radical change in society can be ushered in by a revolution and only then do the desires of the individual become important in a social context. This is where the theme of the play assumes importance too. The play takes up the problem of how a personal relationship has to be established in a social context. After the rise of Aryaka, the state of the kingdom is made evident with characters like the king Palak (lit. ‘one who takes care of’; actually a bad king and hence an ironical use of the name) and his brother-in-law Shakar, who are very bad rulers. In a badly administered state, individual likes, dislikes, wants and aspirations, have no importance; they have to be reinstated in the social framework, and this can happen only with a revolution. To make this happen, personal needs become small, insignificant on one level; on another level, gratification of the personal needs of any individual in society necessitates social change. This message comes across very clearly in the play and we had worked on this point with great care.

In the play there is the original Bharatbakiya: ‘May the fields be filled with a good crop, may the cows be plentiful with milk.’ But one had also to contextualize the statement in the play: what was actually the situation? To communicate this, I had to bring in Bishnu-babu’s poem [Bishnu Dey, poet (1909–82)] from ‘Smriti Satta Bhabishyat’ [lit. ‘Memory Being Future’, the first poem from a book of the same name first published in 1963]; we recited an excerpt from his poem, playing on the two meanings of the word _bor_, viz, groom and a boon, lamenting the plight of a country where young princes in the fairytales had once killed monsters and saved their prisoners and married them, now turned to a land of widows, with no grooms to wed young girls. The moment the poem establishes a kind of a link, a new dimension is added to the narrative of the play. So we tried to suggest a kind of underlying statement: let all negations be rendered positive.
That's what drew me to Mrichhakatik. Something was also happening to me inside, or else why would I choose that poem from 'Smriti Satta Bhabishyat'?

In another sequence in the play Charudatta takes a jasmine-scented chadar for Vasantasena. On the surface there is nothing very special about it, but if you read in between the lines, this motif had been worked very subtly into the play. If we hadn't done Mrichhakatik in the way that we did, we wouldn't have had the kind of audience response we received and Bohurupee would have folded up—it wouldn't have lasted fifty years. It was a necessity at that point of time and it was possible because all of us worked with enthusiasm and involvement.

When I look back, I consider my years in Bohurupee extremely enriching, for those years of experience have made me what I am. It is also true that there were many in Bohurupee who had far more potential than me. I’ve told you we grew up in a family where we were exposed to fine arts, literature, performing arts and music. All that was in my blood. How can I deny that? This had created in me a different kind of receptivity, a certain kind of sensitivity to the arts. Earlier I had tried my hand at writing/adapting plays, even writing essays at times. I painted a little (which was a childhood habit) and I wasn’t very bad at it either. So when Khaled-sahib [Khaled Chowdhury] left, I designed covers for some issues of Bohurupee.

In 1964 we had organized a festival of plays which included Raja and Oidipous. That was a major breakthrough,
as it ended a stalemate in Bohurupee. It was part of a whole corpus of varied experiences and training. 1979 onwards we produced three plays—Mrichhakatik in September 1979, Galileo in October 1980, Rajdarshan in February 1982—all of which turned out to be extremely popular.

I’ll digress a little and dwell on how we decided to produce Galileo, how the translation/adaptation was done and the production itself. Sombhu-da was still with the group. Subrata Nandy had given me the script. Even while Sombhu-da was here, we used to produce full length and one-act plays alike, with Amar [Ganguly (1928–2000), leading Bohurupee actor, director] and me taking turns in directing. Amar directed Sedin Bangalakshmi Bankey [premiered 8 November 1954, St Thomas’ Hall], Swargiya Prashan [premiered 22 May 1955, New Empire] and Angshidar [25 December 1955, New Empire]; and I directed two one-acts, Chourjananda [premiered 26 January 1956, St Thomas’ Hall] and Natyakarer Bipatti [premiered 2 May 1956, St Thomas’ Hall]. So it would be wrong to say that we came into directing only after Sombhu-babu left. There was a preparation going on, as you can see, when you look back. When Sombhu-da went to Bombay, we produced plays here in Bohurupee.

To return to what I was saying . . . we were all very excited because Sombhu-da had accepted the script and that meant Bohurupee was going to do the play. In the mean time, I had made a rough sketch of the set. But we didn’t use that set in our production and I got admonished for it and

Aguner Pakhi, a translation of Jean Anouilh’s L’Alouette, deals with the trial and martyrdom of Joan of Arc. Photograph © Nemai Ghosh.
‘I wanted to portray Galileo as a human being, shorn of all mythical trappings.’ The two Galileos: Amar Ganguly (above) and Kumar Roy (left). Photographs: on left © Nemai Ghosh, on right courtesy Bohurupee.
rightly so. Sombhu-da had gone to Germany and seen the Berliner Ensemble production of *Galileo* with Ernst Busch as Galileo and had brought back with him a remarkable brochure—it contained thumbnail photographs of each scene of the play. It was exactly the size of a 35 mm contact sheet print and from those photographs one could clearly see several aspects of the production: what the sets looked like, the compositions in the play, the costume design. After about a week he asked me what I felt about the German production and I replied that it was a good production. What happened next was something everyone who knew Sombhu-da would be familiar with. Sombhu-da asked me why—that inevitable ‘why’ [laughs]. You too know, Samik, how difficult he could be with his ‘why’…

[S. B. Yes. The moment he asked ‘why’, we knew he was trying to get at something and nothing short of a well argued answer would satisfy him.]

I somehow managed to stammer a reply. Seeing that I had already sketched a set design he remarked, ‘You don’t even have the cart ready yet; what will you do with a horse?’ And he was right, because what I had done was incorrect—how could you do a production with a preconceived set, when all the other aspects hadn’t been decided upon? This was in 1976. He was rehearsing *Chandbaniker Pala*. The script was subsequently returned to Subrata Nandy. A couple of years went by and there were quite a few changes in our organization. Sombhu-da left in 1978.

We did *Mrichhakatik* in 1979. In 1980 we decided we’d do *Galileo*. Amar Ganguly had been away from Calcutta for some eight/nine years and had just returned. When all of us were wondering what we should do about the script, we managed to obtain the script of the production Brecht had done with Charles Laughton as Galileo. Ritwik [Ghatak] had done a translation and it was more or less faithful to the original. The audio cassette is available: anybody can compare the two and judge the merits. There are very few instances of departure and they are fully justified because it is a translation, after all. A year later, there was another crisis. Rudra [Rudraprasad Sengupta] told me that Fritz Bennewitz was coming to Calcutta to do a kind of workshop production with actors from the several theatre groups working here and asked whether Bohurupee would be interested in sending some actors to participate in the workshop.

Our production of *Galileo* was on; we had shows lined up in Delhi. Doing a show in Delhi has always been financially rewarding. When our rehearsals were in full swing in June/July, we got to know that Bennewitz had decided to produce *Galileo* and that Sombhu-da would be performing the lead role. It was a very difficult situation for us, because we couldn’t retrace our steps. So we went ahead with our production and the play was premiered in Calcutta on 12 October 1980 [at the Academy of Fine Arts]; we performed in Delhi in November the same year, and Bennewitz’s *Galileo* opened in December.

I don’t have any hesitation in declaring that my kind of theatre is for the people. My sole objective is to ensure that our plays reach the people and they like them. Whatever little I knew about Brecht at that point of time was by reading—whatever I could get on/by him—his theories, the application of his theories to theatre, how a play has to be done in the proper Brechtian mode—but I’ll make an honest confession to you today: I didn’t understand much of what I read. It was some time around this period that there was a screening of the Berliner Ensemble production of *Mutter Courage* at Minerva. Ritwik [Ghatak] was also present at the screening. After it was over, he asked me, ‘My dear chap, where is the alienation? She is so involved in her acting!'
He was referring to Helene Weigel who played Mother Courage.

In the mean time, there was a lot of debate on whether *Bhalo Manusher Pala* was a good adaptation and how much of the content of the original play remained in it. No one can deny that the production was extremely successful, people liked it, and at least a part of what Brecht wanted to say came out even in the adaptation. For me, all these experiences came together in my understanding of Brecht. I have absolutely no hesitation in confessing that I didn’t understand how his theories could be applied to a production of his play and this I attribute wholly to my inadequate reading. I owe a lot of my understanding of Brecht to you, Samik. If you remember, you gave me a publication from Dresden in which I read about those ten tenets . . .

[S. B. . . . of Stanislavski . . . ]

. . . which Brecht had pinned to the actors’ notice board to underscore the continuing validity of the Stanislavskian method in his theatre. Whether he did it under compulsion or for some other reason, I really don’t know, but this opened for me a new way of thinking.

I responded to Brecht’s plays because I found in them a fascinating store of universal truths told in an easy, uncluttered way, and I felt I should highlight these points in my presentation of Brecht. Particularly in his play *Galileo*, Brecht makes certain statements about the times, the age, the role of science, which are extremely important in the present context. I tried, in my production of the play, to convey some of these important statements to the audience. We couldn’t do some scenes because of the constraints of time, and yet we were able to include some of the dance scenes which are normally left out of most productions. When we were young, we sat through three and a half hour long performances; but one had to take into account the present audience when one was planning a production and so I had to keep the time factor in mind. In Bohurupee, we did not have any model before us when we did *Mrichhakatik*; and neither did Bohurupee have any tradition of doing Brecht’s plays before we attempted *Galileo*. I strongly feel that the decision of doing plays, which had not been done before, gave us a new kind of encouragement.

There has been a lot of debate on whether Brecht wanted to portray Galileo as a hero or an anti-hero. For me, no two human beings are similar, nor can they be classified into types. Human beings can never be black or white. There is a variety in human nature that cannot be predicted or measured in terms of how good or bad a character is. So *Galileo* was for me a journey of discovery—of Brecht the playwright, of the character of Galileo, and even the sociological role of science and how it encounters social pressures.

What appealed to me were Brecht’s words: Don’t look at my plays as theories; look upon them as plays. This was something I could relate to and I knew my plays would be for my audience. I was doing plays for the audience in Calcutta and they responded to plays in a certain way. I had to take that into consideration when I was doing *Galileo*. I didn’t think at all about the alienation method and how it could be implemented. All I was concerned with was that the acting must be very competent, so that whatever Brecht had wanted to say in his play came across clearly.

[S. B. You have been acting as Galileo from the time that Amar Ganguly left . . . ]

Amar was with us from 1980 to June 1984, when he left. I have been playing Galileo since then. Amar had certain advantages as an actor, or even otherwise—his voice, his stage presence. As far as the acting is concerned, he was extremely involved; in fact, in the last scene, he became very emotionally involved. I’m saying this only about the last scene of the play—I feel that the words have such a lot of power in them, that it just isn’t necessary to accentuate or display histrionic skills. But he was very conscious about audience response and it became uncomfortably obvious at times.

When I was acting, I tried consciously not to do the things that Amar [Ganguly] did. I tried not to get overtly sensitive about the audience, to speak my lines with some kind of
a detachment, with an objectivity that would be required of a man like Galileo. I tried to introduce some kind of a balance between the juxtapositions that emerge in the course of the play—the cold logic of argument, the paraphernalia of being a celebrity and the failings of the celebrity, who is, after all, a human being—building up to fine sinuous tensions. Please note that all these references are to the last scene of the play and a close analysis of this scene reveals certain interesting points about the general content of the play as a whole. Galileo is fully aware of all the things that have gone wrong because of him, and yet there is this pain at not being able to confront, at having made certain compromises. This almost brutal coming to terms with reality comes across with great brilliance and control in the closing scene of the play when he says: I was afraid, terrified of physical torture. This honest confession was extremely important in terms of theatre. I wanted to portray Galileo as a human being, shorn of all the mythical trappings—a man who loved life, who loved to live.

I tried to ensure that an undercurrent of tension in the play remains stretched and taut and tried to orchestrate the acting in a way that this tension and uncertainty came across without being overtly theatrical. The acute sense of guilt that was gnawing at his heart had to be reflected in the acting. At the same time I had to be restrained in my portrayal of Galileo, because it was Brecht’s Galileo. Even while acting, I had to be conscious about the complex personality I was portraying, his personality as Brecht saw it, and yet bring in some kind of an objectivity to it. I wouldn’t say that he [Amar Ganguly] was playing to the gallery, but he became so very involved that it became difficult for him to actually introduce that objective slant in his acting.

There is another point I’d like to make about the relation between co-actors. It is common theatre-lore that the leading actor or actress would have the stage to himself/herself when it came to an intense moment like a long deathbed speech, or an intense dramatic moment to be enacted. Even when the scene demanded that several actors be present on the stage, the lead actor/actress would ensure that the blocking/composition was to his/her advantage. Amar was a wonderful actor, but somehow, the rapport with his co-actors was lacking. I am citing all these examples only because this was a play in which both of us acted in the same role and the examples are merely to illustrate the differences in approach two actors might have.

After this came Rajdarshan . . . three plays one after the other—Mrichhakatik in 1979, Galileo in 1980, ideally Rajdarshan should have come the following year, but Galileo was running to packed houses and we decided to launch the new play in 1982. Manoj [Mitra] had given us only a part of the script before the Pujas, and in the mean time, the play had already been published in the Puja issue of Desh. That was definitely not the play we wanted to do. So all of us got together here, in the Bohurupee office—Manoj [Mitra] and us, and I was thinking aloud: why on earth should I do just another play on palace intrigues? The court scene in the play (perhaps you remember my discussion of this scene in detail at the Natya Shodh Sansthan seminar) was missing in the version published in Desh. There was a lot of discussion and Manoj wrote that scene for us afresh. In the first draft that Manoj [Mitra] had given us, the court scene was missing. Just imagine what the play would have been without that crucial scene! Rajinder Nath had also produced an adaptation of this play and named it Nand Raja Mast Hai. The play merely conveys the ‘masti’ of Nanda; the political dimension is left out entirely. We had done an adaptation of a Sanskrit play and a Brecht play, and now we had Rajdarshan. This was not an attempt to seek ‘variety’, as some people would say. How can you even talk of variety when it is so difficult to get hold of any play, let alone a good one? In our attempt to stage an adaptation of a Sanskrit play and later on a Brecht play, we had to do different kinds of background reading.

This was 1980/81 when the entire country was taken up by a great ‘folk’ revival. In the case of the Sanskrit play, we had to ensure that the play appealed to the audience. We had to be doubly careful because we were doing [an adaptation of] a Sanskrit play for the
first time. There are ways in which the folk idiom has been used both on the proscenium and outside it. We decided to stay within the proscenium; but people like Badal babu [Badal Sircar] dared to do non-proscenium plays because most of the time he wrote the plays himself. At times he did texts written by other people, like Sagina Mahato [originally a long story by Gaurkisore Ghosh] and Spartacus [novel by Howard Fast] but did the adaptations/translations himself.

After two successful plays, we felt quite confident, and with it came a desire to experiment because in Bohurupee we had exposure to a wide variety of techniques. We wanted to do something different. We decided Rajdarshan would be a play in a light vein. Till then the only play in our repertoire of a somewhat light nature was Kanchanranga [premiered 24 January 1961, Biswaroop], but even that play had some message being put across, society being critiqued, and an attempt at probing what pettiness and selfishness can do; it wasn’t mere tomfoolery.

For Rajdarshan we had planned to bring in certain folk elements and adapt them to the requirements of the proscenium. So, after it was re-written according to our suggestions, we really started thinking as to how we could introduce certain folk elements in the play. You may perhaps recall, in the printed text of the play all declarations/announcements [by the town crier] are off-stage. I remember seeing performances of folk plays where riders on horseback are included in the choreography. We thought it would be a good idea to introduce several drummers with the town crier’s announcements—about eight/ten people with drums marching on to the stage; that would create a different kind of spectacle and provide the scope for borrowing some folk elements. If you remember our production, all that spectacle was made possible because of the folk elements in them. Consider the character of Shani, for example: everything about him—his appearance, make-up, costume—has definite traces of the folk, and his make-up reminds one of a kathakali artiste. In my attempt to introduce folk elements, I took off from tradition and then tried to build on it.

The other thing I found interesting in the play was how two people—a social parasite who lives off others, and a blacksmith who has to work hard to earn his living—respond to the same situation. Both have gone to seek ‘darshan’ [audience] with the king. Just consider the fun and the irony of it all—going for a ‘rajdarshan’, the blacksmith realizes where the ‘darshan’ [philosophy] of the king has gone wrong, and the parasite accepts this philosophy unquestioningly. He is just a very ordinary man who has to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. He operates by sheer common sense. It is something that comes almost instinctively to him. Once he realizes what is wrong, he wants to come back to his village, to his roots, with all his heart and soul. For me the play is about a return, a going back to one’s roots. I took care not to
typecast the character of the blacksmith in the typical ‘trade union’ mould. The blacksmith is a person who has accumulated practical knowledge and he has learnt the ways of the world the hard way. That is what the play is all about. It was also a successful production. *Rajdarshan* was premiered in 1982 and was on for nearly a year and a half, till June 1984. Meanwhile Amar had directed *Dharmadharma* in 1983.

The play we did after this was *Aguner Pakhi*, an adaptation of Jean Anouilh’s *L’Alouette*. Bohurupee was going through a period of crisis after Amar [Ganguly] and Debatosh [Ghosh] left [in 1984]. When we choose a play in a language other than Bengali, we prefer doing a translated version—we are not so much in favour of adaptation. Of course there are some plays which cannot be adapted at all, like *Oedipus Rex*. So when Sombhu-da directed it, he worked with a translation, not an adaptation. *Aguner Pakhi* too, we felt, was a play that couldn’t be adapted; and besides, Joan of Arc was a familiar character. We tried to keep it as authentic as possible and took a lot of care to ensure that everything in the play worked cohesively. Somehow, the title of the play—*L’Alouette*—which, in English means, ‘the lark’, had all the associations of a sweet little singing bird; it didn’t match the theme of the play. I don’t know whether the French word ‘alouette’ has other
connotations, but we changed the name to ‘Aguner Pakhi’ [lit. ‘Bird of Fire’]. Joan was burnt at the stake, but her voice of protest did not go unheard. It created history.

We staged *Malini* after *Aguner Pakhi*. These were two plays with incidents set in two different countries, each with a different cultural milieu, but with an inherent similarity—a critical way of looking at how an unholy alliance between the state and religion can ruin a society. It is incredible how two warring nations, France and England suddenly come together when it comes to persecution. In the play we tried to underscore the fact that the indomitable spirit of the individual resurrects like a phoenix, even after the power of the state and the church have silenced the protesting voice. In our production we made human flames to indicate that it is actually men who burn other people; fire doesn’t choose what to burn or what not to burn. In that carefully choreographed scene several actors dressed in flaming red robes close in upon Joan.

In the trial scene of Joan, I indicated prison walls with actors standing one beside the other, hands joined, and a huge lock strapped to each of their waists. We used the same pedestal for the church (represented by the Pope), the state (represented by the king) and the stake. So the spatial restriction and identification also becomes indicative of the murky alliance between coercive, tyrannical powers of all kinds. It was one of my favourite productions. I can’t stage it any more due to several reasons, but I feel such a play should be revived at this point in time. That’s not possible any more, but it had a good run and received good reviews.

*Malini* [premiered 1 May 1986, Academy of Fine Arts] came after this. Just consider, Rabindranath [Tagore] wrote this play long ago in 1896, but this was a play he hadn’t reworked, or changed in any way (unlike all his other works which he revised/reworked time and again); no one ever produced it in its original form. The points that have been raised in *Malini* appear in another dimension in *Natir Puja* nearly thirty years after *Malini* had been written. Several friends had asked me what was so special about this play that I decided on a production with it. Malini, the daughter of Kashiraj, decides to shun Buddhism (which was then known as ‘nabadharma’). The society decides to shun her and she is exiled by her father, the king. Ironically, when she wins over the common people by her kindness and good nature, the king realizes that all his subjects are with her, and decides to bring her back. So it is actually a politics of convenience when you banish somebody fearing rebellion, and reinstate the same individual to his/her former glory when you feel the people who would have rebelled have suddenly become loyal to the exile. Where else would I get such a brilliant perception of the political situation?

The second interesting point about the play is the way Khemankar and Supriyo play their parts. I’m not interested in whether Rabindranath decided that Khemankar would be the hero, or whether he thought Supriyo would be more suited to the role, or whether Malini was the heroine. Rabindranath had once written: religion is not the lamp; it is the light of the lamp, and you need the lamp for its light. We would have to see this light. While preparing for the play, this is what I had in mind, because one would ultimately have to say ‘yes’ to life. There is an overwhelming power of the ‘no’ in Khemankar: he says no to everything. He would not let the light of any other religion enter the abode of his deity; he would rather let darkness prevail, not realizing that the truest and the most exalted of religions is the religion of humanity. The play deals with the problem of how the name of religion is sullied when grossly irreligious acts are appropriated in the name of religion. All these concerns are there in the play. I had requested Shankha-da [Shankha Ghosh, major Bengali poet, b. 1932] to do a selection from Rabindranath which would be recited by an actor, almost in the manner of a *vivek* [lit. conscience; a character in jatra who comments on the course of action in the play] just before the interval: you cannot forcibly wipe away the natural light of the skies; I wanted that perspective to be communicated. Aren’t all religious strictures mere variations of certain dogma? Again, in the penultimate scene when Khemankar is led on to the stage in chains, there was a
recitation (in voice-over) of Rabindranath’s poem ‘Kaar padadhwani’. In other words, we wanted our perception of the play to be communicated. _Malini_ was by no means a dated play; the concerns in the play are just as relevant today as when it was written. We’ve had to rearrange the scenes, to maintain the fluidity of the narrative.

_Mister Kakatua_ [premiered 1 May 1987, Academy of Fine Arts] was an adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize winning play _Harvey_ by Mary Chase. A film version had also been made. Prashanta Deb had named his Bengali adaptation _Arindam_ and it had just been printed in our journal, _Bohurupee_. When we decided on a production many years later, he suggested that we change the title to _Mister Kakatua_. I’d like to mention here, that over the years we had been able to groom quite a number of young actors and actresses and they were participating in each of our new productions. There was a constant effort on our part to train new actors/actresses, because all of us were aware that the responsibility involved in holding a group together rested not only on the senior members of the group, but also in the new generation of young performers and in the acting standards that would make or mar a play. In each of our plays a new actor/actress would be introduced. Even at the risk of being accused of propaganda, I’d like to reiterate that this feature in our group, of introducing fresh, new actors/actresses, has brought satisfactory results. I would say, we’ve been saved! Most groups, which failed to train a new generation of actors, are finding it increasingly difficult to continue with a competent level of production. We had received quite a rigorous training before we were given an opportunity to act and saw to it that the tradition continued the same way. You’ll see two new faces in our last production. Gautam [Bose] made his debut in _Mister Kakatua_.

It has been our policy not to repeat ourselves. We had produced _Malini_ before this play and they were so different! In _Kakatua_ we tried to address the problem of humanity from a larger perspective. Finding himself marginalized and victimized in a grossly inconsiderate and self-centred society, a man seeks refuge in a world of fantasy. The selfishness of external society percolates even to the close, intimate atmosphere of the family, where the sister wants her brother to remain in the mental asylum, not so much because she wants him cured, but because she wants him out of the way, so that she can usurp the property.

I’d like to make a confession—in each of my plays I tend to write out an apologia, or even a certain mode of expression which establishes a certain point. I don’t underestimate my audience at all, but I somehow have this feeling that I’m not being able to communicate as clearly as I would have wanted to.

In this play too I used extracts from two/three poems by Rabindranath Tagore and three by Shankha Ghosh. It was merely an attempt to lend my perception of the play a little bit of clarity. We have also tried to bring in new ideas when we plan our set-designs for each of our productions. In _Kakatua_, we used reversible sets for the nursing home/the doctor’s chamber and the house. My responsibility was to prove at the end that this man, whom society had branded ‘insane’ was the only one who was actually sane. In the last scene, he comes back to collect the muffler and cap; and as he wishes the audience ‘good night’, there is a realization that the chain of events has come a full circle.

When Bohurupee completed forty years, we planned a double bill with _Kinu Kaharer Thetar_ [premiered 2 May 1988, Academy of Fine Arts] and Girish Karnad’s play, _Yayati_ [premiered 1 May 1988, Academy of Fine Arts]. Earlier, Bohurupee had produced a translation of Vijay Tendulkar’s play, _Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe as Chope! Adalat Cholchhey_ [premiered 9 December 1971, Kalamandir]. This was I think the first Bengali production to be adapted/translated from a Marathi play. Karnad’s _Tughlaq_ had already been produced by Bangla Natmancha Pratistha Samiti, and later on _Hayavadana_ had also been done. [Bangla Natmancha Pratistha Samiti—a project involving several leading theatre groups, performing artistes, poets—initiated by Bohurupee in 1968 to raise funds to set up a theatre of their own, ultimately abandoned around 1976.]

_Tughlaq_ had quite a lot of grandeur about it. The play had a star cast with several
actors/actresses from nearly all the leading theatre groups participating—Rudra [Rudraprasad Sengupta], Sabita [Sabitabrata Dutta], actors from Shyamal Ghosh’s group. In this production (unlike the production of Galileor Jiban where the audience went to watch Sombhu Mitra alone) all the roles were competently acted and the play was successful not for any one actor, but for a concerted effort.

I still remember that day very clearly. It was during the time that we were planning a celebration of forty years of Bohurupee. Sombhu-da was no longer with Bohurupee, but I thought I should go and visit him. ‘So, what are you doing now?’ he asked me. He was well informed about everything, as usual. He had also gathered reports from members of other theatre groups (about us and what we were doing) and how at least twenty thirty people came to Bohurupee every day, and how we were doing quite well as a theatre group; then he asked me about my work at Rabindra Bharati. I told him about Yayati. He was rather sceptical about the conclusion of the play. ‘Girish [Karnad] always does something strange to the conclusions of his plays; will this work out?’ he asked me. Anyway, we went ahead with the rehearsals and staged it. I had a feeling that Yayati was gambling with the lives of the three women and during our discussion, as soon as I mentioned this to Khaled Chowdhury, he chalked out his plan for the sets. We worked on the costumes and the sets, taking off from the Mrichhakatik experience and building on it. In Mrichhakatik we had planned the costumes in rather subdued hues, but in Yayati they were made brighter and more regal.

Yayati didn’t work out quite as we had expected. I mentioned earlier that we also did Kinu Kaharer Thetar with it. In this play too, like the earlier one, the pivotal character is that of a woman. I see Yayati as a play where three women—Sharmistha, Devayani and Chitralekha—are used as marionettes by Yayati.

I’ll come to Kinu Kaharer Thetar a little later; meanwhile let me speak a little about Nindapankey [premiered 1 December 1990, a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Les Mains sales or Crime Passionnel] and a little anecdote which is historically important. The script had been translated by Arun-da [Arun Mitra (1910-2000), poet] and regular rehearsals were being held for quite some time. In that phase, some of us were, due to some unknown reason, treated as outcasts in the group. It was painful, no doubt, but we have come a long way. Anyway, we used to watch rehearsals from the terrace. I had forgotten to mention something here: Sombhu-da tried doing this play a number of times. Initially Geetu [Geeta Dutta (1933–94), actress, wife of Sabitabrata Dutta] was invited to play the role of Jessica. This was after that prolonged rift. Rehearsals continued for about a month and a half and then stopped.

[S. B. Which year was this?] Around 1971, or it might have been the late sixties—1968 or thereabouts—when we hadn’t moved into this house [the present address of Bohurupee at 7 Lower Range, Calcutta]. When Sombhu-da left Bohurupee, he took the scripts of Dashachakra and this play with him, i.e. he sent for the scripts. And there was also an audio recording of Sombhu-da as Wederer. Many many years later, when he heard that we were doing the play, he spoke to me over the phone and wanted the recording back. So I sent it to him. I had the good sense not to keep a copy of the recording with me, because if I had, I’d have copied Sombhu-da.

I asked Chandan to contact Arun-da [Arun Mitra] and in about three weeks a fresh translation was ready. It was a huge rambling piece. In French plays, every new entry is indicated as a new scene. Now that was not only alien, but extremely confusing for us. In our play-analysis sessions, when we used to plan our khanda-mandalas [action units into which a play is divided] we realized that each of the entries and exits were nothing but khanda-mandalas and we could give some sort of a shape to the play after editing it.

Such a lot has been written about Sartre, especially about his political stand; what appealed to me most was his pragmatism. We have seen the appalling circumstances
when there is a decided shift in political pragmatism. You and I have had the same experience, I know. We have noted the heinous effects of an unpragmatic political scenario. It was such a severely constricted kind of situation that anything that was not codified, would not be followed. It was almost a stance of *byadey nail* [a variation on *byadey achhey* (lit. ‘It’s all in the Vedas!’), which M. N. Saha (eminent Indian physicist, 1893–1956) in his historic debate against the Hindu orthodoxy in defence of modern science (1939, cf. Ray, Raman, Saha et al, *The Scientist in Society*, Calcutta: Thema 2000) referred to mockingly as the set position of the traditionalists on all the new findings of modern science.] Something that wasn’t explicitly written in the texts by Marx would not be followed! During Lenin’s time, the political atmosphere was definitely more relaxed and pragmatic. Later, during the Stalinist period, there was a dictum for everything—literature, music, art, culture. Once his ‘reign’ was over, people became conscious of the futility of it all.

We knew that Sartre was a Communist, and yet he was not a Communist. Sartre’s play is set at a time when the Red Army has put up barricades all over the town, and in the Regent’s estate secret negotiations are on with the German army. Wederer suggests that they should conclude an agreement with the Germans before the Regent does anything and the Regent, if you remember, is a first rate bourgeois. I felt that this was a play that spoke out, in no uncertain terms, against the unholy and undesirable alliances and intrigues in the political world. There are exquisite observations in the play about love in the real Sartre mould. Olga understands everything, sees what has gone wrong, and where exactly it has gone wrong, but cannot move out. She understands that they are in a situation beyond redemption and the inevitable must happen. They are the ones who will have to be crucified at the altar of misguided politics. We have seen similar things happen in our country too, where vibrant, young minds have been wasted, sacrificed by the people who hold the strings up there. I strongly feel this is the time to do the play once again. It would be a good comment on the state of politics. Given the chance, I’ll revive the play. This is the time to do it. You remember, Samik, it was a fairly good production. They went on a campaign against the play and stopped it because they thought it was making a statement against the CPI(M) government.

The next play I’ll discuss is *Akbar Birbal* [premiered 1 May 1993, Academy of Fine Arts]. This play was done after the Babri Masjid incident. Several other groups had reacted to the demolition in their own ways, with productions that were extremely critical of the political scenario and the provocation that ultimately perpetrated the incident. Unfortunately, most plays only made a statement about the demolition on a superficial level. The interesting point about this play was that there was no direct mention of the demolition; but there was an attempt to underscore the basic point that is historically relevant. The two characters, Akbar and Birbal (the names are also very significant here) work together in giving shape to a new religion, where people have better things to do and don’t just go about demolishing mosques and temples. There is another character in the play—a little girl from Afghanistan, who sees everything, watches people around her, and notes with a lot of surprise and pain, how men can be so intolerant and unfriendly. There is another point that is juxtaposed with this—how a ‘mataji’, her followers and businessmen form a clique to use religion to serve their own petty needs. The fake mataji is as much a construction of the business world as of the religious world, who in their collaboration with the unscrupulous businessmen become agents of discord in society. In the play we also tried to strike at the root of hypocrisy which really has given rise to most of the problems in the world.

No two play could be as different as *Yayati* and *Kinu Kaharer Thetar*—the content of the plays was different, the form used for one was totally rejected for the other, the styles were different, even our production planning was different. We used the same cast and crew for the two productions. It was a challenging task and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. *Yayati* had roots in our tradition and mythology and there was a particular
style in which this play could be handled. Manoj Mitra’s *Rajdarshan* was a different sort of a play altogether and we experimented with a different kind of a treatment; for *Kinu Kaharer Thetar* the approach would have to be totally different because it was so very unlike any of Manoj Mitra’s other plays. An unspoilt rustic warmth pervades the play and comes out in the way characters are delineated: the hero is a lowly born man who opts out of the trade of his forefathers and takes up theatre instead. What we found interesting and amusing about it was the way the device of the play-within-the-play was used and how the past was represented in the play and the old world charm of it all. It was as if this was a play of the good old days and the play somehow brought back those days.

Kinu Kahar is the name of the person; what we are concerned about is his life as a performer in theatre. The episode involving the play *Ghantakarna* was extremely amusing. Ghantakarna is a story of paying off the debts of other people. The character in the main plot can, with great felicity, identify with the character in the play-within-the-play; he can change between his real and fictitious selves with great felicity. This is something we are quite inhibited about in our proscenium theatre; but it can be done quite easily in folk plays. In fact, it is quite a common folk theatre characteristic.

There is an amusing episode when people ask Kinu to perform an excerpt from an old *pala* of his choice. He asks his wife to give him her jewellery. She readily agrees and gives all her jewellery one by one, but stops at the earrings. Kinu asks, ‘Won’t you give me those?’ She replies, ‘No, I surely won’t. My father gave them to me’ and there is uproarious laughter from the audience. We were trying to get a feel of the folk theatre, to get under the skin, as it were. There were several songs in the play. Fortunately we had a talented young man [Biman Bhattacharya] with us who could sing very well and he was the one who directed the music for the play (he was with us when we revived *Nabanna*). It was such a wonderful experience for all of us and we were so happy at the end. We had quite a rich repertoire at that point of time: besides these two plays,
we were doing five earlier plays from the Bohurupee repertoire.

We revived *Nabanna* after this and it came in for a lot of adverse criticism. One hadn’t seen the original 1944 production of *Nabanna*, but one had read lots about it and had quite a clear idea of what the production was like. But questions were raised about the validity of reviving such a production. I’ll share with you some thoughts on why we chose to attempt a production of that play. It is true that the play was written and enacted at a crucial point in history when the experiences of war and famine affected every living individual. Bijan Bhattacharya had written the play in response to a very disturbing situation that was prevailing at that time. We did not think it right that a play such as this should merely be a statement of/response to a very contextual, localized history. We thought that the play had a far more significant function and it was just as relevant in the present age, as it was about sixty years ago.

We were taking a fresh look at the play five/six decades from its first performance. We had heard adverse reviews about the play being episodic and the inevitable consequences of performing such a play. But we had some faith in ourselves. We knew the inherent strength of Bijan-da’s play and we were sure about the reason we wanted to do it. Here was
a play that spoke of an event in history that involved extremely tragic circumstances, when human life and human dignity became commodified to the hilt, with human beings sharing the same hovel with stray dogs and rummaging through the same rubbish heap for a morsel of food. We thought that this episode in history should be documented, and documented from a totally new perspective. Poems were written condemning the outrage, artists took to the streets, their criticism of the man-made famine taking the form of brutal sketches in the notebooks they carried with them on their journeys to the countryside, and their wanderings through the streets of Calcutta. We planned to use some, if not all of these, because we wanted to give the play a new dimension and we wanted to take a fresh look at the play contextualized in history.

We spent days searching the archives of The Statesman for news items on the Famine of 1943-44. We enlarged these clippings with photographs and displayed them all over the lobby of the Academy of Fine Arts, so that the audience would be led, as it were, through a particular phase in history. We had used ‘Nabajeebaner Gan’ [a suite of songs on the Famine] by Jyotirindra Moitra; sketches by Zainul Abedin and Chittaprasad (we used slides of these sketches); and poems by Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Premendra Mitra.

I’ll give you a concrete example of a part of our
production design. You remember the scene in the play where Pradhan, with his family and several others from the village, is compelled to join the multitude of the starving poor in Calcutta. We used one of Zainul Abedin’s famous sketches for a backdrop (we used sheaths of fine net and the sketches were blown up to a larger-than-life size and drawn with charcoal on the net). As Pradhan and his family walk on to the stage, we played a song from ‘Nabajeebaner Gan’. This lent a new dimension in the interpretation of Bijan-da’s text.

[S. B. Did you think of doing this play independently, or did the idea occur only after Sangeet Natak Akademi asked you to stage that particular play for Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh?]

There are two things I’d like to mention in this context: we had thought of doing one of Bijan-da’s plays earlier.

[S. B. Yes, there was a time when you were thinking of producing Aaj Basanta.]

No, that was long ago. I’ll tell you what happened later. We had decided that after Yayati and Kinu Kaharer Thetar we would do one of Bijan-da’s plays. That was the time when I directed Debigarjan at Rabindra Bharati University. Inspired by the success of this production, I set my mind on doing the same play for our group. This was totally unrelated to the Nehru Shatabdi Samaroh. We had also written in our letter of acceptance that given the choice, we would be happy to do Debigarjan, because it was a play written in post-independence India. They wrote back, saying that we could do either Nabanna or Raktakarabi—plays which had created stage history. Raktakarabi was out of question; so our only choice was Nabanna.

[S. B. I think you know the reason behind this restricted choice that was offered to you. Didn’t you think of producing Debigarjan independently? I think it is a shame that one of his brilliant plays, Debigarjan, should remain on the level of the text and never be honoured with a decent production. I suppose you agree with me that Debigarjan as a play is far superior to Nabanna.]

I agree totally. I’ve discussed Nindapankey with you during the first phase of this interview. Our group now entered another phase with a new playwright—Sisirkumar Das [b. 1936, Rabindranath Tagore Professor of Modern Indian Languages and Literature, Delhi University, scholar and playwright, and author of History of Indian Literature, vol. 8, covering the modern period, and editor of the 3 volume Complete English Works of Rabindranath Tagore.] I liked his style very much. When we were preparing for the production, we had to arrange the play a bit here and there; often we had to alter the ending of the play slightly. Of course we were looking for variety; but we were also thinking of experimenting. So we chose Shyama by Rabindranath Tagore. Those of us who have read it, know how difficult it is to stage, especially because it had already been produced in the form of a dance-drama earlier. There was every likelihood of the dance-drama being compared with the play we were trying to put up. We took the risk nevertheless.

Sisir-babu had written the play in such a way that it had started with the basic story set in the locale of ancient times, but rose to a new level, which linked it up with the modern times as well. Shyama (the dance-drama) ends with a song about forgiveness; this play did not have anything of the kind. Sisir-babu’s play merely raised a couple of questions, and some of them were quite uncomfortable—questions about relationships, the true nature of love, the extent to which one can stretch oneself for love. Can one, for example, even kill for love?

There are two sides to the pivotal character, Shyama: one is Shyama the woman/lover/beloved; the other is the rational Shyama, who can pose questions, argue with cold, unforgiving logic. So I had the two Shyamas emerging from one in the very first scene of the play and I indeed am very grateful to Manjusree Chaki Sarkar for choreographing this
scene. We had two actresses playing the two aspects of Shyama. The parts were acted out quite well: Debojyoti Roy Chowdhury did the role of the Kotal; Basab Mitra played Uttiya (the man who is killed) and became quite famous. The only two ‘characters’ who were retained from the original dance-drama were Shyama and the Kotal. All the other characters had different names. We didn’t even think we were doing Rabindranath’s Shyama, because we treated this play as an independent play altogether.

Our friend Chittaranjan Ghose had written a play called Nidhu-babu a few years ago. It was a play with a strong biographical content. Banaphool [pseudonym of Balaichand Mukhopadhyay (1899–1979), best known for his short stories, a doctor by profession] had written such plays once upon a time, including one on Madhusudan on which Rabindranath Tagore once commented—if you take out the play from the biography, the biography does not stand on its own as a play; so one might as well write a biography independently! I knew I shouldn’t fall into the same trap. So I decided to approach the play differently.

The complex relationship between Nidhu-babu [Ramnidhi Gupta (1741–1839), poet, lyricist and composer, exponent of the new form of the tappa which became a connoisseur’s delight in nineteenth century Calcutta] and Srimati cannot be formulated into the lover-beloved type; nor is it exactly that of a master-pupil. It is very hard to define the kind of relationship they had. Nidhu-babu’s autobiography tells us very little about his life as such and I was looking for some kind of a clue which I could use as a thesis in the play. Nidhu-babu mentions, at a particular point in his autobiography that his songs would make him immortal and thus his victory over death would be complete. The incidents of Nidhu-babu’s life might well have been the staple of a triangular love-story; but I didn’t want it to fall into the same old love-triangle pattern and this insignificant detail in his autobiography provided me the lead. I knew exactly what was to be done.

Nidhu-babu’s pupil, Srimati’s vision of life changes as she comes to understand and accept his philosophy, that love is not always affection between terrestrial beings, it can also be a transcendent relationship of the finite spirit with the Infinite. After a lot of persuasion, Srimati becomes King Mahananda’s mistress and goes away with him. This is the time that Nidhu-babu composes some of the most exquisitely lyrical songs, some of which are clearly addressed to Srimati. All the three characters in the play come to a kind of realization, and there is
Nindapankey, from Sartre’s Les Mains sales, became relevant with its suggestions of inner-party conflicts in the Communist movement in West Bengal. Photograph © Nemai Ghosh.
some sort of a coming to terms with the way life has treated mortals.

This is one of the plays in our repertoire which still draws a full house, like Galileo, which plays to a full house even now. There is another little point about the songs of the play that I’d like to mention here. People somehow had the idea that Bohurupee would never do any play which had a strong emphasis on music. Our play on the life of Nidhubabu, Piriti Paramnidhi [premiered 1 May 1994, Academy of Fine Arts], broke this myth. We trained under a music teacher for three months and only after we had perfected the songs did we start full rehearsals.

The next play we attempted was Sisir Kumar Das’s Sinduk [premiered 1 May 1995, Academy of Fine Arts]. It had a rural setting with an element of fantasy about it. The play was about how things—a pot, a coin, a vessel—start multiplying when stored in this sinduk [a locker made of wood/steel, usually for keeping valuables]. As we rehearsed the play, I came to realize that the playwright was not talking merely about money getting doubled and trebled; it also involves a kind of black humour when an individual suddenly starts creating his own duplicates. The element of fantasy was retained and we didn’t have to work wonders (as far as the production was concerned) to convey it. I must confess that I did try to get in touch with the famous magician P. C. Sorcar, to help us with the tricks. Later I dropped the idea because I wanted to keep it simple and straightforward. In this production too Debesh [Roy Chowdhury] gave a brilliant performance. Sumita, who was relatively new, improved her acting quite perceptibly. The Government of West Bengal invited us for a festival and we toured the whole of North Bengal with this play. It turned out to be an extremely popular play, appreciated by audiences in towns and cities, and in villages alike.

Bohurupee had attempted Muktadhara a long time ago, but it had failed miserably. Sombhu-da had a theory. He said it is such a play that lead actors must perform even in the bit roles and only then can it stand together as a play. This had somehow stuck in the mind and it took a long time to get over it. I was going through a severe dilemma about the kind of play I should attempt after the success of Sinduk when I decided on Muktadhara [premiered 9 August 1996, Girish Mancha]. In the years when I taught at Rabindra Bharati I did two/three variations of the production, bringing into the interpretation issues that were as relevant during his time as they are today. The moment we show the machine, the theme of the play is restricted. Rabindranath mentions the machine in his stage direction quite clearly; yet I wanted to break away from it because I realized that only if I could do away with it would I be able to interpret the spirit of the play correctly. As soon as Biswajit comes in, the plot takes a turn—it becomes more of a family play (something like Bouthakuranir Hat). I didn’t want it to become something of a stereotype . . . constricted and limited in scope. In the mean time I read an essay in which Rabindranath writes: Western nations act like a dam to check the free flow (of culture) into other nations.

The basic problem then, lay in the interpretation and how one would use this in the context of the play. It is unfortunate that intelligent people like Nityapriya Ghosh and others chose to interpret this play as Rabindranath’s reaction to water resource management in the country! Soon after, an ex-student of mine triumphantly reported to me that he had successfully staged Muktadhara in several parts of West Bengal, and he had received an overwhelming response from the people of Farakka!

I had nearly completed my term as a visiting professor at Visva Bharati when Medha Patkar came to Santiniketan and held a meeting at Uttarayan. Some of our young professors and students requested me to stage this play once more. It was all connected to the question of the dam. I refused, because that would surely be a disservice to the playwright and his ideas. He surely didn’t write the play as an agit-prop play for the cause of the Narmada Bachao Andolan! If, for example, a bishop wants me to stage Bisarjan because it condemns slaughter, I surely won’t do it. I dislike this convenient linking up. It destroys the spirit of the play.
I was again reminded of the incident a former student had recounted, of his experience at Farakka. You see, people were free to interpret the play as they chose; but I took a definite position that I wouldn’t interpret it in such a banal manner. I omitted the character of Biswajit from *Muktadhara*, but most of his dialogues are distributed among other characters. The message comes across quite clearly.

The sets were planned in the manner of several convergent and divergent paths (Rabindranath initially named this play *Poth*); the costumes were designed to give a universal look, so as not to be indicative of a particular country, race or religion. In the play, the people of Shibtarai are the oppressed lot and the people of Uttarkut have a fascist training right from childhood. Ultimately the two characters who actually liberate the people from oppression are Abhijit [Debesh Roy Chowdhury] and Dhananjay Bairagi [Asit Sarkar]. I would have been happy if the play continued for a longer time, but it didn’t.

[S. B. Was it because fewer people came to see it?]

Yes, partly because of that. Last year we performed it in Delhi. The problem is, most critics didn’t like the original play, to begin with, and there was a kind of a resistance to it.

In 1997 I did another play by Sisir Kumar Das—*Ekdin Ekrat* [premiered 1 May 1997, Academy of Fine Arts]. We had selected this play precisely because it said a lot about the times. The whole country was celebrating fifty years of independence, but what had this independence brought us? This was one of the questions that the play addressed and we found it extremely relevant. Like in all his other plays, here too Sisir-babu brings in the element of fantasy—not so much as a device, but as a critique. The play traces the reactions of a freedom fighter who had participated in the Quit India Movement and had been killed. He comes to life on the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence, only to realize that things have gone wrong. As he moves about in an age which seems so strange, he notices that his one-time comrades have changed too. They have turned into unscrupulous operators. Most people he knew fifty years ago are now changed beyond recognition. Sisir-babu transcends the categories of space and time in this play and leaves it entirely to the kind of interpretation one chooses. In the programme brochure I had quoted a few lines from one of Samsul Haque’s poems, on the independence of Bangladesh.

I took on a major role in a Bohurupee production after a long time. But I fell ill soon after and couldn’t continue for long. I haven’t acted for the whole of 1998, and 1999 is nearly over. Let’s hope the year 2000 will bring in something good for all of us.

I have been associated with Bohurupee for the last fifty-two years. I’ve tried not to compromise on values even in the face of the most adverse circumstances and this I can say without any hesitation; whatever I have done, I have taken full responsibility for it.

[S. B. Just one last question: I have a soft corner for you because of that wonderful play *Kimbadanti*. You might recall, I had also written about the play because I had liked it a lot and I had expectations of you as a playwright. But after that, you somehow didn’t write another play, or even if you did, you didn’t produce it. Was there a specific reason behind this? What happened?]

As you all know, this play had been originally published in Bohurupee in the form of a one-act play. Later, on Tripti-di’s insistence, I developed it into a full length play. Though the structure was the same, it was fleshed out and several new elements added to it. I have written a few plays, adapted a few; but haven’t been able to produce one because of ill health. Other groups have performed (a particularly favourite play of mine) *Ujan Beye*, which had been named *Smriti Thekey* earlier. This was also a play on the independence movement. I had written it in the fifties, when I had fractured my leg during a performance of *Pathik* and was practically rendered immobile. In the fifties one was quite volatile and reacted quite strongly against political machinations and it had a strong
critical sentiment underlying the apparently frivolous exterior. This play was performed by several groups outside Calcutta, particularly by the Shyampukur Cultural Institute. Bulu [Kaliprasad Ghosh, lighting designer and actor, one-time Secretary of Bohurupee]’s brother, Shankar acted in it—the role of the constable. I spotted Biplab in that play and inducted him into Bohurupee.

If I had a little more time on my hands, I would have written plays; but I had so many responsibilities; moreover, after I fell ill, I have been forced to restrict my activities quite a lot. And when I did have a little spare time on my hands, the responsibility here [in Bohurupee] increased so much that I really had very little else that I could do.

I have just written a first draft of a play. I’ll tell you how the play opens and how it ends, to give you an idea of what it is like. A young revolutionary had kept aside a part of what he had robbed. In those days revolutionaries used to rob the rich to get money for buying weapons. It was quite common in those days. He serves his term of deportation to the Andamans and returns after twenty years, only to find that none of his friends and comrades can be traced. He moves away to a village in the tribal districts and establishes a sanatorium there. Then he buys some land and starts a rehabilitation programme for the backward tribes who are being terrorized by the Ranbir Sena. In the mean time a young man suffering from consumption comes to recuperate in the sanatorium. He is accompanied by his girlfriend and her mother. Knowing full well that he is going to die, the man starts behaving very rudely with the girl, constantly attacking her, making her life miserable. The girl is almost at the end of her tether.

[S. B. I find your development as an actor very interesting. I first saw you as Gosain in Raktakarabi and then in your role in Baki Itihas you gave a whole new dimension to the character you were playing because so many different shades had to be brought out (you were playing all of them at different points in the play) . . . there was of course Putul Khela in between and then upto Nindapankey . . . how do you assess your own development as an actor? What have you tried to achieve as an actor; how far have you been able to achieve it and what do you feel you could have done, and yet couldn’t do? You have mentioned earlier in this interview that you had to move away from acting because you had to take up other responsibilities in the group. This, I feel, happens quite inevitably in any group and all major actors have, at some point in their lives, given up acting in a major role temporarily to supervise production or other important aspects of organization and this sacrifice yields good results in the long run. When you are not acting, you are able to control certain elements of production, because you are watching the play from outside. This cannot happen if you are involved in the complexities of acting in the play. These are decisions every actor-director has had to take some time in his career and you too have taken it. Ajit [Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay] used to refer to Jakhan Eka as his best production ever, because he could control every little aspect of the production as he wasn’t acting in the play. Looking back, what do you feel about these things?]

It is very difficult to assess one’s own growth/development as an actor. But this I know, that from the three of us—[Mohammad] Israel, Kalim and I—playing miners in Pathik upto the role in Nindapankey or even Galileo, there has definitely been a transition and there has surely been a development. I played Basheer Ali in Tipu Sultan, I also played Maharaja Nanda Kumar; in Siraj-ud-daula I played Watts, and Prof. Jnyananjan in Bandhu.

In Rajshahi Government College (where the late Subodh Chandra Sengupta was our Vice-Principal), we performed Raja long before Bohurupee did it. Ritwik [Ghatak] and I used to be close friends and we would collaborate in these college theatricals. Ritwik played Thakurda and I played the King of the Dark Chamber. Then we did Paritran with Ritwik as Dhananjay and I playing Pratap; we also did Phalguni and Subodh-babu came to see this production. When I came to Bohurupee, I came with this background. I’ll
make a frank confession: as I used to be quite good in elocution and had played major stage roles, I thought Ashim’s role in Pathik would be given to me. One was quite immature and impulsive in those days. I can now understand what used to happen. The credit for training all of us goes entirely to Sombhu-da. He had a definite pattern in his training—encouraging us to read, to watch plays systematically, to discuss the theoretical aspects of performance. Reading was a childhood habit; in Bohurupee, I formed another kind of reading habit, more channelized. There were so many plays we could watch—Pathik, Chhenra Tar, Char Adhyay, Dashachakra, and then Raktakarabi. We were watching these plays, doing organizational duties entrusted to us and also playing roles in the plays. We can realize now, at this point of time, what a tremendous training we had to undergo.

There was also a rule in Bohurupee: you had to come to the rehearsals, irrespective of whether you had been given a role in the play. All these things did affect us deep inside consciously or unconsciously. You have rightly observed, that the role of the Gosain in Raktakarabi was a rather straightforward, simple one. Nothing could have been simpler. But even in that role, I had brought in some of my own childhood experiences during my stay in Brindavan and given the otherwise flat and stereotyped role a new dimension. I was quite at ease with the way the japamala [rosary beads] had to be negotiated and how to alter my body language. I had become quite famous.

After this I was doing the role of Dr Ray [Dr Rank] in Putul Khela [premiered 10 January 1958, Mahajati Sadan]. It was totally unexpected. People would never imagine that the person doing Gosain would be given that role. This you’ll find very interesting—when rehearsals started, I was playing Keshtopada, Sombhu-da was doing Dr Ray and Bachcha [Sovent Majumdar (1927–87), leading Bohurupee singer-actor] was doing Tapan [Torvald]. Eleven days before the performance Bachcha lost his voice and the doctor gave up hope of curing him. Ultimately Sombhu-da started playing Tapan, I was given the role of Dr Ray and Amar [Ganguly] played Keshtopada. The role of Dr Ray—sophisticated, dignified—a man living with a sorrow deep in his heart because he knows his illness is terminal.

[S. B. There is a tremendous dignity in this role, unlike that of the Gosain, who is at one level nothing but a clown. But in this role, bringing out the pain and the dignity was quite a daunting task because you were handling an extremely complex role with very few stage appearances in the course of the play.]

It still is one of my favourite roles, like Thakurda’s role in Raja. I really consider myself fortunate because Sombhu-da did not give me ‘type’ roles to play. There are many actors in Bohurupee who have been typecast time and again.

Then came [the role of] Gobindamanikya [in Bisarjan] in 1961. I was quite at ease with speaking verse in a play. Gobindamanikya is one of the neglected roles in theatre; but unless Gobindamanikya is played well, the roles of Raghupati and Jayasingha become useless. This was defined clearly in our production scheme and I managed to do it. If you ask me what prompted me to do the role in this way, I won’t be able to tell you.

[S. B. You have said that Sombhu-babu gave you these roles or certain responsibilities. What happened after he left?]

One thing I must mention here, somewhere I earned his trust. He would leave certain decisions to me; he wouldn’t impose. He would never decide my costume and make-up. He would write everything down for others; but for me he would not. He had that confidence. In a way that helped me. I became more responsible . . .

[S. B. . . . and that helped you when you started working on your own.] Yes. In Mrichhakatik I had to play Charudatta initially. In Galileo I hadn’t taken a role when the production started; I only started doing it in place of Amar [Ganguly]. In Rajdarshan I had a small role—Lambodar Bhatta has only three appearances in the course
of the entire play—but it involved intricate planning, because one had to show the
mental progression in the character through a marginal appearance on stage.

[S. B. Again, people don’t expect Kumar Roy in that kind of a role!]

If you take the eighties into account, the audience was seeing me as Charudatta in
Mrichhakatik and as Lambodar Bhatta in Rajdarshan—two diametrically opposed roles.
One basically has to transform oneself into a lump of wet clay, ready to take on any fresh
impression, once a role is done. Only then will he be able to take on a variety of roles and
play them all with aplomb. What happens most often is that an actor/actress starts
identifying with one role and brings that role into his/her own existence. That is why
taking on a different role becomes so difficult. Somehow this didn’t happen to me. I
could become that lump of clay once again very easily.

[S. B. I have often come across criticism of the ‘Bohurupee school’ of acting: everyone
acting like Sombhu Mitra. I didn’t have to counter this with any other argument, just by
taking up your example, of your roles as an actor in Bohurupee—as one who could
tackle such a wide range of roles with equal competence.]
Shyamal Ghosh (b. 9 April 1933), actor-director, leading the groups Gandharva and later Nakshatra; was professionally engaged in printing, and came to publish an exquisitely designed and laid out series of plays in Bengali under the imprint Nakshatraprakash. The titles that appeared under this short-lived venture included *Mrityusangbad* by Mohit Chattopadhyay, *Saudagarer Nauka* by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay and *Raja Oidipous*, Sombhu Mitra’s shortened version of *Oedipus Rex*. 
The first play I saw was in the professional theatre. I lived in Baharampur before the Partition. When I came to Calcutta, there were four theatres—Star, Srirangam, Minerva and Rangmahal—with their repertory companies performing regularly, with the actors—virtually the same band of actors—moving from one theatre to another; and occasionally, there would be the so-called ‘combination nights’ or ‘benefit nights’ when the best of them, from the different companies, would come together for a special performance. I was watching theatre from, say, 1948. Sisirkumar Bhaduri was still performing. So were Prova Devi [(1903–1952), outstanding actress, playing the female lead with Sisirkumar Bhaduri in his plays], Manoranjan Bhattacharya and Ahindra Chowdhury [(1895–1974), actor, director in theatre and films] and Jahar Ganguly [(1903–1969), singer-actor]. Jogesh Chowdhury [(1888–1942), actor-playwright] was dead. Ranibala [(1914–1958), actress], Chhabi Biswas [(1910–62), actor in theatre and films, best remembered for his lead roles in Satyajit Ray’s Jalsaghar, Devi and Kanchanjangha, and Tapan Sinha’s Kabuliwala] and Naresh Mitra [(1888–1968), actor-director] were performing regularly. They were a great draw. I studied how they acted, and how by their acting they lifted the play to a different level. Though the ticket rates were not really high when compared to the rates today, I did not always have the means to go to the theatre. The lowest priced ticket cost a rupee, which we found quite costly then. There were higher priced tickets too—must have gone up to ten rupees, but we never went beyond one rupee. There was one theatre—the Star Theatre—that had tickets for eight annas [half a rupee]. There were two rows of eight anna seats. Mahendra Gupta [(1910–84) playwright, actor, director] was the principal actor there. And it was he who had introduced the economy tickets. I recall a period when Mahendra Gupta had left Star and joined Minerva, where he introduced the eight anna seats. The eight anna tickets were a godsend for me, and I could see a lot of plays at Star. The
one rupee ticket was a bit expensive, when one added the expenses of travelling from home to the theatre, and vice versa.

The Star had a special reputation for historical plays. Initially Mahendra-babu had produced plays of two or three other kinds as well—like *Kalindi* [from a novel by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay] and Anurupa Devi’s *Ma*—but he himself did not act in these plays. Later when he came to act, there was a spate of historical plays, for he had a special mastery over this genre. He had an excellent voice, I’m yet to come across a better voice. It’s just unthinkable now—that range, that volume, and the charm that it had! It was a theatre that drew large crowds—because it introduced new plays in the repertoire quite often, and had gorgeous costumes. Salil Mitra, had a reputation as a good proprietor. He did not poke his nose into the internal affairs of the theatre, but took care of the externals and essentials. Hence the new costumes, the new sets—and they drew the crowds. It was Srirangam—now Biswaroopa—Sisirkumar’s theatre—that had the poorest box office. The oldtimers would recall—but let me recapitulate for the benefit of the present generation—Srirangam had the same outer structure as the present Biswaroopa, with the difference that it had a garden in the front, where they are now planning a building. There was no one to look after the garden. There may have been flowering plants there once upon a time, but they had all dried up by then. The booking counter was almost on the street. We would often peep into the garden for a view of two old men sitting on a bench, chatting over tea served in clay cups—one of them Sisirkumar Bhaduri, the other Manoranjan Bhattacharya. Srirangam rarely had a well-known actor acting for the company, for, we were told, Sisirkumar could not pay them adequately. The combination nights, of course, were a different affair.

The Srirangam auditorium was in a shoddy state. Those who were in charge of it were a shoddier lot. There were cats roaming about in the auditorium, and there were occasions when at the height of a particularly dramatic scene, two fighting cats would jump on to the stage itself and make their exit through the wings on two sides. The costumes were shabby and in tatters, the make-up material was the cheapest available. Playing the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sisirkumar had only a pair of long sideburns to flaunt. Naturally, Srirangam had only a few spectators—barely twenty to thirty at a time.

Of the other theatres, Rangmahal drew crowds. Minerva had a reasonably respectable draw. I went about watching plays at all the theatres. I was too young still to imagine the possibilities of theatre. So naturally I came to be convinced that theatre must be just what I saw. There were plays of different genres—the *pauranik* [mythological], the *aitihiasik* [historical], the *parivarik* [familial], also called the *samajik* [social]. For ultimately they were all instances of the craft of acting used to deck out a happening. There was no teamwork as we know it today. What all these plays had was the sheer power of acting that somehow gave the plays a dimension. There were scenes with no scenic input at all—maybe just a bench, with a row of rails behind it, to indicate a park, but if the players seated on the bench happened to be Chhabi Biswas and Ranibala, they could sweep the audience off their feet. With their acting to fall back on, they needed nothing else—no frills or crutches or decoration. There would be some decoration for a new production, but nothing of the smartness that is so common today. Yet the production would have something about it that charmed us, held us in thrall. Whenever we had a chance, we would rush to the theatre. The more I watched these plays, I began to form a certain notion or ideal for the selection of plays, the acting pattern, and production construction.

I lived in Dhakuria [in south Calcutta], where there would be a three-day festival of plays on the days of the Durga puja. One of the days was reserved for the local elders. There was a day for the children. And on the day between the two there would be an invited company or group. The elders would choose one of those plays popular in the professional theatre, and perform it in the manner it would be performed in the professional theatre—a copy of the original. The children had to do one of those strange
plays with no female roles—there was no one to guide or direct them and they were supposed to use a singsong drone. The ‘invited’ performance was overpowering. A play called *Bastubhita* [‘The Homestead’ by Digindrachandra Bandyopadhyay, staged by the IPTA, 1947]. There was nothing much on the stage—a couple of props before a black curtain. But what tremendous acting! It changed for me all the notions of theatre that I had formed by then. The acting in *Bastubhita* did not look like acting. The people on stage looked and behaved like people I knew, they could have been among those moving around us a few minutes before the performance began. Who were they? It was such a surprise. I gathered that it was the Indian People’s Theatre Association, directed by Mumtaz Ahmed Khan. It was a play by Digindrachandra Bandyopadhyay [1908–90]. The production shattered for ever all my earlier notions of theatre.

One of my friends, to whom I recounted my experience, assured me that he had an elder brother associated with the IPTA, and he could help me get an entry. That is how I came to know of another kind of theatre, a parallel theatre. It was a discovery for me. Soon enough I found myself in the IPTA. Those were troubled times. In 1950, the police would often interrupt and stop an IPTA performance, and actors would have to flee to escape arrest. It was a single Communist Party then. Things were changing for me, I was meeting all kinds of people—and I knew I had come into a different theatre. There came a time when I had to leave the IPTA.

I was again looking for a group and a place for theatre. Meanwhile I had moved to north Calcutta, where I joined a group, an amateur group that does not exist any longer. I was now aware of three wings of theatre—the professional theatre; the IPTA brand, that you could call the political theatre; and the amateur theatre. There were several of these amateur theatre clubs in Calcutta then. The Old Club was one such club, with several distinguished actors on its rolls. Thakurdas Mitra and Sadhan Sarkar were excellent actors. These clubs had quite a few good productions to their credit. I started acting for one of these amateur companies. Some of my fellow actors in this company are quite well known now—Tarunkumar, Debdulal Bandyopadhyay and Jogesh Dutta. But I did not like it there.

I thought of setting up a new group. I got together a band of young men and women, in their first or second year of college—and Gandharva came into being in 1956. Let me warn you that I am not so sure of my dates which I mix up only too often.

We did not have sufficient resources when we began Gandharva. It was not just a question of money. We did not know what we should be doing. There was no one to
advise us. Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt were of course there already—as part of a different theatre that we adored. Both had come to the parallel theatre through a stint in the IPTA. Dutt had started with plays in English. He came to the Bengali theatre, playing in Panu Pal’s *Bhanga Bandar* for IPTA, then he acted in Ritwik Ghatak’s *Dalil*, and produced Tagore’s *Bisarjan*. Both Dutt and Mitra had come out of IPTA, and created niches for themselves. They were the models we were looking up to.

Since I had just come out of the IPTA, the first play I chose to produce was *Dalil*, already produced by the IPTA. The production bore obvious influences drawn from the IPTA production. But our production proved to be more organized and more competent than the IPTA production. The IPTA had to work in a desultory fashion, under several pressures. We did not have those compulsions. We had Tapas Sen [lighting designer, b. 1924] to design our lights, Shakti Sen to do our make-up, and Prabir Majumdar to direct the music. The sets were designed and constructed by Robin Dutt. Prithwish Gangopadhyay, who assisted him, later designed sets for several of our productions—in very different styles.

Then we staged *Thana Thekey Aaschi* [lit. ‘We’re from the Police Station’, Ajit Gangopadhyay’s [commercial artist, stage designer, b. 1937] adaptation of J. B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls*, widely staged in Bengali, in several productions]—for the first time we moved out of the earlier mould. We had begun to change and develop. From that point on, we were set to progress. We were trying to introduce some changes—not like the professional theatre companies, nor in the manner in which the IPTA made their productions, nor perhaps even in the manner of Sombhu Mitra or Utpal Dutt, the usual models. Capacitywise, we were considerably weaker than them, but we strove to be
different and original. A few more years, and we had set up Nakshatra.

If someone asks me what I mean by being different, I would say that the professional theatre of the time, particularly in its use of painted scenery, illumination, and background music—all set at a high pitch—represented the model that we were questioning and challenging. The high pitched style was a sop to the mass audience, particularly for the benefit of the viewers who came from the small towns and villages. The acting too was at the same high pitch. There were times when as a matter of fact, there was a persistent effort to oversimplify, though I am not denigrating simplicity as such. In fact, simplicity is one of the requisites of good theatre. Maybe I am not being able to put my point across, but their kind of theatre was too narrowly confined to conventions, so that over a long span of time it ended up giving the impression that this was the only way a play could be produced. Later, when we spoke to people from the older theatre, they would consider unreal whatever went against their own notions or ideas. This traditional brand of theatre had set up through its practice norms for the real and the unreal!

Let me give you an instance. I was performing in the jatra then. We had a series of performances—a whole repertoire—somewhere in Assam. A District Engineer, quite an enlightened person, came to see me one morning. I asked him, ‘How did you like the play you saw last evening?’ He said, ‘It was a good performance. The gentleman, who played the zamindar, spoke his part well, but could not express it properly.’ I wondered how an actor could ‘speak’ his part well, and yet not express it ‘properly.’ I asked him, ‘Could you please explain?’ He said, ‘The zamindar he represents is one who brings in women every night and persecutes them in many ways.
He has his agents and truncheon-wielding musclemen to serve him. If that is the kind of man he is, how can he not drink, and just have an occasional pinch of chewing tobacco and betel leaf, when he has brought in a young woman and is trying to rape her—is this in character? So this gentleman was convinced that a tyrannizing zamindar had to be a heavy drinker, tottering on stage when trying to rape a woman—that is the kind of business essential to establish a zamindar as a tyrant. This is a notion or a pattern that, I suspect, he had picked up from the professional theatre—and it had got ingrained in him. The engineer in the small town refused to budge an inch from his set notion—planted in him by the theatric conventions. We dropped these conventions, refused to be guided by pre-determined patterns, and felt free to be guided by what we considered psychologically credible and convincing.

At the same time, we were wary of the IPTA model. In its urge to move into the masses, it had adopted so naturalistic an approach that in many cases it seemed as if they had stripped away the skin and left the glaring sores naked to the view. I often felt that reality need not be exposed and explained that transparently. What we would look for was not the whole of it, but only the truth. Sombhu Mitra and the others who were slowly coming to dominate the scene at the time were thinking on the same lines, and trying to do things differently. They often managed to give a distinctive quality to it, which became their characteristic mark. We may not have been able to reach that point, maybe because we were not as capable as they were. We had to stop at an intermediate point. So we were slightly different from them. As a result, whatever we accomplished was distinctively different from whatever was produced by LTG or Bohurupee or the professional

theatre or the IPTA. We may not have gone the whole hog, but we had taken a step in a different direction, that at least was obvious. We were not that clever at the time, nor so well informed. We could only try to make it as good as we could.

We started changing from Thana Thekey Aaschhi, where for example, we had a scene in a lounge, beautifully designed and decorated, with doors and windows, but no walls. Later on, there have been many sets with no walls, but this was the first time. In this beautifully decorated lounge, we had an aquarium, with its interior lit in a manner that made the fish move in a direction against that of the light. When the crisis came to a head, and the characters were all on edge, and Tinkari Haldar, the inspector, was hurling his questions like bolts, the lights were put to use and the fish were caught up in a frenzied rush, running away desperately. At the time it was quite an innovation, a different mode of telling. This was a kind of beginning in our theatre of going beyond representation, of using something else to convey something.

Take our Amrita Ateet [lit. 'The Deathless Past'], a historical play by Manmatha Roy [playwright (1899–1988) best known for his Karagar (1930), a mythological play allegorizing colonial repression and the resistance growing against it, leading to the colonial government banning it.] He had come to see one of our productions. At the end of it, he said, ‘People produce my published plays, and I do not normally write plays just like that. But I have liked your work, and I’ll write a play for you.’ The play he wrote for us was set in the period of the maatsya nyaya [lit. 'the law of the fish', i.e. of the big fish eating up the little, used to describe the state of utter anarchy and confusion in Bengal from AD 650 to 700], when Gopaldeva, no royal prince by birth, had been elected King of Bengal. I had seen any number of historical plays in the professional theatre. I knew the pattern they followed. But in the scenic design that Prithwish Gangopadhyay created for us, and particularly in the props he improvised, we went against the grain of that all too familiar pattern. We were stepping out of the familiar mould of the kind of theatre we were used to doing.

We did a play, Yaksha [by Atanu Sarbadhikari, 1962], in which, to suggest man’s confrontations with time and how time tended to slip away from us, we used a large clock as a prop; and turned the stage space into a tent made of thin golden strings, coming right up to the proscenium line. The string tent was meant to convey that this life of ours—this universe of ours—was no permanent habitation. The golden strings were the bonds of temptation that bound us precariously to this universe. Thus we were aiming to realize a yearning to reach out to another kind of theatre. What we were actually reaching after may not have become quite manifest in our productions. There was a grey area still about our objectives; but there was passion in the effort.

There were a few other significant projects that we initiated at the time. We held a festival of verse plays, that ran for six months. This was the first time in Calcutta that a whole series of verse plays were staged for an audience that bought tickets for the shows, and they were staged in the big theatres. They were all plays in verse, and new plays. For there were questions as to whether Tagore’s Bisarjan or

![The imaginary ship in Captain Hurrah with Tinu Bandopadhyay as the Captain; the scenic design and lighting evoking brilliantly rowing into eternity. Photograph courtesy Shyamal Ghosh.](image)
Kshirodeprasad BidyaBinode’s Naranarayan [taking a modern, psychological view of Karna, the Mahabharata character] could be called poetic plays. I particularly recall two of these new plays—Ek Ratrir Janya [‘For a night only’] by Krishna Dhar, and Neelkantha [‘The blue-throated one’] by Ram Basu. Some of the actors and actresses, who performed in these plays, later became widely known, e.g. Mamata Chattopadhyay, Dwiju Bhawal, Manoj Mitra, Debkumar Bhattacharya. But they faced problems when performing in these plays, and I had to answer a lot of questions. They were familiar with the traditional style of speaking blank verse, and the style of speaking prose on stage. But there was now the question of improvising a third style to speak modern poetry as dramatic dialogue. The questions that came up were: were the speeches meant to be spoken in a poetic singsong, with a lilt, or like prose? Since these were poetic plays, shouldn’t the movement embody poetry? The questions were not all decisively answered, but the actors and actresses were prepared to act in blind submission to the director. At the end of it all, the audience lapped it up, and the Press came up with long reviews.

In a play called Suryer Mato Samudra [‘A Sea like the Sun’], we had a procession crossing the stage on an upper level as long as the play ran, with events taking place at different levels over the rest of the stage below it. These were stylistic ‘expressions’ never seen in the professional theatre, the IPTA plays, or in Sombhu Mitra’s productions. We had received several beeja-mantras [lit. ‘seed-charms’, or ‘magical seeds’] from them, derived or learnt a lot of things from their examples, but we created differently, created different things. Then Nakshatra came into being. Samik has seen all the Nakshatra productions.

I wouldn’t say that I had planned to become a director. I became a director in the manner in which almost all directors here come to be directors. If by sheer good fortune, one happens to be a slightly better actor than the rest of the theatre group, and can teach them a trick or two, one is prodded to the position of the director, and has to go through the stress and strain of choosing what to do, what to accept, and what to reject, to make it convenient for himself and the group. I had to go through all of that. When I had acted for the first time, in Panu Pal’s Bichaar, directed by Mumtaz Ahmed Khan, I noted how everything was calculated and measured to the last detail. In my earlier involvement in amateur theatricals, I had never known how measured and precise one had to be in one’s movements, in taking a position, in speaking one’s lines, in adjusting to the lights, in delivering a speech and then moving to a particular point, all within a clearly defined span of time—all those compulsions. In the theatre I had known earlier, all that was expected of me was that I had to speak my ‘part’ well, and stand at the right spots as required. It did not matter if I moved a little away
from the point marked for me. It was in the IPTA that I learnt for the first time the scientific, almost mathematical, approach to both movement and speech on stage. I learnt how important it was to plan and chart everything scrupulously. There was no such planning in detail in the professional theatre, where the performance was left entirely to a band of expert actors and actresses. What stood out in these productions was individual performance.

Let me recall one such performance at the risk of being anecdotal. It was a performance of *Krishnakanter Will*, with Mahendra Gupta as Krishnakanta. On stage he acted a man under the spell of opium—seated in a daze, dozing. We are familiar with the actions and reactions of several kinds of drugs and spirits—alcohol, LSD, ganja, etc. But this was the first time we were watching the effect of opium—straight out of Bankimchandra’s account of Kamalakanta [protagonist of *Kamalkanter Daphtar*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s (1838–94) takeoff on De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, for a comic/satiric view of his times]—the eyes swimming, the inertia, one did not know whether the man was awake or asleep, a strange seated posture. An old man came in and placed the loaded bowl on the hubble bubble, and put the pipe to his hand. The pipe stayed as it came, as he held it in the middle, not close to the mouth of the pipe. It is that middle of the pipe that he raised to his mouth, and tried to puff. As he gave up in despair after a while, he said, ‘Who knows who’s prepared it? It gives off no smoke!’ Then he would turn the pipe round in his hand, get to its mouth, give a fresh puff, and then blow out smoke. But all through he had retained the same indifference—the first time, there had been no smoke, the second time there was, but in his stance, there was no sign of disappointment or surprise or thrill. He said something that we could not quite catch, an ‘ishhh’ sound went up from the audience, a kind of sign of disappointment at having missed the words! Then the old man on stage asked: ‘What did you say, Master?’ Usually, in such a situation, we would speak the entire sentence, at a low pitch, the pitch I’m using now, so that the audience gets the words all right, and then when the question comes, ‘What did you say, Master?’ the audience is content. It has heard the words, and enjoys the game, pretending that it has not heard! But Mahendra Gupta had used a voice that had given out only a hint of

*Lambakarna Pala: a musical with a difference in which a band of folk players have their drums, instruments and costumes devoured by a gluttonous goat. Photograph courtesy Shyamal Ghosh.*
what he had said, but not the whole of it; so that the audience and the old servant share the genuine suspense, when the latter asks: ‘What did you say, Master?’ It was something wonderful, a magical use of voice. Later on, I asked Mahendra Gupta, ‘How did you do it? How did you use that half note?’ He answered with a smile, ‘In our times it was individual acting that came before everything else. We had to work hard on ourselves, by ourselves, lest our competitors felled us. Yes, we imagined an enemy stalking us all the time, breathing down our necks from all directions, and we were on our feet all the time, looking for ways and means and strategies to beat the enemy, and training ourselves to the act. We improvised and learnt and trained, all by ourselves. You have teamwork now, it’s much better.’

In their time, they may not have had our discipline, our sense of total design, or sense of composition. But with their great acting skill they could compensate for all these virtues. In my initiation in the IPTA, I was preparing for a different mode of theatre altogether, where the entire stage needed to be divided up into several spaces, and then every space had to be defined and used. This is what I learnt for the first time in the IPTA. But Gupta and his contemporaries were part of another kind of theatre; and immersed in that theatre, they did not think along these lines ever. We were studying theatre abroad from texts available here, and trying to draw lessons for use in our theatre. And that is how we learnt and taught ourselves, step by step, bit by bit, learning from our mistakes and failures. I remember how we plodded and exhausted ourselves utterly over a composition that still left us dissatisfied. That is how we were preparing ourselves for...

[Samik Bandyopadhyay. . . maybe Mohit Chattopadhyay.]

Maybe. For when we came to Nakshatra, we had matured a little, had made some progress from our earlier learning entirely by trial and error. I knew Mohit as a poet of course, for a long time, and had once asked him to translate a play for us—Will Shakespeare: An Invention by Clemence Dane. He did a magnificent job of it. But we could not stage it, for various reasons. Then we received an original play by Mohit, for publication in Gandharva, the theatre periodical Gandharva published. I was entrusted at the time with the entire editorial responsibility of the special autumn festival issue of the periodical. Nripen Saha, the regular editor, was on leave at the time for his examinations. Hence I was in charge. The play—his first original play—we published in Gandharva. Kanthanalitey Surya ['The Sun in the Gullet'] was radically different—in its dialogue, in its ideas, in its structure—from the plays we were used to, at the time.

When we set up Nakshatra, our new group, we found a new play by Mohit—Mrityusangbad ['Deathnews']—which came to be the first of his plays to be staged. The problem that we faced was one of improvising a style that could accommodate the universe of the outsider hero, and the
everyday familiar space inhabited by Subodh, Bulu and the young men of the neighbourhood. It was a challenge for us, with the outsider conveying news and messages from a different universe, and a set of strange ideas that at one time threw Subodh into a state of utter helplessness: ‘All that he says I have known and cherished within myself all along. But my prose was never so good. So I could never put it across like that.’ We tried to design the play in a different manner, and we perhaps began to change in the process. It is difficult to say now whether the change would have come if we hadn’t had Mohit’s play at that point of time. Mohit’s plays faced bitter criticism at the time from many quarters, because they lay way beyond the kind of plays we had become used to. When we came to do his plays, we had to do a lot of fresh thinking. We could see at the heart of his plays a dream space, which we tried to suggest in a scenic design that went against the symmetrical—with all the objects distorted and made different in some way or other—whether it was the table or the aquarium, or whatever it was—so that through this defamiliarization we could reach that other space. There were situations too that we had never seen in our theatre. There was that scene, for example, where a young man went on sleeping, as a few other young men went on talking around him. When the young man woke up and asked, ‘Who’s there?’ the other young men went into what we would now call a ‘freeze’, struck still at the different poses, positions or gestures that they had adopted at that point of time. We did not know the word ‘freeze’ at that time. We called it ‘stop action’. Someone trying to make an escape gets stuck, as if caught it in a net. In a later scene, in a state of hallucination, a character leaves the stage, but comes back even before he has made his complete exit. When the ‘outsider,’ who says he has killed his father, leaves at the end, there are bubbles flying and floating all over the stage. A novelty then, all these have turned into clichés now.

In the same phase of our work, in yet another play by Mohit Chattopadhyay, Chandralokey Agnikanda ['Fire in the Moon', premiered 26 July 1967, Muktangan], a character comes in and tells us that he has lost his identity. There is yet another character who is now in the past and would like to return to life, but the administration would not let him; society would not take him back; and he is marked as a preta [ghost]. All that happens takes place on a rooftop terrace. It will be hard for me now to recall and reconstruct all the visual details, and no description can really convey the quality of the scene.

As a poet, Mohit had used a dialogue that was blatantly poetic, a poetic prose
unfamiliar in our theatre. When you go back to the text now, it may seem a little too poetic, but at the time he seemed to be engaged in improvising a new language that we strove to acquire or reach with Mohit. In Captain Hurrah [premiered 4 December 1970, Muktangan], Mohit showed change in a different direction—in political terms. In Captain Hurrah, a house turns into a ship, its walls dissolve. When the poet in Mohit offered us his ideas, we could latch on to the poetry around them, and through the poetry we found a new direction. I have always felt that we could discover a new theatre language, in our exploration of Mohit’s plays.

Later still, I have done other kinds of plays too. Nayan Kabir-er Pala by Nabhendu Sen had its poetic flavour, very different from Mohit’s, and we had to improvise a different style for it. We did an anganmancha [theatre in the round, in a closed, intimate room space, as defined and practised by Badal Sircar] version of it, with Badal Sircar performing with me in the two-actor piece, for a number of performances. We used a few props and a ‘scene’ in the anganmancha setting, and there was no problem in transferring the production from the proscenium to the freer space of the anganmancha. Once you are able to touch the core of a work, you face no problems. I had the same experience in the jatra—we went to places and audiences who might find our subjects or themes quite tough, but it was for us to make them easy and clear, and once we had been able to do it, we faced no barrier. In the jatra, we took Hamlet to the remotest villages, and there were people who came up to us at the end of a performance to compliment us in glowing terms. When producing a novel by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay [novelist, 1898–1971] or Titas Ekti Nadir Nam by Adwaita Mallabarman for the jatra, we carried with us experiences gathered in our urban theatre, and the jatra audiences were quite prepared to accept them. They did not turn us away. Productions need not flaunt labels pigeonholing themselves into aesthetic or stylistic categories to demand particular responses from the audience. I am convinced that if we can touch the right chord, nothing will stand in the way of appreciation by any audience.

In Lambakarna Pala ['Lambakarna’ (lit. ‘the long-eared one’), a story by Rajsekhar Bose (1880–1960), in a comic ‘musical’ version made by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), painter and writer], I tried to make use of an extremely rugged kind of poor man’s opera, with simple characters singing, moving, speaking, and entertaining the audience, on an uncluttered stage. I wonder why we cannot bring to our theatre the rich store of songs, dances and visuals that we possess. Even when we tap these resources, we bring them in, only in bits and pieces. Why don’t we bring them in, with
a feel for their totality? Why can’t we draw on painting, on classical music, on styles of dance, in their authentic richness, and build a new theatre form that will give us all a feeling that it is our own theatre? This is a possibility that has struck me again and again. But I have not been able to explore it.

[S. B. When you moved away from Mohit’s plays to Lambakarna, and then began rehearsing Sannyasir Tarabari [‘Sannyasis with Swords’, play by Utpal Dutt, originally for the jatra company, Loknatya, premiered 24 September 1972], were you driven by a conscious urge to reach out to a larger audience, and make a wider use of the resources of traditional theatre? For, after all, Mohit’s plays demand a certain level and kind of sensitivity from the audience, and the plays therefore have a limited appeal. You can do a lot of course within those confines, but you remain stuck within a self-imposed limit. As you moved out of Mohit’s domain, you could make freer use of songs, dances, visual objects and props, space and theatrical resources, and was it then that you realized the potentialities of weaving songs and images into a theatrical design? With Mohit’s plays and the way you treated them, you had given our theatre a lift into poetry. But then were you consciously trying to step further beyond, reaching out to a poetry created in theatric terms rather than a theatric presentation of poetry?]

You’re right. We had touched a different grain altogether with Mohit’s play. But I felt that I was falling into a pattern which I had to crack. That is what led me to Nayan Kabiber Pala, and then to something quite simple and straight like Brishti [lit. ‘Rain! Rain!’], Asit Dey’s adaptation of Richard Nash’s Rainmaker, with which I was trying to find out if I could break away and break through to somewhere else. Then I went back to Mohit for Captain Hurrah. But then I was bent on cracking the proscenium frame and its code.

That is what we did with Lambakarna Pala, where we dispensed with the drop curtain. We went beyond the original script to allow the actors in the play within the play to get down to the auditorium, singing a song, praying for alms, and raising money, to compensate for their loss; the goat they had acquired for their dinner having devoured their costumes, their musical instruments, and all. At the end of their bit among the audience, the adhikari [the leader of the jatra company] grabs the entire collection and makes
his escape. There was something down-to-earth and something theatrical in the way we played *Lambakarna Pala*, and we felt we were reaching out to a larger audience.

It was this search for a larger audience that prompted us to take up *Sannyasir Tarabari*, renamed *Deshabrati*, a text written for the jatra, a larger-than-life theatre; that we tried to handle more realistically. We were moving in a direction radically different from the one we had been pursuing. We were proving to ourselves that we had not got stuck in a groove. But we could not follow this new direction for long. I had to give up theatre for a while, and go over to the jatra.

It was in the Nakshatra phase that we made a conscious effort to extend the frontiers of our theatre. It was a short-lived effort, but an effort nonetheless, that went beyond the more obvious changes; seeking to change ourselves, and trying to affect and influence the relationships and contacts between artists/artistes in different disciplines in our society. Painters rarely come to see plays. Even when a painter associates himself with theatre, it is only as a set designer. He would not retain any standing relationship with theatre as such. A musician in the classical mode would not mind singing a song or two for a production, or compose or design the music for it, more or less as an outsider. But I would have liked to involve them in theatre more intimately. For only out of that kind of involvement could there develop a total theatre. It may all sound quite Utopian, but these thoughts persist, though I cannot do much about it.

I spent a long time—thirteen years at a stretch—in the jatra. I joined the jatra for money. I needed money at that point of time, and I wouldn’t do anything but theatre for money. The theatre that I had grown up with couldn’t provide me with the money. Jatra offered me a different universe altogether. All the actors I met there were hard-boiled, full fledged professionals. The question was not how good an actor or actress was; it was a question of making a living from theatre, something that we had never had in our theatre. Hence all the actors in the jatra, given their different levels of competence, were in a competitive situation, where every one of them knew that s/he had to learn and master the art of acting and act better than the others, to ensure a higher price the following season; if s/he was not good enough, there was all the likelihood that he/she would have to go without a contract and any
income whatsoever the next season. That was what prodded them to work hard to act well, to train themselves as best as they could.

I saw the same concern and urgency in a group of young men, in the deep interior of the district of Medinipur, where I had to go once on an assignment, directing a local jatra group. I found them bursting with a mad urge to learn. It was so different from what I find in our theatre most of the time, with the know-all attitude that our younger actors bring to their work.

When I joined the jatra, I did not have any experience of it. I had seen some jatra performances; that was all. And most of it had been in my childhood. I was not aware of the changes that the jatra had undergone since then, nor of what the jatra audiences demanded. I had my first real experience of the jatra in a place called Ektarpur—I remember the name still. I lived in the place—as a kind of Resident Director—teaching a band of actors, and a band of village people. That was my first jatra experience, and it was especially important because of the circumstances. There were ricefields all around the house in which we rehearsed, and a few hay-thatched shacks in the distance—a typical village, without electricity. For illumination we had only petromax lamps. Several of those that I trained were illiterate. But they had the commitment and skill to pick up dialogues in English just by hearing, with all the accents right, without knowing the meaning. When they performed on the stage, and sang Western pop the way they sing at the hotels, they were lapped up. In my long experience with urban actors in a non-professional, experimental mode, I had never come across such actors. But I thought, well, maybe Girishchandra Ghose had taught his young recruits in the same manner, and they must have responded in the manner in which my boys were responding.

Even the rehearsals were so differently conducted. In the evenings when we rehearsed, there would be a large crowd of villagers gathered all around us, watching the rehearsals,
150 to 250 of them, peeping through the windows, gaping through the open doorway. Denied any other mode of entertainment, they revelled in the rehearsals, and from their reactions I could read the impact of the scenes—as they laughed, and cried, for happiness and misery. At one of the regular rehearsals—not a dress rehearsal—I found one of the spectators bursting into loud weeping. The audience—or should I call it the potential audience?—enjoyed the slow making of the production, through mistakes and amendments. I remember an occasion when we were rehearsing a wedding scene, a ritual scene, for which I suggested a scheme, with some doubt: ‘I’m not entirely sure, but I think this will be the right way to do it.’ There was a professional priest among the audience at the rehearsal. He suggested a different mode as the right one. I said, ‘You may be right, for you actually conduct wedding ceremonies. So let’s do it your way.’ Once we had gone on to the other mode, the proprietor of the company called me aside to tell me, ‘Sir, the way you had conceived it is the right one. That’s what the audience told me. The new mode is specific to a particular region.’ In other words, the audience had exercised a choice. They had refused to accept the change. All these things stimulated me considerably. This was the first time I was coming to know my audience. It was an enormous affair that I had never really known. A jatra audience is like a human ocean, with 500 or 2000 of them joining in a laughter all together, sending you a sound vibration, an immediate exchange of action and reaction, right through your eyes and ears, at close proximity. In a theatre, the spectator can hide himself, and give forth only a superficial and cautiously redefined reaction, with an approval or an objection. But in the jatra it is all above board and open and direct. That is what overwhelms me. This is something that I have never found in theatre, and here was something that I found inspiring.

I tried to bring the classics of literature into the jatra, in a conscious initiative to break away from the prevailing trend. Every time I had to shift proprietors, moving from one

*Director Shyamal Ghosh and playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay in creative collaboration once again after a long gap in *Socrates*. Photograph courtesy Shyamal Ghosh.*
company in one season to another in the next, never finding time to establish my credentials with the company concerned and get my way. Still I could make and produce jatra plays out of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay’s *Naginkanyar Kahini*, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Devdas*, and Adwaita Mallabarman’s *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam*—or even Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. There would be a company that would give me the freedom to do a classic like this one season, and the next season I would be with a company who would insist on their usual stuff, and not let me have it my way. That is how it went. It was like dropping a pebble into a pool infested with water hyacinths. The water would make a clearing for a little while, and then get covered up again. After a while, I got tired of it. My passion for theatre persisted. It hurt when I thought of all that I had hoped to achieve in theatre, and had left undone. And I felt that the jatra was not my space. I had to go back to theatre. I left the jatra and came back to where I thought I belonged, only to find that I had turned into a Rip Van Winkle. Things had changed in our theatre so radically in the mean time that I found I did not have a place there.

[S. B. In the jatra, did you have the opportunity of acting with some of the masters of the form?]

I did act with several of the great veterans, particularly Purnendushekhar Bandopadhyay [b. 1911] and Bijan Mukhopadhyay [n.k.]. There were some stupid prejudices in the jatra, that made the lead actors dictate terms according to their whims, and insist all the time on their position in the performance. I directed the redoubtable Amiya Bose in a production of *Jhinder Bandi* [dramatization of novel by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay (1899–1970), a takeoff from *The Prisoner of Zenda*]. Amiya Bose, an old man then and the proprietor of the company, was acting the role of a friend of Mayurbahan. In a scene, the hero enters the stage, and all on stage stand up to pay him reverence. They take their seats once Mayurbahan is seated. Amiya-babu could not take it: ‘What kind of direction is this, Shyamal-babu? You keep me, Amiya Bose, standing, and let a junior actor take his seat?’ There was no way I could make him see the point that he was playing only a friend of Mayurbahan, who is a sort of cousin of the Raja, and it is only proper that the cousin would take his seat after the Raja. He went on grumbling, ‘How can it be? I’m a veteran, an old man, and treating me like this! What a thing to do!’ There was too much of this in the jatra.

I’ll give you yet another instance. Bijan Mukhopadhyay was acting a scene, in which he was brought, as a prisoner defeated in battle, to the Bheel [a tribal community in Rajasthan, particularly known for their martial prowess] Raja. The way the scene had been devised was that he would kneel before the Bheel Raja, and his headgear would be taken off on the Raja’s instructions. But he felt that that would affect the position he enjoyed in the jatra. After all, he was Bijan-babu! So he cooked up an excuse—‘I have a bad knee,’ he said, ‘I can’t kneel.’ So he would keep standing, in the scene. He entered, with the turban in his hand, and laid it on the stage. He would not let anyone take the turban off his head—that would be a personal affront! That is the way he felt.

But there was a different kind of experience with Purnendushekhar Bandopadhyay in *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam*, where we were using the eastern Bengal [at present Bangladesh] dialect. He said, ‘None of my ancestors for fourteen generations has spoken that dialect. Still I’ll try.’ He tried, and learnt it just like a child. At every point, he would ask me, ‘Shyamal-babu, how should it be? Is this pronunciation, this interpretation all right?’ At the end of it he had mastered the dialect to a point where even natural speakers of the dialect failed to detect the outsider. In his acting too, his handling of emotions had the same authenticity. There was this scene where in the setting of a terrible famine, Ramkeshab’s wife has gathered some rice by begging, boiled it, and tries to feed Kishore, her mad son. Purnendu-babu, playing Ramkeshab, pleads with his wife, ‘He’s mad. His senses are all warped. I’m not mad. I’ll die without food. Give me the rice. Don’t waste it
on him.’ The mother would not listen to him. She says, ‘You must’ve gone mad,’ and feeds her son, who spits it all out at once. And Purnendu-babu would leap at the spot where the rice fell, and lap it up, bit by bit. This was emotion in the raw, driven to an extreme, to the ultimate point of desperation, where a starving man, almost embodying the famine, would grab at the morsels spat out on the street—a piece of unforgettable, heart-rending acting. That year Purnendu-babu, the great actor, received his first ever award—for the year’s best actor in the jatra.

They were all major actors, powerful actors, with sharply different attitudes and approaches to acting. I did not have the privilege of acting with several even better known actors, for in the company in which I acted, I would have the ‘number one’ position, and all the rest in the company could come only after me. So I would not have a chance to act with the ‘number ones’ in the other companies.

[S. B. Moving from the theatre, particularly the experimental theatre that you were engaged in, to the jatra, did you have to change your acting radically, or make any special effort in that direction?]

No, I didn’t have to change myself seriously. I have found the demands on acting more or less the same in the indifferent media in which I have acted. Since it was an open stage in the jatra, and a much larger audience, one had to keep to a consistently high pitch. If I kept it to the base—[lowering his voice] like this—this is how it would sound. So all that one had to do was to keep it a little raised, not too high, just a little for we have microphones now on the jatra stage. The total acting drops if the pitch is not slightly raised. The injunction ‘go’ can be spoken trippingly for the film, raised slightly for the theatre, and raised a little more, with gesture added, for the jatra audience. Once you take care of that, you don’t have to alter your acting as such. The body, of course, has to be used a little differently. Conveyed through the body and the voice simultaneously, the experience received by the spectator at a considerable distance from the stage becomes significant. You must have noticed that all through a jatra performance, maybe because it is presented in an open space, there is a music playing, even if it is on a low key for most of the time. I have found the same continuous presence of music in Ebottombi’s [Harokcham ‘Sanakya’ Ebottombi, theatre director from Manipur] Shakuntala, with flute and a khol [typical percussion instrument associated with Vaishnava rituals and Manipuri dances, played by tapping on both ends] playing softly all along. All the actors carried something of the swaying rhythm of the Manipuri dance in their movements, the music supporting and sustaining it. The sustained music of the jatra serves the same purpose, growing loud at points to hold a sequence at a level of intensity.

I never felt the need to change my acting style as such. When I acted with Shantigopal, one of the stars of the jatra with a distinctive acting style, I acted in my own style, and Shantigopal in his. But the audience found me more acceptable. They were only too familiar with Shantigopal’s style, and maybe they liked my style, because it was different.

[S. B. The period that you spent in the jatra was marked by developments in its stagecraft, with greater use of props and devices and levels. Did you make use of these new elements in the jatra?]

Yes, of course, but maybe not so much with props. I tried to bring variations to the rostra in use in the jatra, and provided for four entrances for the actors, all through the audience. Originally, there had been only one entrance, the actor using a long ramp from the green room at a corner of the auditorium space, behind the audience. Later there were two entrances, to facilitate entry and exit. I introduced four entrances, the entry routes from the greenroom cordoned off with ropes. At the end of my production of Nildarpan [lit. ‘The Indigo Mirror,’ Deenabandhu Mitra’s (1830–73) play on British oppression on recalcitrant Indian indigo planters in the 1860s in Bengal], the farmers came from all the four directions to enact an act that I drew from Bijan Bhattacharya’s
Debigarjan [lit. ‘The Roar of the Mother Goddess,’ written and directed by Bijan Bhattacharyya for Calcutta Theatre, 1966]—with Rogue, the British tyrant being killed as a demon, and Torap, the angry Muslim peasant as the lion [in a typical Durga-killing-the-buffalo-demon scene], and the farmers converging on the scene, with their flaming torches and weapons. The chalachitra composition [the typical iconic construction/design of Durga triumphant] included the dead Kshetramoni, victim of Rogue’s lust, raised aloft. The convergence of the mob with drums and torches from the four corners of the auditorium space had a tremendous impact. In Titas Ekti Nadir Nam. I used four flights of stairs rising to the platform, using one to suggest the river below, with people stepping down to or coming up from the river. With the river thus registered, for the boat raid scene, the stage itself was converted to a boat, with men mounting the stage up the stairs going down to ‘the river,’ and two beams of light crisscrossing left to right and vice versa, illuminating with a third light the face of the newly married young woman at the centre, with her husband, in the darkness underscored by the moving beams of light; creating the illusion of the couple on a floating boat.

[S. B. What were the problems you faced when you came back from the jatra to theatre? Was it primarily one of finding really good actors?]

Right. When I came back, we had to start from scratch. We drew a few actors and actresses from the Drama Department at Rabindra Bharati University, and produced Socrates, which had its weaknesses in both acting and the script, which had not fleshed out the characters substantially. In its original form, it would have lasted for four hours and a half on stage. Once we started cutting it down to size, we began to lose a lot of the density of the original. There were organizational problems too, with the youngsters incapable of handling things efficiently. There was some propaganda circulating against us, doubts being voiced about our competence before the premiere. I remained too much of an outsider in the changed circumstances. Someone had even commented, ‘There’s been a break in his service!’ That was his objection to our claim to one of the regular production subsidies granted by the state government to non-professional, experimental theatre groups.

Too much had changed in the theatre conditions in the time that I had been out of theatre. It is difficult to catalogue all the changes, but they were serious changes. I could see that there were many still who did very good theatre, but to survive in the changed theatre scene, one had to have a greater grasp of the mechanism and strategies of performance than of the inner dynamics of the production itself. In our times, we were more stupid, and were driven most of the time by emotions and sentiments. But now I find all of them more pragmatic. Maybe it is not a question of good or bad, but one of coping with the conditions. Having been out of theatre for so long, I find the situation quite confusing. Still theatre has grown into such a habit with us, we cannot give it up. The urge comes back again and again. We are in the same state as those devotees who come to the chadak festival [celebrated in mid-April every year in Bengal, in honour of the god Shiva] and have their backs pierced with spears, the wounds taking six months to heal; and come back again the next year to go through the same pain. It’s like that with me.

The change is most perceptible in the actors and actresses. They have more avenues before them now. They have very little time to spare for theatre after they’ve spent most of it on other things. There are media where one can become a popular artiste without being much of an actor. With these easier choices open to them, they naturally do not care for theatre. Whereas earlier an actor or an actress would be exclusively attached and loyal to a single theatre group, with fewer competent actors and actresses available now, the same actor or actress, because s/he is somewhat better than the rest, would be acting with fine different groups. Neither the group nor the individual actor or actress who could develop with some raining and practice has the time to spare for rigorous actor
training. Thus there is little prospect for the development of a new generation of actors and actresses.

There was that one single occasion when I had to go against our usual convention and act for a single performance with Barun Dasgupta’s group [Chaturanga, founded 1955]. It was an invitation performance, and one of the actors had dropped out. If the show had been cancelled, it would have been a great loss for the group. That was an emergency situation. But now it has become the rule, only because we have so few actors and actresses. And most of the few that we have, those at a certain level of competence, are not prepared to take any responsibility. It becomes difficult to handle them for they have dates with five different groups, and they would have a plea at every rehearsal: ‘I won’t be able to come on that date,’ or ‘I can come in for only two hours and rehearse’ on another particular day. Our kind of theatre cannot pay enough to buy all their time, and they are not prepared to give more than the minimum without money. Things were different thirteen years ago.

[S. B. Could you please tell us something for the record about your role in and involvement with the theatre periodical Gandharva and Nakshatraprakash, your publishing project for theatre?]

There was a time when I was professionally employed in a publishing firm and its printing press. They published excellent books, expensive ones, widely appreciated ones—*Nabanna*. It was one of the two publishing houses known for high quality publishing—the other was Signet Press. I had dreamt for a long time of having a periodical of our own. When we began Gandharva with our production of *Dalil*, we were already thinking of a periodical. In fact the programme brochure we published for *Dalil* had the look of a journal. Tapas Sen, the lighting designer, was so impressed with it that he made a donation of twenty rupees to our fund. Twenty rupees was quite a large sum for those times. That’s how we started, and managed to publish a few issues of the periodical *Gandharva* at irregular intervals, every issue turning out to be better than the previous one. Then we found a friend, Ramanlal Maheswari, a Burabazar [the wholesale trading district of Calcutta, dominated by Marwaris, Gujaratis, and Sindhis, from northern and western India] businessman, who was always prepared to support something original or different. He joined us and provided us with some funds that enabled us to publish the journal regularly. Nripendra Saha was given the responsibility of running it. All the time that we were in theatre, we felt that we had to do something more for theatre, for the theatre culture, and not remain content with putting on grease paint and stomping about on the stage. There were lots of such things we would have loved to do, but couldn’t. Gandharva published Manoj Mitra’s second play, *Nilkanther Bish* [lit. ‘the poison of Nilkantha’] as a book. I had already staged his first play, *Moroger Daak* [lit. ‘The Cock-crow’]. We couldn’t publish any other book. But the periodical *Gandharva* became a more regular and people found it strikingly different from *Bohurupee*, the other theatre periodical, which had been a pioneer in the field. But *Bohurupee* was the organ of the group, Bohurupee, while we took all care to ensure that *Gandharva* served as an organ for theatre as a whole, not for the theatre group Gandharva. This change in character that we made a sign of *Gandharva* influenced *Bohurupee* at a later stage.

When I left Gandharva and started Nakshatra, I could not publish a journal. But on a personal initiative, I published four playscripts under the imprint Nakshatra-prakash—*Mrityusangbad* by Mohit Chattopadhyay, *Brishti Brishti* by Asit De, *Saudagarer Nauka* by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, and *Raja Oidipous*, Sombhu Mitra’s adaptation of Sophocles’ play. But the press folded up with two new scripts—*Aaj Basanta* and *Jeeyankanya*, both by Bijan Bhattacharya—in the pipeline. The taste and style that went into the making and designing of the books drew the appreciation of several people including Samik Bandyopadhyay who raised a substantial sum to support the publication of *Jeeyankanya*. The money was never repaid. The book never came out.
Then I drifted to other directions. I had brought to my publishing the same care and love that I brought to my work in theatre. I still feel the urge to start publishing again. I know I would enjoy it. There are more advanced facilities available now. With the offset and the DTP, we have left the letterpress far behind. We can do much better now.

Transcribed and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay.
Rudraprasad Sengupta

(b. 31 January 1935), actor-director, playwright, translator, leads Nandikar; has been visiting faculty at Rabindra Bharati University and the National School of Drama; major directorial works include Antigone, Khadir Gandi, Sankhapurer Sukanya, Shesh Sakshatkar, Gotraheen. Recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1980).
Samik Bandyopadhyay. You were actively pursuing politics as well as drama during your college years, so that both these interests overlapped during that period. If you could give us a feel of the period—what was going on—and your role in it politically and in terms of theatre, college theatricals and so on.

Rudraprasad Sengupta. My first introduction to theatre was as a child. I used to live a captive and isolated life in our house near Dumdum Airport, with my elder brother. The family stayed in Calcutta but my brother had moved out. He was a senior officer at Dumdum Airport and he had taken me along to serve as a bridge between the two families. I was terribly lonely as a child. My schooldays were not an important part of my childhood as I never used to go to school regularly. I used to come first in the exams (laughs) but was a stranger to the other students. Nobody knew who I was. I would play truant all the time and never went to school except on exam days. In those days there used to be far too much latitude regarding this kind of behaviour. Admission could be taken at any time: once in class six, then in class eight and then at the end of class nine. At the time when I was living at Dumdum, there was this theatre group affiliated to Monimela [children’s association sponsored by and associated with the Bengali daily, Ananda Bazar Patrika]. Even though I was very shy about girls (I never looked them in the eye) I used to admire a girl—one of their leading actresses—from a distance. They were doing a play and I drifted into it. I was playing a soldier and all I had to do was stand rooted to a spot. I was quite a dud, I realize in hindsight.

There was another play being put up in that neighbourhood. It used to be a very popular play in those days, performed in the commercial theatre and later in office clubs. I can’t remember the name. It had a character called Goopi Goonda, who was a very good man despite being a tough. I remember wearing a lungi and my sister-in-law drawing a moustache on me with a pencil. I used to roam around the house dressed like that, very excited. All children go through this phase, I suppose. It was followed by my
role in Jedid Jaglo Mukul, the play we did at Monimela where I had to stand still, and that was that.

In the next phase I was preoccupied with sports—cricket, football etc. and I was good enough to play at professional levels. The Birla Club used to pay me Rs 15 to play at the office-club level. I represented Anandabazar for free, though they paid my travel expenses. In the mean time I abandoned my studies, loafed around for a while, and finally returned to Manindra Chandra College. At this point in time a significant event took place in my life. It was in my second year that I saw Ajitesh [(1933-83), actor–director in theatre and cinema, playwright and translator; led the theatre group Nandikar from 1960 to the late 70s.] Everybody knew him as Ajit. Extremely lanky and tall, he tended to look skywards and had a peculiar gait. He was extremely shy and withdrawn and had an almost obsessive love for the theatre. I had to see him to realize that I couldn’t really call myself an actor, director or an artiste. I’ve seen two or three people like that, who came to embody theatre in its most creative, passionate, monastic form. I had nothing of his passion for and total commitment to that make-believe world of theatre. I was merely a worker. I have always believed that I am a ‘theatre worker’. We met each other when I was concentrating on being an absolute good-for-nothing. I had acquired a lot of clout in my neighbourhood. Although I had never laid a finger on anyone, I had the infamous reputation of being a bully.

[Anjum Katyal. Which year would this be?] 1956 . . . That was a time when the people who were doing theatre—i.e. those involved in the Communist Party—affected a certain superiority by reading Stalin etc. For example, there was Paramesh who stormed out of the examination hall when Stalin died, declaring that life was now meaningless, etc. They treated me with a combination of caution and disdain—I was sneered at because I hailed from ‘that neighbourhood’. Ajitesh was the only one, who used to advertise my singing talents. I could really sing very well, and there was no one who could offer any serious competition. I had a very good range. I would stand in a corner of the room, with Ajitesh in the diagonally opposite corner and then sing ‘Dharti kahe pukar ke’. I used to test him by frequently inquiring, ‘Can you hear me?’. This had nothing to do with theatre, you see, but he used to listen to that kind of stuff. I used to spend my summer vacations and other holidays at his father’s colliery.

During my Inter-days [the Intermediate examination, corresponding to the present day class XII examinations] I had been introduced to a passionate theatre personality, but not to theatre as such. When I joined Scottish Churches College, where Ajit was also a student, I gradually began to observe him closely. I used to idolize him so much that everything he did seemed charged with passion. He was like a man possessed! I would hear snippets of tales that wove round his activities. His involvement with the Patipukur Communists; our group had people like Pashupati Bose, an official Party member; they were over-enthusiastic, and incited him frequently to engage in Party activities. However, intellectually he identified with people like us.

Another friend of his was Niranjan, from Dhanbad. When the three of us began our adda sessions it would be something like this—Niranjan (Ajit’s childhood friend) would say anybody who possessed a voice like Hemanta Mukherjee’s [music composer and singer (1920-89)]should never be punished even if he had committed seven murders. Only the eighth time should he be brought to trial. Similarly, Ajit’s wife and I were there when he became a father and we heard him wonder aloud how such a beautiful child could be born to human parents. He had a certain naivete and simplicity about him. People like this were great fun to be with. The Communist Party forcibly involved him in the trade union movement which also turned out to be a bit of a joke. A retired man had started a small workshop with a lathe machine which he had obtained from the Railways, and four workers. The Party began to interfere and tried to set up a trade
union. They threatened to stage a demonstration. The gentleman said he too would
protest since they were depriving him of his livelihood. Ajit told me that since literature
on trade unions could not be found, they were made to read information on the Soviet
Five Year Plan—just to know something about the activities of the Party! This was all
good fun for us. But I was not involved with the Party at this point.

When I enrolled at Scottish [Churches College], my interest in Communism was
renewed and I returned to the Communist Party. My Sejda [third brother, in order of
seniority] was a Communist but he had been driven out of our home by my Borda [eldest
brother] who was a government employee.

[S. B. The middle brother being . . .]

Hariprasad Sengupta. He was practically thrown out of our home and had to take
shelter for the night with the coolies at Srimani market. He was taken away to work at
the Gun and Shell factory. There it was suddenly discovered that he was an educated
fellow studying for his B.Sc. and so he was made a supervisor or something of that sort.
After the stint at the factory, he wandered off somewhere else. Contradictions of this sort,
therefore, existed in my family. In those days, everyone at home would be discussing
Sejda’s activities as a member of the Communist Party. I would invariably be awakened
only to discover that the leg of a somnolent comrade was weighing me down. So I would
move out to the verandah to make room. This was the prevalent atmosphere of that
period although there was nothing theoretical or practical about it. It was more
emotional, and familial in nature.

But after joining the Scottish Churches College a slow and methodical change
occurred in my response to the Party. I had another influence, whom you know very well
in fact—Pratul Lahiri. My Sejda took me under his wing. We heard Suchitra Mitra sing
‘Sharthaka janama amar’ [lyric by Rabindranath Tagore, lit. ‘It’s fulfilment to be born
in this country’] at the South East Asian Youth Conference. We were present at the Muslim
Institute Hall when Suchitra Mitra, Hemanta Mukherjee and Debabrata Biswas sang
‘Sare jahan se acha’ [patriotic song by Muhammad Iqbal, set to a new tune in the 1940s
by Pandit Ravi Shankar, lit. ‘My Hindustan is superior to the whole world . . .’] together.
These moments are all special memories associated with the Party. The songs, the poetry,
the marvellously organized protest marches or the moving speeches at the Peace
Office—I may not have understood every word but they provided me with a tremendous
source of inspiration.

Since then, Pratul Lahiri and I have often discussed the Communist Party irrespective
of whether I still belonged to it. Even when I visited him in Delhi, all our serious
discussions would centre around politics. He was the first to tell me about theatre for
children and young adults. He asked me to do theatre with children because he pointed
out ‘Budora shob noshto hoye gechchey’ [the adults have all been corrupted]. The
influence of such people and others, such as Dipen Bandyopadhyay [Communist writer,
1933–79] kept me loyal to the political movement and this is how I got involved with the
Communist Party.

All my sporting instincts made me regard it as a challenge—for nine years the
Chhatra Federation hadn’t been able do anything significant. A group of anti-Communist
‘bhadraloks’ who distributed ice-creams were in power. With my typical North Calcutta
attitude of ‘Let’s stir up some trouble’, I set to work using all my cunning, all my
athleticism, all my energy and all my contacts. The first year I remained aloof. Gradually
my political ‘background’ came to be known, and the next year I entered the Party. By
the end of the year the Communists came into power and came to dominate the union.
Though I was still the college cricket captain I had grown intellectually. I had finished
reading all the books like Liu Shau Chi’s How to be a Good Communist, etc. I used to think
that if a person was unable to appreciate and enjoy all the facets of life—sports, music,
poetry, the company of those who are friends out of ‘sheer affection’—then that person
cannot be a Communist. ‘A Communist should be like a superman; one who should be able to negotiate with all situations, the combination of which, is life’[sic]. This idea appealed to me tremendously, at least in theory. There were students who had come from Nagaland, Mizoram, even Africa. I was the only one who wished them ‘good morning’, and who inquired ‘Are you going to the hostel? Have you had your tea?’ when we met in the evening. There was no ulterior motive—I had just noticed that nobody else ever spoke to them. The boys from Africa sat around by themselves. The Mizo boys and the Naga boys were also largely ignored. I was the cricket captain; I joined in Parthapratim [Chowdhury (1938–96, playwright, actor, theatre and film director, music director, one of the founders of Sundaram]’s discussions of literature; I also knew the goondas very well. Consequently, it was a real composite life.

Sushil Mukherjee [Senior Lecturer in English at Scottish Churches College] was very interested in theatre and encouraged the boys to participate. I got involved with his
production and played a bit part—that of a moneylender. Keya [Chakrabarty (1942–77), leading Nandikar actress, drowned while shooting for a film] and the others did the larger roles. I just had to walk around with an umbrella and a painted moustache. Basically, I thought it my job to do everything which makes a student.

During this period, I had a vague notion of what Ajitesh was trying to do. He was trying to get into the film world, and no one was willing to pay heed to this lad from Asansol, who was being ticked off by the smart blokes of Calcutta. He wasn’t even getting a foothold in the Communist Party. I knew he was feeling awfully down but he just kept on going and he managed to get some people around him, Ajoy, Chinu, Ashok to an extent, all these people, and also Asit. Then he managed to get some girls together as well. I used to keep track of what they used to do, and also the fact that they needed Keya a lot at that point of time for plays like *Char Adhyay, Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhati Charitra* and a lot of other plays, that required a girl like Keya. So I was the bridge, maybe I would go and watch a bit . . .

[S. B. Keya was at Scottish at the time?]

Keya was at Scottish, yes, in the fourth year. Keya used to really enjoy doing theatre. You see, these people were the real artistes. I would do more mundane things like writing letters. As I went on to the University, I slowly got sucked into politics. While I was studying in my fifth year, I was already President of the Students’ Federation. In my fifth year I was the President of the Calcutta University Postgraduate Humanities Students’ Union and in my sixth year, the General Secretary. So I was in the student’s wing of the Communist Party in a formal capacity as well. As a consequence, my playing cricket eventually came to an end. Theatre, in fact, started to come into my life, maybe as a substitute.

[S. B. Party membership?]

I had already taken membership while I was in college. The Students’ Federation had done a play called *Rupali Chand*. I was appalled. How could university students put up a play like that, I asked the other members. To set matters right we decided to stay up at night and choose a play. We started reading Gassner’s *Treasury of World Theatre* and stumbled upon *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It was a remarkably powerful play, theatrically. We had read Shakespeare and all that, but this was so different! Initially, Pratul and Bijaygopal gave me a hand and then I jumped on to the bandwagon with Parthapratim and Dipen Sengupta, among others. After carrying on we realized that this wasn’t working out because we weren’t capable enough. Eventually we decided on *Thana Thekey Aaschhi*, and I played the Inspector.

[S. B. Where did you have the show?]

In Mahajati Sadan. And I remember this very well because I was working very hard—after spurting out speeches all day, I would rush for rehearsals and then supervise the setting up of the stage. In the process, my role as the inspector was becoming quite anaemic. I remember telling myself, why the hell am I overdoing all this? Couldn’t this role have been done by somebody else? I had no conscious need for self-expression through theatre. As a student leader, it was my job to see that the play got done properly—ensuring that everyone came to rehearsals on time, learnt their parts—that was all. It was part of our training in the Communist Party—to be able to do anything meticulously.

You may recall how we would avoid getting the ‘Party’ types to speak at our meetings and try to get our best students to speak for us in the protest meetings we organized. We tried to get people like Ketaki Kushari, Sumit Sarkar to give speeches, we never really wanted any political bigwigs. It was our endeavour to bring together all students irrespective of their political affiliations. You might remember that we really tried to encourage the good, talented students, the ones who used to sing well, write
good poetry, draw well; we tried to give them their due. The students' front wasn't part of any of the basic fronts, it was a floating entity.

While all this was going on, towards the end of my M. A. Ajit initiated me into watching theatre and I had started watching at New Empire, Sombhu Mitra's *Raktakarabi* at Banga Sanskriti Sammelan. My exposure to theatre during this phase was more like a rendezvous with a lover. I had no ambition, no desire to be a theatre person or a theatre activist. I hope I have managed to convey this.

I was reading more plays during this phase, reading and re-reading Shakespeare, watching Shakespeare in English, watching Bengali theatre, watching Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, organizing campaigns for Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*. I was beginning to understand that maybe, I wasn't a person meant for daily politics. The way I had grown up, my general lack of discipline—didn't attend school, declared discollegiate once, and non-collegiate twice, the reason I could give my M. A. exam was because I was the general secretary, becoming a student of English without having any formal training in its language and literature—contributed to the informal structure in which I conducted my life. I have thought about this later and come to the conclusion that all social structures, be it a political party or a family unit, for example, exist only for the maximum freedom and fruition of an individual. But in all these organizations—from the family to the state, or political party, there lies an inherent mechanism to suppress the individual.

[S. B. A certain authoritarianism . . .]

Yes, it exists. This is a strange, interesting game. And maybe this is the point at which . . . when I was young, and the bright-eyed enthusiasm that the Communist Party inspired, throwing oneself into it. To me it was very easy (even without reading Marx), very easy to understand that this is the man operating the machine, that is the man getting money through his father or through the bank, and that the latter will always have an advantage over the other, will be able to sack him, and that an injustice exists in this arrangement. So at this point, when I saw . . . and you realize how vulnerable one is at that time, how very impressionable . . . these people during the day would make speeches denigrating Yankee culture and at night quickly pop in to see the night show. Why? For a little recreation, a little refreshment [Laughs]. And I would get into an argument, saying why should the common man be denied his share of refreshment!

I had a dispute about this once with Bibhash [Chakraborty], Kali Banerjee and others, when they were supporting the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools. And it turned out that both their children study in English medium schools! Kali explained, 'My daughter is not my daughter alone, she is also my wife's daughter.' I retorted, 'If you can't manage your own wife, why are you trying to manage the lives of the children of other people's wives? Who has given you the right to interfere with the lives of all these children?' It was a very confusing, uncomfortable period for me. In the Party office, I would see my comrades from the villages waiting for the bigwigs, who would slip out invariably for the night show and leave them stranded. And my love-life was going through a rough phase. My girlfriend and I, well, both of us were very wayward, whimsical kind of people.

I decided I can't stay with these people. I have to leave. I decided I'd go away to London for a Ph D. at London University. Then I thought, after all, if I am not at peace with myself, how can London save me? At this point of time (this is why Pratul was so important), Pratul understood what I was going through, and advised me against continuing my Party membership mechanically. As a result, my membership just lapsed at that point of time.

[S. B. When was this?]

1961. It isn’t that I didn’t fit in politically, I just did not fit in as a human being. Till today, I have always said in public that perhaps I was not fit enough to stay on. One
requires resilience, stamina etc., one has to make many compromises, and I wasn’t willing to. Consequently, I just slipped out of the Communist Party. And just at that point of time Ajitesh opened up a whole new world for me. Being the General Secretary of SF in Calcutta University, I had quite a large circle of friends and contacts, and when I joined Nandikar, I brought all of that to the group. Till 1963, I would be on the sidelines, acting as the manager and liaison person. I’ll give you an example. Supposing we had only Rs 30 on us, and were going to Asansol by train. I would quickly slip into the next compartment to avoid buying food, and save the money, for the group; or while returning after a show at Muktangan, I would plead with the conductor, ‘Look, there are twenty two of us, but we are only going to buy sixteen tickets. We are not cheats or anything, just short of money.’ He smiled and agreed. I would take them to the Coffee House, and ask Ajit to distribute the handbills of our plays, because that had a great impact. Slowly and steadily I was becoming more familiar with the kind of work that a theatre manager was expected to do, and with it I was developing a strong liking for theatre; and sharing with Ajitesh all those wonderful plays from the storehouse of world literature.

Once Ajitesh dropped in at my place late one evening. He was feeling rather morbid for some reason, and so was I that day. We sat in a room on the first floor of my house, and I asked him, ‘Do you want to listen to the script of a play I adapted? It was never staged, but you might find it useful.’ He hadn’t heard of Pirandello till then. It was quite late when I finished. But that day he said, ‘I won’t stay at your place today.’ Generally, whenever it was late, he would spend the night at my place. So nearly an hour after midnight he walked back to Patipukur. It was sometime later that we decided to do the play at Nandikar.

In the Students’ Federation in my University days, I was good at playing second fiddle. Willingly, happily I played the second fiddle to Pratul and others. That was because I didn’t have any personal ambition. Even in this sphere, I didn’t have problems giving Ajit the free rein, so that Nandikar would be run successfully in his way—that was my inspiration. In those days I used to feel that as I couldn’t be a good Communist, there was nothing else to live for. And I saw these people working so hard, and I wondered whether I could help them with my intelligence, with my hard work, and I think that I . . .

[S. B. . . . played that role?]
Yes, played that role, and it has been overestimated quite often. I remember Subrata-da saying once that Rudra was the main person, which was not true. Fortunately I was a good complement to Ajit and we had a kind of mutual respect for each other. So that’s how I got into Nandikar and theatre. And till today, I have more or less tried to serve theatre instead of being the centre of attention myself.

[S. B. Coming specifically to your role: when Six Characters [in Search of an Author] was being done . . . the script was your discovery and when Nandikar decided to do the play, you also reworked the script (which you had told me in another context)—that you worked with it afresh, etc. Then you went on to make the script and it was done. But now, you were also gradually getting involved in acting. You weren’t doing important roles as such, but had started off, nevertheless.]

My primary responsibility was to manage the finances of the group, and take decisions when Ajit couldn’t. There were some hack Communists in Nandikar; they just could not be called
Communists in any sense of the word. They had just jumped onto the bandwagon. Nandikar came into existence as a branch of the IPTA. The problem was, IPTA hadn’t settled their accounts and we inherited a huge tax load. Whatever we could accumulate from push sales and the like, used to be spent on taxes. Since the IPTA hadn’t paid their taxes, it was assumed we hadn’t paid our taxes. There was no point in keeping ourselves hitched to a dead horse, I felt. I was most vocal and instrumental in dissociating Nandikar from IPTA.

Then came the responsibility of framing a new constitution couched in the right language. I played a major role in that. I used to play an important part in policy decisions—deciding which show we would do, raising the price of a show by ten rupees—in all these petty areas, which I can’t even explain to outsiders, I was Nandikar’s . . . I wouldn’t exactly say theoretician but I provided the theoretical input on the one hand, and acted as their liaison person with the external world, doing their hackwork for them, arguing with them at the meetings—being to Ajit the kind of friend who would never compromise, which meant if I didn’t agree, I didn’t agree and that was very important to him. That’s why after he left the group he said, off the record, that the person who understands theatre is Rudra.

Satyen used to come in at the last minute and all of us would be quite tense till he actually arrived. This was a regular happening. The soft spoken Satyen Mitra used to play the part of the elder son in the play. One day there was a crisis. The show was about to start in five minutes and there was no sign of Satyen. Ajit looked at me. I understood. As I told you earlier, we had an excellent understanding, somewhat like Saurav’s and Rahul Dravid’s [cricketers]—just an exchange of looks, and I knew what I had to do. I took off my trousers and wore Satyen’s costume and was ready. There was just one minute for the show to start, and I spotted Satyen. Ajit was visibly embarrassed. I said, ‘He’s the actor, isn’t he? I’m just the standby, and why should I act when the actor is here?’ So I took off the costume once again, and wore my own. Once, we had a show in Chittaranjan. We had stayed up the whole night, putting up the sets. Satyen had missed the train and we had no idea.
whether he would turn up. So I slept a little bit in the afternoon, and was all geared up to play the part in the evening. Then I turned and found him fast asleep by my side! He had probably arrived by the three o’clock train.

But as things kept going on this way, at one point, it was decided that I would play the drunk man in *Will Shakespeare: An Invention*. I was very flexible and could put a helping hand to nearly everything. Ajoy had gone off to act in Tapan Sinha’s film, and in two days’ time we had to prepare for a double show in Durgapur. Now, Chinu was a virtuoso actor, but he was very indisciplined. I had to fix his tie every day for the two hundred shows of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Every day I threatened him, telling him that he had to learn how to do it. Why should he be dependent on others? We were faced with a problem. The show was exactly two days later. Ajoy was not going to act Ajit would do his role. Who was going to play the role of the other brother? Ajit called Chinu and me to try out the role. It was embarrassing for Ajit, because I was his friend, and here he was testing me. He asked Chinu to say his lines from memory. But Chinu made it easier for him. All of us knew that he wouldn’t be able to learn the part in two days. So I ended up doing it.

[S. B. That was virtually your first big role.]

Yes, virtually. But in spite of that big role, as soon as Ajoy came back I said, Ajit, you go back to your role and Ajoy goes back to his, and I got back to doing my job as a stage manager. A stage manager is not a director. He is rather the odd job man, fixing things—that was my job. So that way the ensemble spirit was always intact. And from this point, I started acting out of necessity. I acted in plays because I was needed. And it was the sheer need of the organization that made me a director. 1971–73 was a turbulent time—the Naxalbari movement was on, people in one party were killing their colleagues in another party and in the midst of all this we hired Rangana in 1970.

One day Ajit, Keya, and Asit came to the group and announced—there is this new theatre house and they’ve told us we can use it on a daily basis for as long as we like and they hadn’t even given it to Bohurupee. Who else would have been more gullible than Nandikar? Bohurupee had naturally asked for something in writing from the hall authorities. It was interesting that Ajit, Asit and Keya had discussed all this, keeping me absolutely in the dark. They knew that I would object. And I objected strongly. The whole group was elated—‘Our own theatre house! Think of that!’ they said, their eyes filled with wonder. By then we had already started giving out something called ‘local conveyance’ to all the members of the group for each show. Ajit used to get twenty-five rupees, I used to get nineteen, and the lowest was eight.

I objected because with the kind of theatre that we did, it was impossible to work out some kind of a viable solution which would take care of filling up the eight hundred and fifty seater auditorium four days a week. I knew that our kind of theatre could never draw large audiences. Utpal Dutt couldn’t make it work. We had seen it with our own eyes. Plays like *Teer* and *Manusher Adhikarey* did not turn out to be great hits. I tried explaining that we would have to compete with plays featuring Miss Shefali [cabaret artiste] as their prime draw, just two houses away from Rangana. Rashbehari Sarkar was spending a fortune on advertisements, highlighting the cabaret ingredient in his plays. Could we ever match their strength? Group members of Nandikar just refused to understand my point.

[S. B. There was nobody else in your organization who . . .]

No one. Keya was thinking of leaving her job. Everybody was thinking of doing more of theatre than anything else. I’ll give you an instance later, which will make this clearer. Coming back to what I was saying, everybody just kept mum, and so did Ajitesh and Keya and Asit. But there was a basic democracy in our group and unless the major decision makers agreed on something common, we wouldn’t impose anything on the group, at least then. Like Ajitesh wanted to do *Truck and Judy* many times, but Keya
didn’t want to because she didn’t like the portrayal of the woman in the play. I said, ‘I bow down to the passion and emotion of the group. I’m a disciplined soldier of the group and will continue to do all my duties as a member of the group, but I still feel we took the wrong decision.’

Hiring Rangana was a wrong move on our part, but each of us learnt something from it. It was part of the maturing process, I guess. The agony that I suffered every day of the performance at Rangana is indescribable. The play—Hey Samaj Uttal Samaj—was not a great play, but it addressed the political questions that were bothering us during the time. I used to be on stage for the major part of the performance time. My position would be downstage, to the stage right, with a mike in hand. Sometimes there would be only forty people in the auditorium, sometimes sixty, sometimes twenty-eight people. People didn’t go out of their homes after sundown in those days and the lanes had become a paradise for killing. you felt someone was pointing a pipe gun at you. It was a horrible feeling.

Ajitesh left for Bombay for a role in Samjhauta during this phase. I tried to dissuade him. ‘What do you hope to gain from this role?’ I asked him. ‘And that too for a director like Ajoy Biswas? It would have been different if it had been someone like Hrishikesh Mukherjee.’ He replied, ‘I’ll be famous and more people will come to my plays.’ I argued with him, ‘But the wrong kind of people will come to your plays. They will come to see the villain of a particular Hindi movie on stage and when you’ll give them Brecht, they’ll turn away disgusted, never to return again.’ I remember both of us talking endlessly about this even between our entries in the play (we used to share the same green room). I remember telling him, ‘Ajit, if you take a look at history, you will realize many people have put up with greater hardships than you or me.’ ‘But I desperately want to do more theatre,’ he answered. I couldn’t answer him. I knew there was an inherent difference in the two of us. My concerns were more cerebral...

[S. B. . .and his, passionately emotional, at times even sentimental.]

Absolutely. I tell you, Samik, the youngsters in my group are an even more crisis-ridden lot. They are passionately committed. Buddhadeb Dasgupta once approached me, offering a role for Gautam Haldar, a particularly talented young man in our group. I asked Gautam to go and have a word with him, saying my permission wasn’t needed. Gautam went and asked Buddhadeb ‘Can you give me an idea of my approximate screen time?’ And that was the end of it.

If you go to our group on any of the days when there is no performance, you’ll find these youngsters concentrating on rehearsals, doing a voice training exercise or trying out a particular body movement. Currently they are trying out suitable body movements with a keertan.

Our failing was that we hadn’t allowed them the full journey, we had protected their weaknesses to a certain extent. It was with their leadership that in 1979 when we were doing Mudrarakshas for Sombhu-da, some of them got together and split into factions. I had inducted so many people into the group that Ajitesh told a few people, ‘I went berserk trying to manage thirty people in my group. How can Rudra control seventy?’ [Laughs] It was a queer tendency to do a grand larger-than-life theatre from a reactive point of view.

We nearly dissipated ourselves in trying to be democratic. We had eighty thousand rupees in our coffers from Football alone; and the balance came down to eight hundred rupees. For the first time in my life I accepted the offer to go abroad as part of the cultural mission—an offer that I had declined very strongly all along. Some of our group members, who are still with me, wanted to leave us during this phase. I told them, look, I’ve tolerated all your whims and fancies for all these months. I’ll give you an example. When I was trying to explain a particular Chekhov character and asking the character not to be so verbose, he had the feeling that I was trying to cut down his part. I had put
up with things like these. Some of my friends suggested that I should form a separate group, but I felt, why should I not fight it out when we had fallen on bad days. I must say my resilience yielded fairly good results. I made a deal with some of the seniors in the group—I was under you when you were king; now why won’t you remain with the group when I am Prime Minister? Why don’t you give me a try? I became more mature in the later years after I had received a couple of blows. I learnt how to handle such situations. I understood that history has its own way of sorting out the debits and credits, and if the balance sheet hasn’t been sorted out right at the onset, one will have to do a settling of accounts sometime in life.

There are still some basic concepts/thoughts that bother me about theatre these days. Shall I continue, or take a break for two minutes?

[S. B. Let us come a little away from the experience of the seventies. In the eighties, you start with a new group, with a number of youngsters enlivening the group with their zest, coming into a certain kind of leadership even. If you could dwell a little on how you were nurturing this group through the eighties, and also mention a few productions during this period, because these names will reach out to a wide readership. In this context, if you also discuss the wider perspective of theatre vis à vis the strange mix of short-sightedness and idealism of theatre in Bengal. If you could start with the group, the rebuilding of the group, the younger generation and then the rest.]

In the eighties I sincerely felt that I could do something really big for theatre. The failure of Bangla Natmancha Pratistha Samiti—no government (Communist or Congress) gave a piece of land for the project to take shape. With Sombhu Mitra were people like Uday Shankar, Ravi Shankar, Satyajit Ray, Khaled Chowdhury, Bijan Bhattacharya, Mrinal Sen. They all wanted a cultural complex to evolve around theatre, with Sombhu-da as the director. The project did not take shape and we donated a few lakh of rupees towards cancer research. But I still had a feeling that we can do something collective about theatre and this prompted me to start the Calcutta Repertory
Theatre project. And I made the same mistake once more. Theatre is one of the most social concrete human actions. Theatre is. It cannot grow out of a private sensibility in the manner a poem or a work of fiction can grow. For theatre is a collective medium and we offer it to a collective. I was wondering whether we could go in for professionalism in this endeavour. I managed to collect some funds from the Government of India, contacted Fritz Bennewitz, Sombhu Mitra agreed to act. But the six of us who got together weren’t really birds of a feather, or really travelling in the same boat. There was a mismatch of wavelengths. I realized that later. Secondly, all collectives were failing in India anyway. We are in an age when those political collectives which used to inspire us once upon a time are also failing. I should have realized that. There was no attachment, no bonding, no idealism. We are living in a queer age. If we could (as Lenin said) identify the social gravitational pull, identify the areas of strength, the negative and the positive vibes, we would be able to levitate. I failed to understand it, and as a result our internal and external equations misfired. It could really have been an event. The kind of historical awareness, intelligence, humility, renunciation and even a certain authoritarianism that is required to make such a project successful was lacking and hence it didn’t work out. And then I said to myself, I’ve had enough of trying to do something in the collective mode.

[S. B. I’ll interrupt you for a moment. This is something you have also mentioned in other interviews: basically the directors . . . ]

. . . and Mohit [Chattopadhyay].

[S. B. . . . came into Calcutta Repertory Theatre. Preparation took nearly a year, there was an involvement, with all of you interacting, working hard. The groups suffered in the process. Did it also happen in the case of Nandikar?]

I don’t consider that suffering. You’ve raised a very important point. Even in the case of Natmancha Pratistha Samiti, where Ajitesh was the Vice-President and I was the Joint Secretary, there was a feeling of being in the organization but not of the organization. Even when it came to selling tickets for a Natmancha Pratistha Samiti performance, some of the boys in our group refused to sell tickets, because they didn’t feel it was their group at all. But I told them this was part of the group’s work and they would have to do it. How many groups were groups in the way that Nandikar was? Some groups (I’m not criticizing anybody) even had lifelong Presidents with the power to nominate the successor. After the experience of Natmancha Pratistha Samiti and CRT, I realized small is beautiful and I went back to work with my own little group. I’m telling you all this in hindsight, after a post-facto analysis. Perhaps the Communist Party had taught me how to analyse and think. Perhaps that is why I could identify the vibrations. My antennae were alert all the time. Perhaps that’s why I did Antigone in 1974/75. In 1977 when I was reading out Football to a few of my friends like Amalendu and Chitta-da, they wouldn’t agree with me that such awful fanaticism can build up over a game of football. But in a year all over Calcutta the small nondescript flags were replaced by larger, flashier ones. Reality took over in a big way. In fact I was like a prophet in a way, almost in the way that it is handled in the film If, in which the incidents in Berkeley and Sorbonne start happening soon after Lindsay Anderson speaks out. This wasn’t done consciously. It was almost intuitive . . .

[S. B. . . . and then you discover so many new dimensions in doing a play . . . ]

Yes, and besides, I was a student of history and those years in the Communist Party had given me a different sense of history. We didn’t need any training to do theatre because we had a different kind of grooming and we had learnt a lot. But this is a different age and most middle-class families have moved out into the suburbs. How can an unemployed boy afford to come to Calcutta every day from Bhadreswar or Barasat to do theatre in Calcutta? Fares have gone up drastically in these few years. For how long
will he be able to manage? Observing the situation around me, I realized the need for institutionalized training. And I started working with a few groups.

Then in 1984, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Nandikar, Subrata suggested that rather than do theatre ourselves, we should invite other groups to perform. This was regarded as Nandikar’s conspiracy to bring in theatre groups from outside Bengal and prove how good they were. My idea was primarily to initiate a comparing of notes among the theatre fraternity. After some time, of course, our real intention became quite apparent and people welcomed it. That was how the Nandikar Theatre Festival came into being. Bibhash has admitted that B. Jayashree’s [actress-director from Karnataka] theatre inspired him to plan a production like *Madhab Malanchi Kainya*. This sharing is important. How many times does one get to see Dr Lagoo for example?

The pursuit of theatre, which Somibhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, and later on Ajitesh tried in their own ways, was in a totally different socio-cultural context, when the electronic open sky culture hadn’t impinged on the human society; theatre had a wider reach. It was basically a take off from the youth cultural movement with people like Khaled Chowdhury, Tapas Sen, Somibhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Sova Sen, Ajitesh coming into the limelight and fame by the time they were in their thirties. And with them were scores of not so famous people like us. Theatre was a youth cultural movement. The situation has altered considerably during recent times with the elderly ruling the roost. You could hardly see the younger crop in the vicinity and they were increasingly becoming apolitical and atheatrical. Career building was the order of the day and society had rendered most good students apolitical.

[S. B. Even the audience had become an older audience, for example, your audience in Rangana and your audience later on.]

I was thinking seriously about how to tackle the situation. The theatre festival was one, and the other was the various training programmes I tried to organize. Gramsci had said that the trinity of feeling, commitment and knowledge can work towards the completeness of the individual. We Bengalis have tremendous feeling and commitment, but what we lack at times is knowledge. Theatre has its own craftsmanship. It has to make its own connections with the world. One has to make one’s entry into theatre more viable, more concrete. I realized that bringing the youth closer to theatre would be one of the responsibilities and this I planned to achieve through specific theatre training programmes. From 1986 onwards, I started advertising in the newspapers and started recruiting boys for training. Gautam [Haldar] and Debshankar [Haldar] came into Nandikar during this period. I sincerely felt that doing theatre passively wouldn’t help anybody. It was not an age where I would do my kind of theatre, and society would sort out its problems on its own, and respond to my theatre simultaneously. This was not possible.

I’ll digress into a very interesting little anecdote. *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance* and a few other plays were being performed in Paris. A lady had sponsored the tour. There was absolutely no draw for *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance*. Exasperated, the lady announced in a little insertion in the papers that the last show would be a free show and seating on a first come first served basis. That show turned out to be a full house and there was roaring applause at the end of the performance. The lady appeared on the stage after the show and asked the audience, ‘Did you like the play?’ ‘Yes, very much,’ came the reply from the auditorium. ‘How many among you couldn’t afford to buy tickets for the performance?’ she asked. Just one hand went up. ‘Why didn’t you come to the performance if you liked the play?’ she asked again. ‘Because of the press,’ came the answer. ‘Do you believe in the press?’ she asked. There was a unanimous ‘no’.

Now there is a tremendously complex game going on here. The class of people who run the mind-construction industry, or their agents, ensure that people will read the newspaper every morning, or watch the television, and then at the end of the day shower
abuses on the media. With this comes an insurance: Nandikar has been criticized, we won’t go to their play; or alternately, Nandikar is being praised so much, we must go to their play. It is unfortunate that a country as culturally and spiritually (not in the religious sense, you understand) rich as India should have to ape other cultures. Active participation of the society is needed in the fields of sports, culture, health and education. Ironically, these are the areas in which there has been maximum commodification, where the role of the society should have ideally been promotional. It is the need of the present times that theatre assumes the dimension of a youth cultural movement—not a mere masquerade on the stage with painted faces—the way it had started. There are only two people in theatre today—Bibhash and Arun—whom I call up at night and hurl abuses at, saying, ‘Why the hell are you churning out one play a year? Why can’t you do something really good once in three years so that the kids can sit up and take notice?’ I can do this because I vibe well with them.

I have started training up kids right from the school level and I have learnt so much from them. Nowadays kids have to go to an English-medium school in order to learn English. You and I didn’t have to go to an English medium school to be fluent in English. It is very painful to observe how the upwardly mobile would ape western culture and the lower middle class would ape the upwardly mobile and so on. Kids nowadays are being bullied by their parents into a straitjacket, with an isolationist/exclusivist mindset. They are taught to be selfish. The first thing they do after they pass out with an MBA degree, is abandon their parents. They go off elsewhere with a transfer.

I have gone into the interiors of Arambagh, to a place called Bander, and have worked with kids who really need the training. I decided I wouldn’t waste my input on training in the
city, which had already reached a saturation point. I had a
terrible experience the few times I tried to do anything in the
city. I was astounded to find how vocal those little dark boys
in the villages had become on the fourth day of the training
session. They would even put together dialogue. Kids had
written entire scripts around a theme. They were small little
children.

People need to know what tremendous potential these
little children have. I haven’t been able to spread the word
around. If you can do this through your journal, it will serve
a greater good. These kids have put together such exquisitely
beautiful plays—plays that kids have written for themselves.
It would have been wonderful if we could publish these
plays in Hindi and English; translations to make them
accessible to children all over India. This is because
Rabindranath has become dated and where are the
playwrights writing plays for children? There are hardly any.
So ultimately what do we end up doing? We take up one of
those outdated plays, or if that doesn’t work, Phantom, or
Snow White, with the result that kids hardly ever get
involved in what they are doing. I have worked with some of
the posh schools where kids hardly ever come to watch their
schoolmates rehearse; and there are schools in villages where
the entire school turns up in full strength to watch the goings
on, and to cheer their peers. Electronic culture creates an
alternative reality and plugs the consciousness of the children
into that reality where there is no dandruff, no malodorous
person, where everything is spotlessly clean. This is an
invitation to a retreat from reality, into the world of a non-
negotiated reality. After a hard day’s work, what could be
more blissful? And what tremendous power it has! This
status quo-ist anti-realist position cultivated and
disseminated by all the moneybags in the world is something
that throttles the sensibility of children. That is what bothers
me most. The first thing I tell the kids is, there is no
assessment, no marks here. So be yourself, enjoy yourself,
don’t be afraid of speaking out or acting out. We adults have
to guard against something while dealing with kids. You
must never tell them ‘You’re not up to the mark.’ What are
the parameters of being ‘up to the mark’, I ask you? This is
something I hate. And I’ve made this absolutely clear to
everybody who works with me. The kids have to develop an
awareness about their bodies, know what the correct posture
is. The basic principle in training is that they should feel
theatre offers them a centre—metaphorically and literally.
The kids don’t understand the theoretical intricacies; but they
are able to find a centre for themselves. I try to give them a
little joy. These little children, living in a society where they
feel peripheral and orphaned, fall into the trap of a culture of
silence. Theatre gives them a voice, brings them out of the
periphery. First it is the periphery of the society and the
parents who dominate them, later on it is the glitzy multi-
national they work for, with a lap-top thrown in as part of the
perks. Do they realize the politics of buying up time? Theatre teaches them that life is a multi-centred experience.

I’m telling you all this in great detail, because I want all this to reach the distant parts of the country and the world. I’ll share with you some of my experiences in Naihati. Jute mills have closed down in Naihati and most schoolchildren have no money to buy either books or school uniforms, because their parents are out of work. Most of them sell candy on the local trains for sustenance. There was an incident in Naihati, in Prafulla Sen Girls’ School (where we used to go frequently) where the Geography teacher wouldn’t allow any student to enter her class without a textbook. Two little sisters had saved up some money and one was trying to convince their mother that one needed a uniform because it was badly torn and couldn’t be mended and the other trying to convince her that a book was more important, because her teacher wouldn’t allow her to enter class. We took off from the story of these two little girls and framed a play round it. It was childlike in its simplicity, with incidents like these framing the main narrative. I didn’t have to borrow from the folk medium. My urban folk was good enough
for it. We performed to a full house. The Chairman of Bhatpara Municipality was also present. 'Won't you sit up and take notice?'—the children acted, sang and danced and won the hearts of all those who were present there. Theatre can do this little bit. They became vital to their society, to their parents. We went to Konnagar to see a play by the children of Debishwari Uttarpara School. After their Madhyamik [Secondary] exams were over, sixteen of the thirty-one children got together to do a play for a charity show. It was such a wonderful, neat little performance! They were working with a certain conviction, a determined spirit. It was so heartening! We should guard against being bossy and domineering when we are working with children. It is a principle of participatory theatre. No ‘teaching’ is involved. At this age I had to dance for forty five minutes with children, because the whole principle is do things with them! These kids perch on my shoulder, tug at my beard playfully. All this is part of the enjoyment. They become aware of a certain multicientredness and also become aware that the world is changeable. Theatre can teach you that. This is very important to me. One needs money to manage such a large project and this is where the Ford Foundation grant came in handy.

I had to be like them to be one of them. I had to dance to the tune of popular Hindi film songs to break the ice and let them know I was not the boss. I was one of them. Once I had their attention, I diverted into fairy tales, and then into situational stories around which they could improvise. At one point I realized that it was becoming something of a white man’s burden. We had to guard against this. We couldn’t let even the tiniest bit of smug complacency intrude into our behaviour. That would be dangerous. We decided to give it a break. I don’t know of any other group in India who work with so many different groups of people. We have, for example, worked with children of sex workers. Working with each of them has its own distinct advantages and cultural/social/theatrical relevance. My pupils, in their turn, learn from this experience, and mature with every new experience. The border lines are very flimsy. You never know when you become more concentrated on trying to locate funds and you suddenly find all your energies channelized into that one goal. That is a potential danger.

We at Nandikar are thinking/experimenting a lot about the ways of doing theatre. We are rehearsing Dostoyevsky’s Gentle Spirit. Gautam [Haldar] is performing it. But all of us are involved in the production. Sons of bhadraloks are not coming into theatre in Calcutta. Youngsters from really poor families join theatre. I try to explain to them that it is essential that they know English—not to rattle off a few smart phrases, but for a lot of essential reading that is denied to them because of the language barrier. Now it is very difficult to try and ‘teach’ them English in a classroom situation, because they would be bored in no time. So I tried to do an English play with them. I was also toying with the idea of doing a play in Hindi with them. Projects have an inherent danger in them. They give rise to pettiness within the group, with some people suffering from a false sense of superiority, with the resultant
tensions and unpleasantness. It becomes a problematic situation. I am trying to train up two Nandikar boys in computers, so that most of the publication material, which had to be done in other DTP houses, can now be done inhouse. This saves us a lot of money. I am also training in computers myself, so that I can type out and design the basic programme notes on my own.

We at Nandikar are blessed in having a tremendously committed person with us—Swati [Swatilekha Sengupta]. She has a remarkable talent in being able to act with virtuoso skill and can handle music remarkably well, theatrically. If you have seen Nagar Kirtan, you’ll know what I mean. There is a situation in the play when the priest’s son is unwilling to take up his father’s profession of being the priest who performs the daily puja in middle class and wealthy households. He wants to be part of the mainstream; he wants to enter the competitive society. The son will eventually be hanged in the course of the play. Swatilekha plays the mother. The way she manages the role of the mother and coordinates the musical arrangement, playing on the violin, the keyboards, and then going back to her role, is simply remarkable!

I am proud to admit that in Nandikar, we have a very flexible theatre language. So we can have two plays of totally different kinds—Meghnadbadh Kabya and Shanu Roy Chowdhury. Khaled-da and Tapas Sen were so enthused, watching the rehearsals of Meghnadbadh Kabya. They were of the opinion that the musicians should be seated so that they can’t be seen very clearly on stage. I was appalled. I explained to them that it should be left to the audience to edit what they wish to see. They should be given the freedom to glance at the performer, as well as the accompanist on the violin. They understood my point and agreed. That’s why working with such great designers is such an enriching experience all the time.

The other day I said in a television interview that every day I live in fear of my space shrinking and encroached upon because of this new open sky culture. ‘You people are very powerful. Your cameras can go down twenty thousand leagues under the sea and shoot up to capture the Everest; you can get the best brains in the country to work for you; you can buy most of us, but not all of us. Don’t forget you have been created by man and it is man who can bring about your downfall.’ I can say all this because I am associated with the most humanistic art form, and that is theatre.

So from that perspective, if I can’t make my theatre attractive enough—I don’t mean attractive in a cheap sense—attractive in the way that the songs sung by Beatles were attractive—in the ability to say simple things simply—who can beat the charm of the song: ‘Mama, I don’t want to be a soldier/I don’t want to die/I don’t want to be a lawyer/I don’t want to lie’—isn’t it a charming way to express the urban crisis that is staring us in the face all the time? Theatre has to be varied in its expression, because it has to attract human beings and depend on them for its survival. The deficiency of the open sky culture lies in the fact that it can bombard you with images and sound, but can hope to get no input from you. It can’t gauge your reactions. Theatre, on the other hand, is a give-and–take game. A poem can be self-contained, a painting can be self-contained, but in theatre, somewhere out there across the footlights, there has to be someone present.

I have to be varied in my expression. I have tried out a few musicals like Brecht-er Khonjey and Kolkata Kolkata. I’ve tried to experiment with a different kind of theatrical representation. We have with us a very bright young boy, Sanchayan Ghosh, who has passed out of Kalabhavan in Santiniketan. He stood first in his M.A. He can do wonders with the sets. Earlier he had designed sets for Nagar Kirtan, which were very good, but very bulky. We had to hire an entire lorry to transport the sets. When I explained the problem of transportation to him, he thought out an entirely different set, with plastic sheets forming the main ingredient of the set. He painted on the sheets and created an innovative set design which would fit snugly into a trunk. We toured different parts of the country with this. He has done the sets for Brecht-er Khonjey as well. We can’t afford to hire a godown for our sets and do a lavish classical production. We are trying to make our productions as colourful, varied and efficient as possible. It is very tough to remain committed these days. These young boys are working so hard with us, and their compatriots are strut ting about, cell phones in hand. It is very hard to keep oneself away
from all the temptations of the modern world and deny oneself pleasures that abound around you. These boys are young, I understand how hard it is for them. This is not the age when you do things with a monastic zeal. One has to market theatre in a certain way. But again one must be careful not to fall into the trap of consumerism and become just a market product minus the theatre. These aspects are worrying me these days.

The other day a lad in our group shared his views with me. He said, 'If you only had opened a tutorial and said all that you teach us every day, you would have earned much more. Swati-di, with the kind of talent she has, could have been a famous musician, touring the whole world; Gautam-da could have been a wonderful trainer. All of us have such great potential. Why then can’t we do something really wonderful and earn a lot of money when all of us come together? Why can’t we? With the talent that we have, can’t we earn enough to feed ourselves, have a roof over our heads at least? We don’t want cars, do we?’ We have to understand the psychology of these young people. You’ll have to educate yourselves, I told them. You’ll have to understand why Suman suddenly becomes famous one day; why the whole of Berlin whistled the ‘Moritat’, you’ll have to understand what atonality means if you claim to have any training in music. That is when you can really break away from the conformist line and gain something of your own.

We work under severely inhibiting circumstances. One has to eternally keep track of the funding agencies, try and get some money for the group so that work can go on unhindered. Most of us are growing old. The few who are mentally alert have their own problems to sort out. A few days ago Kasturi Gupta Menon told me, ‘So everything’s going well with theatre these days!’ ‘It is not,’ I retorted. ‘Why? Why are you saying that?’ she asked. ‘Why does a sixty year old man have to run from pillar to post trying to collect funds for his theatre?’ I asked her. I’m sixty four. I get up every morning at six o’clock and go to bed dog tired at one o’clock at night. I can’t read as much as I used to because of the hackwork—I have to be the public relations man, write letters for grants, visit the government departments. I want to pass on whatever I’ve learnt from my elders in theatre down to the younger generation.

Theatre, according to me, is a minority culture. But the minority culture suddenly becomes the universal voice. That is the space one wants—the space in which some passionate young men with an unstinted faith in humanity wanted the world to be one with them. The Natya Akademi in West Bengal can play a vital role in giving some kind of direction to channelizing talent in the field of theatre and doing something meaningful. If our theatre fraternity cannot rediscover their crystal seeds once again, how can new crystals be formed? How can new talents be best utilized? How am I supposed to answer Gautam’s question: ‘Sir, nowadays there is neither fame nor money in theatre. It was different when you were young. What has the situation come to now?’

Why is it that nobody here could bring to theatre what Sir Laurence Olivier brought to theatre in England? West Bengal should have been able to bring something of that glory into theatre. I am trying very hard; but this is not something you can do all by yourself. I have tried to gather people around me. What is one to do? Do I accept this as life? You see, we are in hostile times. On the one hand a woman is forced to kill her children out of sheer desperation because she can’t give them food to eat, and on the other, crores are spent on building up a nuclear arsenal. Who are they competing with? A poverty stricken country like Pakistan, which runs on foreign debts, and a super power like China, whom India can’t hope to compete with ever. Why are these people wasting their time and energy on such meaningless things as atom bombs? A country which can’t ensure a little patch of green for its children, has no business to enter the nuclear arms race.

How can the elderly pass the baton on to the younger generation without competition, without rancour, but with grace? These are the issues we have to address. We have to address issues like modernity; what should the theatre language be, how powerful can theatre be, how eclectic, how diverse, how can theatre be a matter of right. I am sixty four now. I might die next year; or I might turn blind. I’m not getting my cataract operated because that would keep me from performance. If I could see with my own eyes that these boys have had their full training . . . they are better performers, infinitely better
performers! I don’t know how to embellish myself while acting, accentuate certain traits that would make me a better actor.

I wish there would be more emphasis on culture. It is not desirable that the appointment of the Chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi from the North-east should spark off such a debate. What is wrong with it? One feels so small telling you these things. The other day I heard one Marwari lad saying to another in Salt Lake city, ‘This is a nice place Jyoti-babu has built, but there are too many Bengalis around.’ [laughs] What could be a more macabre joke? It is perfectly okay if we are accommodating types, but surely not at the cost of our marginalization! We must be proud of our legacy, the legacy theatre has given us. Whose friend am I? Who is my friend? The situation is becoming more complex day by day. One has to change one’s language of expression with the times. Tell the political party that is so vociferous about the ‘Bengal package’ that there must be some provision for culture.

I wish the younger theatre workers could think of taking up theatre as a vocation. I wish some talented young men would come forward and by sheer hard work set an example to the rest of their generation. I really wish a young crop of theatre workers in Calcutta, in West Bengal, in India, and all over the world, would believe that this society can appreciate people who are not joining the gold rush; who still believe in the humanistic art of theatre, who have a kind of moral and artistic greatness by making this choice in such a situation. I feel they should get a place when I’m no longer there in the scheme of things.

_Rudraprasad Sengupta interviewed for STQ by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Anjum Katyal on 2 June 1999._

_Transcribed and translated by Padmini Ray Chaudhury._
Asit Mukherjee (9 May 1936–2000), actor-director, began theatrical career in Rupakar; associated with various theatre groups before forming his own group Choopkatha (1995), which he led until his demise; major directorial works include *Neelam, Bhomma, Takhan Bikel* and *Janmadin*. Recipient of the Paschimbanga Natya Akademi Award, Lebedeff Award, Shiromani Puraskar.
‘A different kind of confidence and strength’

Asit Mukherjee. How did I get involved in theatre? Whenever I have to answer this question after a long time, I have to look back and take stock. When it comes down to the basics though, I actually started out without any intention. I just got involved while doing plays. However, in order to make my answer sound good, I have to frame the question a little differently—when exactly did I get involved in theatre? Then I have to walk backwards. It isn’t really true that I wanted to do theatre from a young age, although while I was in school I watched and enjoyed plays. This is how my interest in theatre grew.

My early schooling was in Kashi (Benaras). As kids we would participate in plays—you know, the kind of amateurish theatricals one does at school or even at the local neighbourhood club. I used to be complimented on my acting. My father was an employee in the Railways at the time when air raids on Calcutta were in full swing; the Second World War was raging at that time. The Railways office had this strange notion that there would never be any bombing in Kashi [laughs] since it is the abode of Vishwanath! They decided to shift its zonal office to Kashi. So my early childhood was spent there.

In school we would usually do some plays, one or two every year. I don’t know if it still happens nowadays, but at that time every school would have a special assembly on a particular day of the week, maybe a Saturday or a Sunday, when students from each class would perform—some would act, some would sing, some would recite poetry and the teachers would give us all a pat on the back! All of us looked forward to this weekly activity with a lot of enthusiasm. My first memory of a performance was seeing Siraj-ud-daullah, but it was a version called Nari Borjito Siraj-ud-daullah. The play has a character called Franco, a sahib. I really liked the way that particular actor handled the role. That inspired me a lot.

Another event which used to be quite a regular affair every year during the Pujas was the five-day theatre festival my elder brother and his friends used to organize in the Bangalitola school.
compound. Maybe it still takes place in Kashi. They did not exactly invite groups from Calcutta, but people like Ardhendu-babu [Ardhendushekhar Mustafi, actor (1850–1908)] and others who lived in Calcutta would go there at that time and act in plays. It used to be quite an elaborate affair. We kids used to be on the lookout all day for a ‘volunteer’ badge. As soon as we got hold of one, we would go in and promptly take the badge off. If we kept it on, we would be in for trouble—some ‘mashima’ would request us to take a small child to the toilet, or we would be entrusted to keep an eye on people who dozed off during the performance and nudge them awake, and things like that. So we would promptly take off the badge once we got in, to avoid all these duties [laughs].

And we would watch the plays with close attention. There I saw one of my brother’s friends play the role of a sahib. That was how I had got drawn to that particular role. We had a lawn in our house itself—we used to live in a bagan bari [a large bungalow with a garden and grounds]—and it would be the venue for rehearsals of whatever play we could lay our hands on. Seeing us do all this, my brother’s friends approached us and said, ‘Why don’t you do a play yourself? We’ll sponsor it.’ With their encouragement, we started rehearsing Bandibir, a play based on the story of Alexander and Porus. We directed it . . . not really ‘directed’, did it our way . . . someone had to be the leader and I just happened to be the leader. Then they decided that they would have a special programme. Resplendent costumes arrived from Taherpur Rajbari, which was just opposite our house. Our dadas took care of everything. How it all happened I won’t be able to tell you now, but we did the play and everyone liked it. In fact, we became quite famous. Inspired by the success of the play, we organized a repeat performance. Ustad Mushtaq Ali Khan, the sitarist, who used to live there, played the sitar. There were several performances lined up in the programme that day. We were to have a repeat performance of Bandibir and with it a performance of the play Gurudakshina (the story of Ekalabya, from the Mahabharata).

When we finished Bandibir, it was quite late at night and by the time we came on stage, we were all feeling sleepy. So we decided we would do the first scene and the last scenes of Gurudakshina. All of us were dozing. The person playing Mantri was prompted, ‘Mantri! Say your lines!’ Waking up suddenly, he mumbled in confusion, ‘Mantri! Say your lines!’ I was playing Ekalabya. I had instructions to fold my thumb into my hand while I mimed cutting it off with the arrow, and another thumb was to be thrown in from the wings to indicate that it had been severed. This was the arrangement. So I did all that but did not fold my thumb in. Meanwhile the other thumb had already been thrown in from the wings. There was a general confusion on stage and the audience burst out laughing [laughs]. Anyway, all this was quite encouraging.

Subsequently we returned to Calcutta from Kashi when it was considered safe. Meanwhile, our house here had been rented out and the tenants were refusing to vacate. So we stayed in the mufossil [suburbs], in Sheoraphuli. Not exactly Sheoraphuli, it was Baidyabati. But Sheoraphuli was the nearest and most convenient railway station for us. There, like in every neighbourhood in those days, used to be a theatre club. Our club was called ‘Sandhyabasar’ and our para dadas [young men of the neighbourhood] would run it. They would often ask me to play the role of a young boy in their plays. Some of us also got together and did plays. So I got to know that I had a talent for acting. I used to be praised quite a lot and I had a bee in my bonnet on that account.

That is when I came to know that there was another very good actor in Calcutta—Sisir Bhaduri. I used to think, how good is he? Is he as good as me? You see, I had absolutely no idea who he was! Finally, we came to Calcutta. I hadn’t yet seen any of his performances. This was just when Sisir Bhaduri was about to leave Srirangam—I couldn’t see his last production. I couldn’t manage to get tickets for it. But when he was acting in other productions in various places, once I had the good fortune to see him perform in Chetla. I understood then that he was far, far superior to me [laughs].
Around this time I got myself a job in a bank. There used to be a garage near our bank called 'Mobility' where film stars and celebrities used to keep their cars and also send them for repairs. Mobility’s account was with our bank, the Grindlays Bank (it was Lloyds Bank in those days). The garage people used to invite us for Vishwakarma Puja celebrations. I found out that there would be a performance of Bohurupee’s Putul Khela that evening. Now we were brought up on [historical] plays like Kedar Roy or at most, social plays—dramatizations of novels or stories by Saratchandra (Chattopadhyay (1876–1938), major Bengali novelist, known for his sensitive critique of society in his novels—Grihadaha, Datta, Nababidhan, Pather Dabi and the autobiographical Srikanta). I was completely dumbfounded when I saw the play.

[Samik Bandyopadhyay. Where did this performance take place? On the grounds opposite the garage?]

Yes. A temporary stage had been erected for the play. I had never imagined that such theatre existed! They were so natural, talking naturally and even the acting was so natural. I had heard people complain that Bohurupee’s acting style was manneristic, that the actors had a peculiar intonation; but to me it was very, very natural because we had never experienced theatre like that ever before. I was spellbound. I saw RaktaKarabi later. I couldn’t understand anything the first time I saw it; I hadn’t even read the play then.

[S. B. So you are talking about the fifties.]

No, not the fifties, sixties . . . actually it was the end fifties—1958/59—to be precise. In 1960 I joined Rupakar. Though I did not understand much, I realized that it was a very good production. Subsequently I read RaktaKarabi and saw the production again once or twice. I understood that my conception of theatre was all wrong. Theatre was something totally different.

At that time, there used to be no performance at the [recreation club of our] bank. We took the initiative and put up Jochhan-da’s [Jochhan Dastidar (1933–98), playwright, actor, director] Dui Mahal. It was a very popular play at that time. Nirmal Chatterjee, who is no more, was our director. It was quite a good production. We received accolades from our colleagues at the bank. We were told it was better even than the version that Jochhan-da himself had produced. It was proclaimed we had done better than Jochhan-da, every actor in our play was better than their counterparts in Jochhan-da’s production. Naturally, I was proclaimed better than my counterpart in Jochhan-da’s production.

Boosted with all this encouragement, I told Nirmal-da that I wanted to join a group. At that time I used to study Commerce at an evening college. I graduated in 1960; there had been a gap of two years in the middle, but I finished in 1960. I also got married at quite a young age. All this being over, I decided I would join a theatre group. So I asked Nirmal-da to take me to a group. Nirmal-da used to work with both Prantik and Rupakar in those days. He asked me which of the two I wanted to join. I’m basically a very lazy person and don’t like the idea of running around or straining too much at all. Prantik used to have their rehearsals in Wellesley and Rupakar was very close to where I lived. I used to finish work at four in the afternoon. I could easily return home, take a short nap and then go for rehearsals. So I selected Rupakar.

Nirmal-da explained to me at length that group theatre was a fearful prospect. He said that even if your father had passed away and you had a show that very evening, you would be expected to slip away from the house unnoticed, do the show and only return home to mourn at night. So it was quite frightening . . . having to do theatre like that! But my father was no longer alive, so at least I could risk it! [Laughs] I only had my mother with me. I took a chance, hoping my mother would not decide to leave this world on the day of my performance! So with a prayer on my lips I said, take me to Rupakar.

My first day there was very interesting. I had heard so much about group theatre, about their rules and all that, from the morning of that day I could barely control my
excitement. I had to reach at 6.30 in the evening. When it was time to leave the office I saw that Nirmal-da was playing carrom. I said, let’s go. He replied, we shall, eventually. By the time we left, it was impossible to reach by 6.30 in the evening. So I was quite upset and thought we be pulled up for being late. He said, you are going with me, what are you scared of? I was very confused. I had been warned about their dos and don’ts, but just because I was going with him we were excused. When we reached the place, the rehearsal room was absolutely full. You have seen the outer room. It’s quite small. The rehearsal of *Byapika Biday* was in progress. In the mean time I had already seen some productions of Rupakar in a festival of their plays. I sat down quietly in a corner. During the rehearsal Nirmal-da introduced me through sign language, and a gentleman with a pleasant genial appearance greeted me with smiles and asked me to sit down. So I was feeling quite comfortable and happy, thinking that I had come to a very nice director. I was enjoying the rehearsal when suddenly for some reason, Geeta Dutta—I did not know her then, I got to know her only later and that she was married to Sabitabrata Dutta—giggled and said something and Jhunu-da [Sabitabrata Dutta] in a great rage shouted, ‘Get out, get out!’ He turned her out. So whatever Nirmal-da had told me was true, after all. People really took theatre seriously. I got scared. I thought, if he could ask his own wife to leave the rehearsal, what would he do with the others! I understood that Nirmal-da hadn’t exaggerated one bit. After the rehearsal, I was introduced to everyone.

The next day I had got slightly delayed in coming home from office and taking a nap. I used to love snoozing and still do. So when I reached there, it was only two minutes past thirty. The door was closed and there was no sound from inside. I was completely at a loss. If I opened the door and went in—I was already two minutes late—I would surely be pulled up for that. But if I didn’t go at all, I would have to give an explanation the following day. That was another problem. I couldn’t make up my mind. Five minutes passed in trying to decide what to do. I was so nervous, I began sweating. But there was no sound from inside. Ultimately, I hesitantly pushed the door open. I saw that there was just one person in the room, Dilip Choudhury (of Rabindra Sadan). So I mustered up some courage and went in and sat beside him. As we got talking to each other, he told me that he had joined the group only two/three days ago.

The point is, that the incident of Geeta Dutta being asked to leave the rehearsal at Rupakar was actually just a stray incident in the history of the group. Never did such a thing happen again.

[S. B. All along, quite a loose, relaxed kind of atmosphere prevailed.]

That’s right. You see, Jhunu-da was basically a very genial, warm person. He would readily accept whatever you said. He was the trusting kind. So the attitude there was very relaxed. Since I started my theatre in an atmosphere like that, I too was very relaxed. It didn’t even occur to me that one had to read up so much about theatre as an art form and that it was much more than a mere pastime. Besides, nobody in Rupakar thought along those lines. You know, like giving specific instructions to the production team, or giving directions—all that was not there. It was just that I had made a name for myself in their play *Byapika Biday*, which was a roaring success. And if you are fortunate enough to land up with a role in a ‘hit’ production, you get your share of accolades and attention and you start feeling good. I was receiving all that attention but I also had the feeling that I was not growing intellectually. That created a kind of a void within me.

Three of our colleagues in office, Bimal Chatterjee, Sunil Banerjee and Ajit Banerjee, were members of Prantik. All three of them used to read a lot. Ajit-da and Bimal-da used to go to Sunil-babu’s house for adda sessions. There would be people like Subhendu Chatterjee . . . they would often participate in an adda. Sunil-babu especially used to be a voracious reader. In fact he used to read so much that the others would often tease him about it. I used to hear from them that he has studied a bit too much.
Anyhow, then I began to understand that theatre was not as simple as it seemed. And I also realized that Rupakar was not the ideal group. I decided—by this time four or five years had passed—to leave Rupakar and join LTG [Little Theatre Group] . . . or was it PLT [People’s Little Theatre] by then. No, in 1964, it was still LTG. I would join LTG and learn from Utpal-babu. That used to be a dream. At that time being with Utpal Dutt or Sombhu Mitra’s group was like being in the rival soccer teams of Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. One group would poke fun at Sombhu-da, imitating his manner of speaking, while the other camp would imitate Utpal-da’s grave and deep voice. Things like these were very common in those days and we used to take these things in our stride.

I was Utpal Dutt’s fan at that time. So I decided to join his group so that I could have a proper training in theatre. A relation of mine, Samaresh Bandyopadhyay, was the Office Secretary of LTG in those days. I requested him to introduce me to Utpal-babu. He said, ‘Very well, I’ll introduce you to Utpal-babu.’ For three months I kept going to him. He couldn’t introduce me to Utpal Dutt.

[S. B. You never got introduced?]

I never got introduced to him. It went on like this for three months. It was not that I would go once a week for three months. Three months means ninety or ninety-one days. I used to go every day, but never met him. I never had the opportunity to meet him. And I didn’t have the courage to go and meet him myself.

This was when Gandhar came into the picture. Then it was somewhat like a family club, doing a play once a year. At that time some people from Rupakar broke away. But then I was sort of addicted to acting in plays regularly because that is what I had been doing in Rupakar and it had become almost a habit. That’s why I didn’t feel like joining Gandhar at first. But most of my friends had joined the group and so I went with them. But it wasn’t a very deep involvement. It was as if I’d go and do the role, but ultimately I’d leave and join somewhere else. I thought I’d join Bohurupee; but everything in Bohurupee was so severely regimented that on second thoughts I decided against joining it.

In the mean time, we did a play at Gandhar, based on a story by Banaphool—‘Baitaranir Teerey’, and we called the play *Adekha Dik*. This turned out to be quite a record for Gandhar. It ran for about fifteen to seventeen nights.

[S. B. Who directed it?]

Amar Bose of Gandhar directed it. The play turned out to be quite popular, with good reviews in the papers and all that; we didn’t get audiences for it though. Then there was *Dashti Bachhar*, a play based on a story by William Somerset Maugham. While all this was happening, there was another split in Rupakar and Bankim-da [Bankim Ghosh] left. After he left, Anandaloke came into being. No, it would be wrong to say it came into being, I started Anandaloke along with Bankim-da. Initially Bankim-da was quite reluctant, but later on I managed to persuade him. So the two of us and another person called Shankar Mitra took the initiative. Anandaloke practically ceased to exist after sometime but that was due to other reasons. After that Amar Bose too left Gandhar.

This was the time when Chanakya Sen’s play had been published in a periodical. I had read it and found it very interesting. I kept telling Bankim-da to do this particular play but couldn’t make him read it. I was under the impression that he had read it but had not liked it for some reason. And for good reason too. I’d never have done Chanakya Sen’s play *Tarara Shoney Na* today. But at that time I was young, and there was something interesting in his prose; all this made me very eager. It was Bankim-da who suggested that I should direct the play. I was very enthusiastic and readily agreed. As I started rehearsing, I realized that I was being given one hour—I was given time from six to seven o’ clock on two days a week. And the other artistes never turned up for rehearsals on time because Bankim Ghosh was the director for them; moreover, I was very young
and why would they listen to me? They didn’t pay any attention to what they were being
told. Moreover, Bankim-da too began a sort of non-cooperation with me. I must say,
though, that everything I have learnt about theatre has been from Bankim-da. I learnt a
lot just watching him closely. Neither Nirmal-da, nor Jhunu-da used to take theatre very
seriously. I understood that I would not be allowed to go through with this play.

Meanwhile Gandhar was without a director and I needed a producer. Gandhar made
an offer, asking me to direct the play for them, and I agreed. Actually it was very
convenient working there as Gandhar already had an actress, Geeta Chakravarty, and we
needed about three or four other people to do the supporting roles. So all of us got
together and decided to do the play. We had agreed that the performance would only be
for one night and after that, I’d join elsewhere.

I hadn’t been able to get into LTG. So I decided to join Saubhanik. I had fixed up
things there. At that time the music director for Saubhanik was Debashish. I had spoken
to him. Now this play of mine was to be put up on 19 May.

[S. B. Which year was this?]

This was in 1969. I had originally planned to join Saubhanik the next day. This was
the deal. Actually the play was over-rehearsed, because we couldn’t get a hall booking
till 19 May. Once it was performed, I suddenly became very famous. I kept hearing what
a great job I had done. My desire to join Saubhanik had already ebbed by then. In
Saubhanik too problems had started cropping up when there was a rift between the
group and Debashish-babu, who had made himself scarce. He just couldn’t be traced.
Seeing all this, I stayed on with Gandhar. Tarara Shoney Na became quite a hit, with a few
‘house full’ shows as well.

Around this time people began to ask me, so what are you going to do next? It
suddenly dawned on me that I would really have to start doing something in earnest, as
people were expecting it of me. And gradually, as I started thinking about it, I decided on
Buddhadev Bose’s Punarmilan.

[S. B. Even after Tarara Shoney Na were you working with Gandhar more or less as a
sort of outsider?]

In Gandhar there was some kind of a strange distance between the top brass and the
boys of the group at that time. Later, this problem ceased to exist. They had this business
of committees which had no communication with the ordinary members at all. I used to
go to their meetings and see some people coming nattily dressed like babus, basket loads
of eatables arriving, but we had no communication with them. It was as if they were the
employers and we, the employees. Only we didn’t get salary. And because I used to get a
bit of preference I was invited to the meetings while others were not. This was the way
they worked. There were too many do’s and don’ts. In fact, they had objected to me, but
because of the popularity of Tarara Shoney Na, their objection didn’t hold any water at
that time. They didn’t make anybody a member. I was the only exception. I left Gandhar
later because of this reason. I had objected to the fact that no one among all those boys
who used to act in Ghoda was a member of Gandhar.

It was taken for granted that they would come and act, the authorities didn’t see any
need for them to become members. At this point, there was a falling out, as happens
when you’re young and hot blooded. Something similar happened in Rupakar; nothing
unpleasant, but just a difference of opinion and I left. I left alone, not with a gang. The
rest left later. I left Gandhar probably around 1975.

[S. B. So you didn’t do anything after Ghoda.]

Yes, that was the last one. And the three people in Ghoda came away with me and we
performed it again in Komal Gandhar. In the mean time, I had got a few promotions in
my job and was finding it increasingly difficult to give a lot of time to theatre. My job at
the bank had become more demanding and I couldn’t even do the kind of reading up (on theatre) that I used to earlier. Besides, a number of people joined the group, whom the group could easily have done without. The way we approached group theatre in Rupakar, though there wasn’t the culture of reading and intellection, everybody in the group had a certain pleasant aesthetic sense and there was nothing ugly about it. We found that people of a different kind had joined the group and work started to be done their way, and after going on this way for a while, I lost all enthusiasm and left it. Years went by and I had to start thinking about theatre seriously. But I was still not that serious.

[S. B. When did you leave Komal Gandhar?]

I left Komal Gandhar in 1979. But even then, I was still not all that serious about theatre. My perceptions about theatre were still not very well formed.

In 1980 Sombhu-da invited me to do Char Adhyay. It was then that my views and notions about theatre began to alter slowly. The kind of illogical notions one has about theatre, one tends to pass off as dramatic license, etc. The fact that theatre follows a certain logic and is not merely a collection of events in a story, strung together, nothing but an amalgam of untruths couched in fantasy, we got to know much later. All of us were accustomed to watching this kind of theatre. This school of theatre still exists; it has not totally uprooted itself. But when I went to Sombhu-da I realized for the first time that a lot has to be culled from life itself, and that theatre does possess many truths that have to be expressed. Slowly I began to change.

[S. B. When you went to Sombhu-babu, he wasn’t part of any group, because he had left Bohurupee by then. We found it curious that he should invite people from outside Bohurupee and attempt to revive old plays from their repertoire.]

It was a little different in my case; he treated me as an individual; not as somebody who had affiliations with a particular group.

[S. B. What I am saying is, from what I have heard and even seen myself . . . I used
to be very close to him from 1962 to 1970/71 and I watched what was happening. With the people he gathered around himself, he would discuss at length his opinions on theatre, ask them to read books on theatre, discuss with them things he had read, and develop a certain awareness about theatre among them. This used to happen all the time. The space for theorizing and discussion was always there.]

That’s right.

[S. B. Yes, and also trying to energize others, provoke them, something I would refer to as keeping the other person on his toes, a space for challenge. Did he interact with you in the same manner, or was it just confined to a
few tips on your role?]

No, it was just that much, nothing more.

[S. B. We found that somewhere down the line, he stopped generating the kind of response to the art of theatre as he used to when we got to know him.]

I found he was only concerned with giving detailed instructions about the role. For this he would conduct exclusive rehearsals with me at his place and only after I had reached a certain standard in acting did he take me to the proper rehearsal. This was very different from what I had heard about rehearsals in Bohurupee.

A very interesting event had occurred. Both Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt had turned up at a show of *Tarara Shoney Na*, without anybody inviting them. We had no idea why they had come to watch the show. I thought it was rather entertaining—people were laughing and I could hear Utpal-babu’s loud guffaw. He was sitting right in front, whereas Sombhu-da was sitting somewhere on his favourite seat near the aisle. Sombhu-da’s face didn’t have the faintest trace of a smile, while Utpal-babu was in splits. I was confused, because I couldn’t understand which reaction was genuine! Although this is a play where people do laugh, but I just couldn’t make Sombhu Mitra laugh.

[S. B. Obviously that made you self conscious! [Laughs] ]

Indeed it did. Every now and then I would look to see whether the faintest hint of a smile would register on his face, but it never did, which made me very uncomfortable. Then one day I met him at Saubhanik purely by accident. Someone introduced us and he looked at me and said in his inimitable style: ‘I have seen your play. The acting was competent enough, but I just couldn’t understand what happened at the end.’ It used to be a standing joke among friends—that unique way of giving an opinion which only he could.

There is another incident I want to mention here. Dharani [Ghosh (1944–97)], literary editor and drama critic of *The Statesman*, a leading English daily of Calcutta] had just started working with *The Statesman* and S B Chatterjee used to be the drama critic in those days. *The Statesman* used to be very selective about reviewing. We had more or less reconciled ourselves to the fact that they wouldn’t find our play worthy of review. One day somebody rang me up at my bank (I used to work at the Gariahat branch of Grindlays Bank in those days) from *The Statesman* and said he had lost the complimentary pass and there a way he could attend the performance that evening. I thought somebody was surely joking with me. So putting on a rather grave tone, I said: ‘Unless I have a look at the [ticket] chart, how can I assure you of a ticket? Besides I’m in office right now. (I knew perfectly well the kind of disappointing ticket sales we were having) [Laughs] But I didn’t want to miss an opportunity to throw my weight about just a little bit. So I suggested, ‘Well, you can come to the hall; I’ll have to see whether we can arrange a ticket. By the way, how did you get my office number?’ He replied that he had got my number from Muktangan. After disconnecting, I suddenly realized that I hadn’t even asked his name and whatever the gentleman had said could also be true after all! I immediately called up *The Statesman* office and found out that he had actually misplaced the tickets and he had already left office for the day. I really didn’t know what to do, because I had committed the blunder. I called up Gora and asked him to watch out for Dharani Ghosh and ensure that he got a good seat at the performance.

By the time the show was over that day, I hardly remembered what had happened and even forgot to ask whether he saw our performance that evening. A few of our friends used to assemble every day at Muktangan and we would have an adda session. The day after the show, a friend told me: ‘You have really worked wonders with your play this time. [The] *Statesman* has carried a rave review of your play today. How come you didn’t even see today’s *Statesman*?’ Dharani-babu had praised our play to the skies. I’ve never had such a good review of my play till date. In those days *The Statesman* used
to publish the review immediately, on the next day itself.

As I matured as a theatre person, Dharani-babu’s criticism of my plays became more pointed and ruthless. [Laughs] We became acquainted later. It was a common belief in theatre circles that Dharani-babu’s criticism of your play is an indication that you have come of age as a theatre group. He wouldn’t have acerbic things to say about a new group. His criticisms would be directed only at established groups and their productions.

Anyway, once I started working with Sombhu-babu my ideas about theatre started changing. I started thinking seriously about theatre, and I did my roles and worked differently, which was definitely an outcome of Sombhu-babu’s influence. I produced Neelam Neelam and Bhomma.

[S. B. How many shows of Char Adhyay did you manage to do?]

Ten in all.

[S. B. Did you have to restructure your group when you produced Neelam Neelam?]

I returned to Gandhar during this phase. In the mean time Chenamukh had produced Rani Kahini. They were depending too much on me; and given the nature of my responsibilities in the bank, I was finding it extremely difficult to manage both my job and the responsibilities of the group. How could I blame them? Our play used to get quite a number of call shows. Attending all the call shows became problematic for me because I couldn’t apply for leave every now and then. I couldn’t, on most days, leave office before 5.30 in the evening and would have to rush to the theatre if there was a show that evening. That was really a strain.

Working with Sombhu-babu was a unique experience. We had rehearsals on every single day, for ninety-one days at a stretch. I attended every single rehearsal except one. There was a crisis at the bank that day. Something went wrong in the calculations and the balance sheet showed a deficit of £50,000. It was an extremely critical situation. I was in charge of the exports and this came to my notice in the late afternoon. Just imagine my state! It was a question of £50,000! I was so worried that I didn’t even realize that it was already evening and most of my colleagues at the bank had already left for the day. In spite of my best efforts, I couldn’t do anything with the accounts that evening. Feeling absolutely crushed and broken down, I left office. It was nearly half past eight in the evening and the rehearsals would be nearly over, I thought. I slowly went into the rehearsal room. My face must have turned ashen by that time because of the kind of mental trauma I was going through. Before I could even explain anything, Sombhu-da had realized something must have gone wrong. ‘I was going to inform the police!’ he said. I tried to explain the situation to him—the position I was in, and the disparity in the accounts. I was so taken aback at the way he reacted: ‘So how many days will this thing about pounds continue?’ It was evident that he hadn’t believed a single word of what I had said. I was extremely hurt by the way he reacted. How could I ever explain to him the kind of psychological trauma I was going through at work? I was the person in charge of that department and if the discrepancy didn’t get resolved, I would be thrown out. So I told him that it could take several days and I could even lose my job if that wasn’t sorted out. To my great relief everything was sorted out the next day and I started attending rehearsals as usual. But a wound lay deep in my heart because Sombhu-babu had thought I was making up stories just to stay away from rehearsals.

Several years later, however, he recalled the incident and told me, ‘In spite of the crisis at work that day, you found time to come to the rehearsals before going back home. People nowadays are not responsible at all.’ I had thought he hadn’t believed me that day, but now I knew what he had really felt.

On another occasion, he had altered the show timings on my request. Bohurupee was having shows continuously for ten days and the show started at 6.30 pm. I could slip out
of office on some days, but to leave office early every day was becoming rather problematic. I explained my problem to Arijit [Guha] of Bohurupee who said he could do nothing about it and I should speak to Sombhu Mitra himself. Later on Arijit explained my problem to Sombhu-babu and he asked me what the problem was. I explained that it was becoming rather difficult for me because I simply couldn’t get out of office early every day. This was a time when Bohurupee was having shows every day for ten days at a stretch. Sombhu–babu understood my point. He asked me: how do you manage in your group? I replied: we start the show at seven in the evening; and besides we hardly have fifteen people in the audience and if I can’t make it, nothing really matters. I further argued: it is something quite different when the name of Sombhu Mitra is involved. You can’t have a show cancelled just because I got delayed at office. He understood and postponed the show timing by half an hour just for me. I was very touched by his gesture.

There was another incident I’d like to mention. We had an invitation for a call show in Jamshedpur. I requested that my name should not be mentioned in the publicity material because it would be very difficult for me to bunk office if my name was publicized too much. At first he would not hear anything about not having my name in. I had to plead with him and make him understand that it would be very difficult for me to get sick leave from my bank if everybody knew I was going to Jamshedpur to act in a play. He did not do that show ultimately. He was a strange mixture of opposites. At times he was so understanding and accommodating, and at
times he was rather abrupt and one would feel hurt by his behaviour.

The load at Chenamukh was becoming too much for me to bear, because I had a demanding job and I just could not adjust the responsibilities of my office with those at Chenamukh. It was really becoming too much of a strain for me. I was already thinking of forming a new group when I was approached by Gandhar. But my previous experience with Gandhar had not been very pleasant and I had several conditions and they agreed to all of them. However, just as the group started functioning smoothly, I found that my conditions weren't being adhered to. That is quite inevitable, isn't it? That is not important. What is important is, that in this later phase I knew what I was doing and this was reflected in the selection of plays and even in the quality of the productions. There was a certain . . .

[S. B. . . . consistency in the selection, production values, and standards in acting in the plays you directed during this period.]

Yes. This was the time in my career when I could understand why I did plays. I wasn't doing plays mechanically any more and the plays I chose and directed during this phase had a distinct character of their own.

[S. B. Can you formulate what you were aiming at, during the phase which started with plays like Neelam Neelam?] I have always felt that values play an important part in one's life and one has to have a clear idea about values. How much can we, theatre people, do about the way things
are around us? We can do very little. Our contribution is insignificant. A play can only put across certain points and it can have just a temporary impact on the audience for just those few hours. The atmosphere has to be conducive. For example, reading one good book won’t make any difference to one’s intellect unless it is nurtured in an academic atmosphere. I make no claim to bring about a dramatic change in the way of things and don’t aspire to do it either. It is only unified effort that can bring about some change and I sincerely feel that all of us in theatre coming together and doing something positive is bound to yield something good. There is a nice little observation in the editorial of The Statesman; a comment on why evil spreads (I’ve copied it down lest I should forget): ‘. . . the only reason why evil spreads in the world is because enough good men do nothing’. It is no use just being a ‘good’ person. One has to make other people realize what is good and the power of good. I am saying nothing new; but one has to be reminded time and again. My plays don’t have a so-called villain. How do the events in the play progress unless there is some villainy? You see, in our daily humdrum existence, no one is born a villain. The society makes you a villain. One becomes a villain of circumstances. Anyway, perhaps a few stray efforts are being made. But only if some people make a concerted effort can anything worthwhile start happening. Only then can anything significant happen.

People often ask me why I stick to realistic plays and never attempt any other kind of play. I feel that the effect a play can make in the realistic mode cannot be compared to those done in any other form. The plays done in other forms may seem very attractive, but when it comes to getting a message across, it is the naturalistic-realistic mode that is the most eloquent and it leaves a lasting impression.

[S. B. It so happens that stylistic devices attract you like artifacts. They are interesting and attractive. You admire them for the moment, but don’t look to them for any profundity.]

I have always felt that I won’t be able to make any significant contribution if I ever tried to tackle a genre that didn’t appeal to me. When people tell me that my plays convey a certain message, I feel I have done something . . . nothing remarkable, I’m sure, but at least a little
bit in my own way. Is our theatre achieving any kind of good at all, I wonder at times. There was a time when one was told one would have to be a ‘full-time’ theatre worker in order to be really committed. Surprisingly, all the ‘full-time’ theatres in our city closed down and nobody raised a voice; not one of us ever protested. We believed theatre would never die out. But with the closure of public theatres in Calcutta, all of us became apprehensive of an imminent doom—that our theatres might close down one day. Public theatres should have continued, because it was the theatre of the people. We hadn’t been to convince people that theatre has an intimate link with life and shake them from their belief that theatre only represents the fantasy and is not remotely connected with the real. The question is, what does our theatre audience expect when they want to see a play? They definitely don’t want to watch a slice of real life. They definitely don’t. People are so comfortable with the idea that theatre is merely fictitious, that they hardly ever take it seriously.

[S. B. They don’t take it seriously.]

The void that had been created with the passing away of Utpal Dutt and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, has lingered on. Utpal Dutt in his own way had instilled some kind of seriousness into theatre. We could identify with the characters and the situations in his plays, or even in the way his characters react. There is something I want to ask you. We rarely get an opportunity to talk to one another this way! Do you feel this theatre will exist?

[S. B. Something that also bothers me like you, is the way theatre has become one man’s way of looking at things. It is just that singular individual with a certain ideology, a certain philosophy, on whom the group totally depends. The group starts depending on him so much that once he passes away, all that the group can do is carry on his legacy in the same set mould. They can neither bring in anything new, nor can they break away from the ‘tradition’ of the group and experiment along new lines. Even with Bohurupee and PLT, it is merely a continuation of tradition. Nothing new has been attempted. If people of Sombhu–babu and Utpal–babu’s stature couldn’t create a second line of defence within their group, what can you expect of others? I don’t blame them. They had a lot to give away; but where would they find a receptacle? Was the next generation prepared to take on the mantle? Like the audience, they too lacked seriousness. The prevailing attitude was—I have my father or my grandfather who will lead me on by the hand. When they are no more, that will be the end of it. This has gone on for too long. All those who are working now too have similar calculations. Even you think—whatever I can do while I’m still there I’ll do, and I don’t know what happens after I give up.]

Exactly. You’re absolutely right. Groups are being formed; there’s no denying it. But there has been an abysmal fall in standards.

[S. B. It is evident everywhere. The groups progress from one production to another. Some productions click, some don’t, and that is the end of it. One rarely finds some sort of a continuity, some kind of a consistency in their productions.]

For that matter, I’d like to mention one individual who was an outstanding actor, and a far better human being—Ajitesh–babu. But somehow I don’t seem to find the same consistency in his work. It was somewhat uneven.

[S. B. He would be very candid about his survival strategies. He had read out *Sher Afghan* to me long before there was a split in the group. ‘I’ll launch it as soon as the group splits,’ he told me. And he did. He knew the potential of the play and knew exactly how to use it. That play would save the group. I felt somewhere there was a sense of insecurity working within him and the urge to save the group made him act that way. I don’t think Utpal–babu or Sombhu–babu felt as strongly about their groups. Their feeling towards the group was more like—the group will take care of itself. If the members of the group could take care of their requirements, they would continue with
their work. They wouldn’t bother much about the group as such.

Sombhu–babu left the group; Utpal–babu didn’t actually leave the group, but he had distanced himself so much from the group that it was quite evident.

[S. B. I had seen the first show of *Neel Sada Lal* and had gone to interview him the next morning as part of an assignment I was doing for Sangeet Natak Akademi. Before starting the interview I asked him, ‘Had this been five years ago, would you ever have allowed the actor who did Tipu Sultan to act on stage?’ ‘Never!’ he replied, ‘I have no other choice. Where can I find actors these days?’ Earlier, he would get into a rage if anything ever went wrong in his plays. He would even throw chairs at people. Later on, towards the end, he became so quiet, withdrawn.

Coming back to your work, you have worked in Hindi theatre with Usha Ganguli. Later on when you formed your own group, you’ve produced plays both in Hindi and in Bengali. What did you think of doing at this stage? What prompted you to do plays in both the languages?

In fact it started off without any plans as such. Long ago, during my days with Gandhar, I had got a few plays translated into Hindi and we left it at that. On the other hand I had been thinking about the possibility of doing Hindi plays because I knew we could make an impact in the Hindi theatre segment. Naturalistic plays in Bengali are quite rich in content; but they don’t mean a thing to audiences who don’t understand the language. When I saw Jayashree’s [B. Jayashree] plays, I never had a problem understanding because the spoken language wasn’t important in her plays, unlike plays we used to do, where the language/dialogue is so important that nothing gets conveyed to the audience unless they understand every word of it. For instance, in *Neelam Neelam* and *Takhan Bikel*, I know the audience will laugh at a particular dialogue; but if an audience speaking a different language doesn’t respond in the same manner, I can’t blame them, really, because they can’t understand the language. But while acting you feel a bit unnerved because you have become so used to a particular response at a particular point in the play. Moreover, I had been thinking of taking across some of the good productions to areas which did not speak my language. Secondly, (no malice intended) I have observed that Hindi plays have a tendency to oversimplify things. The content is somewhat insipid. When we have performed outside Calcutta, we have noticed how people appreciate plays that make them think. They are overwhelmed, to say the least. We don’t claim to be doing original Hindi plays. We stage Bengali plays in Hindi. I don’t change the play even in the slightest bit—the names of the characters aren’t changed and neither are the place names changed. It is only to make good Bengali plays accessible to the Hindi-speaking audience. I am fully aware that the amount of extra work that goes into the production of a Hindi play by our group won’t be appreciated in Calcutta. That is quite understandable, because people associate Bengali plays with our group. They won’t come to a Hindi play I’ve directed because they will get to see the original in Bengali anyway. They will go to a Hindi play directed by Usha Ganguli. Usha’s is a predominantly Bengali-speaking audience. Our original idea was that we wouldn’t take Hindi speaking people as actors; instead, we would master the language and do the plays ourselves. By the time we were waiting for a few call shows, we forgot all the Hindi we had picked up, and that was the end of it. We had wanted to reach out to more people, that’s all. There wasn’t any other reason behind it. Ananda Lal, however, read some kind of an ulterior motive behind our trying to do plays in Hindi. He had written in an article that we were trying desperately to gain some foothold in the television channels this way. But none of our members has ever acted in any television serial. We had only wanted to reach out, that’s all. We had also observed the overwhelming response that our plays would get outside our normal circuit of performance.
I understand the kind of response that greets a play like Janmadin, which transcends the language barrier with its sheer emotive quality. But we have had the same response with plays like Takhan Bikel or Sham bhi thi dhuan dhuan. We were performing in Chandigarh. It was a bitterly cold night with temperatures dropping to below 5° C. The audience had liked the play so much that they mobbed us backstage. How do you explain such a reaction? They were so overwhelmed that they were talking to us till past midnight. You see, they are not accustomed to seeing such plays, and hence the euphoria. It is extremely rewarding once you can take it to them. But so many years later I feel it is just not worth it. Hindi is a difficult language—especially its grammar—and one has to master the habit of speaking grammatically correct Hindi until one speaks correct Hindi without any conscious effort. That was difficult.

[S. B. Has any Hindi speaking actor ever approached you for a role?]

Yes, of course. In Punjab . . .

[S. B. I mean here, in Calcutta . . .]

No. Nobody came to as much as see the play once. Shyamanand-babu [Shyamanand Jalan, b. 1934, founder-director of Anamika and Padatik, director and actor], who is otherwise a very nice person, and someone whom I respect, has made a statement in one of the newspapers a few days ago that no work has been done in the field of Hindi theatre in the last twenty years. To tell you the truth, he used to be our inspiration in the years that I started out to form a group of my own. We used to look up to him. He had said that plays don’t get appreciated here. My point is, he had those twenty years in which he could have done so many things in the field of theatre. He was talented and perfectly capable of doing something outstanding. I haven’t been able to bring Shyamanand-babu to watch any of my plays, nor for that matter any of the really important Hindi-speaking theatre personalities. In fact Usha herself hasn’t seen my plays. Usha has seen my Bengali plays, but not the plays I’ve done in Hindi.

[S. B. Coming to Choopkatha, it was the first time that you were operating totally on your own, which is totally unlike your experience of working with groups like Gandhar, with an established set-up where there were other tensions involved, etc. Had you drawn on your experience of the other groups you had worked with when you were thinking of a new group?]

Right from the beginning, we had agreed on the fact that we’d do plays both in Hindi and Bengali, and with the same cast.

[S. B. And that was possible because of Dolly to a large extent. ]

Exactly. I knew I could depend on Dolly [Basu] to provide us with the language training support, and I would train them up in acting. That was the advantage of having Dolly with us. So that was quite simple, and that’s how it worked out. I had got Neelam Neelam translated long ago, but couldn’t stage it because one of the main actresses had backed out. When I look back I feel we had been saved because we didn’t continue with the production. We didn’t have Dolly with us then, and all of us would have spoken Hindi with a terrible Bengali accent, and that would have ruined us.

When Usha offered me the role in Khoj, I told her that I would have liked to do the same role in Bengali, if I had been given a choice. But I wanted to work under a Hindi-speaking director who could teach me how to speak Hindi. I asked her to be ruthless with me and requested her not to make any concessions for my sake alone, just because I didn’t speak the language. In theatre actors often have difficulty in pronouncing certain words in the dialogue. To make it easier for them, difficult words are substituted with words that are easier to pronounce. I didn’t want Usha to make any compromise on that account.

[S. B. It was also a question of putting your capabilities to test and emerging with a
certain sense of fulfilment and triumph at the end.]
Yes, that’s true. You emerge with a different kind of confidence and strength.

Transcribed and translated by Vikram Iyengar and Padmini Ray Chaudhury
Arun Mukherjee (b. 16 February 1937), playwright, director, actor, has led the theatre group Chetana from 1972. Major works include Jagannath and Mareech Sangbad, both written and directed by him. Was awarded the Best Actor award in the National Film Awards (1978) for his role in Mrinal Sen's Parashuram.
Falling in Love with Theatre

Arun Mukherjee. It is difficult now to recall and reconstruct why and how I came to theatre. I did not belong to Calcutta. Haora [Howrah] did not have the atmosphere that Calcutta had. Haora had quite a lot of amateur jatra companies. An indirect impact of their work must have stayed with me, especially in the use of songs in my productions. All the plays that I have written after Mareech Sangbad have drawn on the form of the jatra. The other influence that I imbibed—in my boyhood I was quite addicted to the commercial cinema. Sneaking out of school to watch these films must have left traces of influence on me, I don’t know exactly how. I cannot dissect the influence, and mark it clearly, but I’m sure it’s there.

I came into theatre as an actor, acting those bits one does in school and college theatricals. There was no clear comprehension then of a dramatic sense or the role and function of theatre, or its social relevance. But all those notions came in fast enough. Early in my acting career I realized that I would not go far with acting. My voice had congenital limitations. It was there in the family. Suman, my son, too, suffers from the same limitation. Neel, my other son, is slightly better in this respect. An actor must have at least the average good voice, if not somewhat better than the average. We are all below the average—minus. Once I realized that, early enough in my life, I knew that I could be more effective as a director, for by then I had fallen in love with theatre. Living in a small town, I had to take the initiative in gathering the knowhow that a director would need—mainly through reading. In college—the first two years in Presidency College, then in Deenabandhu College—theatre grew more important than the usual academic studies. I had some reputation as a scholar of sorts, but my results did not bear that reputation out. My father was an advocate, and expected me to become a good lawyer. But that was not to be. My initial interest in theatre grew from various factors—the praise I got for my performance, and other things—but there were several stages before I came to serious theatre. I came to the group theatre movement much later, when I formed Chetana in 1972.

I was lucky in life. I wasn’t unemployed for a day after
graduation. I got my first job, a government job, at the age of twenty. A job meant freedom—I became a clerk, and was free to be in theatre. I have seen too many young men with a great urge to be in theatre. I don’t know how well they are prepared or trained—but defeated by their dependence on their families, or their families’ dependence on them. This is a problem I never had to face. That was a great factor.

I was free to buy books on theatre of my choice, put up plays, and enjoy the power of defying the authority of my family altogether. That was a great advantage. With all that on my side, I could form a small group. The first few plays we produced did not show any sign of an attitude or position. We did plays by Bidhayak Bhattacharya, and around 1958-59, Raktakarabi too. The group was called Tarun Shilpi Samsad at first, and then Ritwik Sangha.

[SUMITA BANERJEE. You were still the director?]

I became a director under strange circumstances. I had already started feeling my limitations as an actor. I had started thinking of making the necessary preparations to take over as director. But my group—they were all of my age group—was not prepared to accept me as director. They were not prepared to accept that someone of the same age could know more than them. This kind of thinking is more common in the small towns. But I soon attained that power, that leadership. The fact that I was not too eager to grab the main role helped me to a certain extent. In West Bengal, in any theatre group, it is the lead actor who is also the director. So I was a sort of exception.

After a few years of directing for my group, I joined the cultural wing of the Co-ordination Committee [of the employees’ unions of the government departments and enterprises of the state]. There was not much to do there. I had to do a production every year for the annual conference. I could do quite a few productions for this annual event, for which I could count on the seriousness of the participants, who were prepared to work with the same discipline and to the same standard as we demanded in the group theatre. There was another advantage in the Co-ordination Committee. There were many good actors in the organization, and I could have my pick of them.

With the Co-ordination Committee, I produced Spartacus, and Gorky’s Mother. It was under pressure from the Co-ordination Committee that I became a writer, a playwright. I had never had much of an inner urge to write. But the Co-ordination Committee insisted that we had to stage a new play every year, and that it had to be our own play. They said, ‘Try to write.’ The other thing that I developed in my involvement with the Co-ordination Committee was an interest in the street play. I have written a large number of street plays—using an immediate issue, short pieces of life. With the Co-ordination Committee, I had enough opportunity to try my hand at different kinds of productions, and develop as a director in the process, and as a playwright too.

The Co-ordination Committee productions did not have too many performances, but every production had any number of serious rehearsals. Both Mother and Spartacus were done in the open form, in the jatra form—I’ve written two or three jatra scripts too. Mother proved to be so popular that we started receiving invitations for call shows [shows sponsored by non-theatrical bodies who would pay the company a flat fee for a performance, and gather the proceeds, or present it to its own members or an invited audience].

I had meanwhile joined the Sibpur Branch of the IPTA, who had tracked me down. My mind-set had been moulded by my orthodox family background, with its traditional natmandir [theatre space in traditional mansions] and religious associations. I came to politics and political ideology through my work in theatre. I had never been involved in any kind of Party work, not even at the College Students’ Union level. In theatre I realized that I had to understand politics, and read political texts. Whatever I have learnt—be it singing or anything else—I had to learn for theatre.

With the IPTA, I had the opportunity of travelling a lot through the small towns, and
performing to large crowds, and writing plays for direct and immediate political campaigning and writing 'debates' in dramatic verse.

Of the two or three plays I wrote for the IPTA, *Haraner Natjanami* was a dramatization of a short story by Manik Bandyopadhyay [major Bengali novelist (1908–56)]. As you can see, the organization was pressing me to write new plays, and encouraging and supporting me in productional work. It was the organization that saw to it that we had many shows for every production. We had not yet come to group theatre status. And we were yet to attain to a sophisticated artistic sense. We were glad enough to get an audience for a show, and some of them praising the acting or telling us we had done a good job! From that stray Bidhayak Bhattacharya play at the start, I developed slowly both at the political level and the artistic—I came to dramatize Premendra Mitra's *Sansar Seemanteey* [lit. 'at the fringes of society']—maybe not politically so significant, but in my selection of stories for adaptation, I had started having a feel of what was good and what was bad, where the deeper issues of life had been explored, and where they had been touched on only superficially. I was drawing on what I had been reading. Once I had a job, I started buying books regularly from the Foreign Publishers' Agency in the Grand Hotel Arcade. Buying an expensive new book meant a financial strain, and few in my place would spend on books. It is a pity that several of these books are now lost. But what is most interesting is that my office colleagues pooled together to buy me a copy of John Willett's *Brecht on Theatre* as a wedding present. I had already started reading Brecht.

I was drawn to Marxism in my search for a solution of the crises that affected human relationships in our times. I was convinced that it was only Marxism that could provide the solution. Later in life, I have read more political books.

The first work by Tagore that I dramatized was his story *Nashtaneerh* [lit. 'the broken nest,' filmed by Satyajit Ray as *Charulata*]; followed by more dramatizations of stories. I came to write original plays much later. All my plays—whether adaptations or original—have not been directly political. But the more experience I have accumulated, the more I have realized that a rich political insight is an essential condition for a good play. How the political dimension will come through is of course another matter. Brecht brings it in, in a certain manner, Chekhov in a different manner. In my Co-ordination Committee days, I was not acting. That was an advantage, for it left me enough time to read and think.

Even in Chetana, I came to acting only in *Jagannath* [premiered 8 February 1977, at the Academy of Fine Arts], when the group was already four or five years old. There were several advantages in staying out of acting. Acting demands a special engagement—you have to get on to the stage every time there is a performance. Even without acting, I could share in all the preparations and rehearsals anyway—as the director. I allowed other potential directors in the group to handle particular productions. That meant more free time for me. As a director I had enough confidence by
then not to feel endangered at the emergence of a new director. I would not sideline the really competent director in the group to promote the weaker elements. I would support whoever felt an urge to direct. I would, of course, exercise my prerogative in the choice of the play. Call it censorship if you will. But there has to be some control. What you call the democratic process is ultimately meaningless. Though our group is perhaps the most democratic of the groups in Calcutta in its operations, still I have not been seriously concerned as to how democratic it is! How can you apply a democratic method? When you sit to deliberate over the choice of a play, the entire group must be aware of and understand certain things—it is there that the gap yawns.

Now of course there is Suman
[Suman Mukherjee, who has directed Gantabya (premiered 10 February 1997, Academy of Fine Arts), a play on Dr Norman Bethune in the Spanish War, and more recently Tista Parer Brittanta (premiered 4 June 2000 at Rabindra Sadan) for Chetana, and is a TV producer-director]. He has earned the faith of the group as a whole and proved his directorial capacity, with the two or three productions he has mounted for the group.

It’s my problem now, for I have to carve out for myself an alternative field of activity. I’m agile enough still, and I cannot sit idle. I have begun thinking of an alternative theatre—little theatres. Not like Badal-da [Badal Sircar]. Not street theatre either. I shall count on the connections and goodwill I have in the district towns. The group can carry on with mainstream theatre, while I work in a different mode. No other group or director has had to face a problem like this. But it is a very positive problem.

Ten years of deliberation had gone into the making of Jagannath. I am not a playwright. I couldn’t have ever conceived a character like Jagannath. I was responding to Lu Xun, and building on him. But there was great satisfaction when I could ultimately bring the experience to an Indian context, relate it to Indian politics, and could make a credible character out of Jagannath, drawing on whatever little I knew of the lower middle class in India. But viewers had their personal perceptions of Jagannath. One of the critics commented: ‘Jagannath doesn’t understand a thing.’ There are such critics. Several leftwing intellectuals misread the scene of sex and hunger. They said that was physically impossible. The woman is aware that this is a hungry man.

She is a victim of sexual oppression. Her husband has thrown her out. The woman finds him safe. With him it will not blow up into a scandal. Nobody would come to know of it. That is why she has chosen to approach Jagannath. But she has brought food for him too. She has to feed the man
first to arouse his sexual instinct. The question of sex and hunger is linked to that of possession. Why and how is one possessed? How does a woman possessed act? I have seen people in fits of possession. I have a sort of obsession with several religious phenomena. In the house in which I grew up, where I spent my childhood, there used to be all kinds of religious rituals, with gurus and their shows and tricks. I saw them all. Several of these experiences have made their way into Jagannath and given it its reality. As a playwright I didn’t have much else to do, though as a director I had quite a burden of responsibilities.

As with Jagannath, so with Mareech Sangbad, I could draw on elements associated with my childhood experience of jatra performances, or that of growing up as a country boy in a small town. It is that artlessness that has gone out of my later plays. My plays have grown more sophisticated. A lot of reading, and alienation from my earlier roots, getting too immersed in reading—that is what comes in the way now. If I could somehow recapture that old spirit, though I have grown older now, I could perhaps create something meaningful again.

Once I had conceived the Mareech idea, it took me seven days to write the play out. The production took another fifteen days, i.e. twenty-one days from the conception of the idea. I was thinking a lot in terms of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. I got my clue from a Ramjatra company performing in the neighbourhood. I came home late one night. My wife asked me to call Lal, my son, home from where he sat watching the Ramjatra performance. I found him engrossed in the performance, watching the Mareech episode. There was a line of dialogue that struck me. Mareech was addressing Kalnemi: ‘Am I Ravana’s paid servant that I have to go running to him whenever he calls for me?” What a piece of dialogue! In the popular jatra, they adlib their dialogues. I went up to one of the jatra people and asked him, ‘Where did you get this attitude of Mareech’s?” He told me, ‘It’s in the Valmiki Ramayana.’ I went to a Sanskrit scholar in the neighbourhood the next day who told me that in the Krittibas version in Bengali,
Mareech is a humble bhakta, but in Valmiki’s version, he is quite adamant when the proposal comes his way. There I got my clue—in the man who refuses to get embroiled in the tussle between kings: Why should I get into this? Let me be!

Once I had hit on that clue, I could visualize the young American who refuses to go to Vietnam—the Vietnam War was raging at the time. In the first version completed in a week, there was no Valmiki. It was staged for the first time, fifteen days later, in August 1972, in the Canteen hall of the Writers’ Buildings, in a production for the Co-ordination Committee. Chetana came into being two months later, in November 1972. As we deliberated on what play we could start with, there was a consensus on Mareech. At the end of the Co-ordination Committee performance, there was a feeling that it was ‘too intellectual,’ though I found it quite simple and straightforward. Valmiki was inserted in the play, when I went for a rewriting in November. The new production came up in January 1973.

I followed it up with another play in the pala [the usual jatra structure, with heightened drama and songs] form—Ramjatra. It was a sort of second part to Mareech, with the same pattern of three central characters, at three levels. It was an interesting play—acted out in the greenroom of a band of Ramjatra performers, on the jatra stage where a Ramayana episode is being enacted, and the local politics

Suman Mukherjee, Arun Mukherjee and Biplabketan Chakrabarty in Roshan: a working class play, a rarity in the Bangla theatre scene. Photograph courtesy Arun Mukherjee.
of the village where the performance is being staged, running parallel. There were
evocations of the joys and sorrows of their lives, all those strange minutiae drawn from
their lives, as I knew them closely enough. There was a situation where the two actors
playing Rama and Lakshmana have a tussle just before an entrance, with the Lakshmana
actor asking the Rama actor to repay a loan, and the Rama actor pleading his inability,
and then move on to the stage as the godly brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, to carry on
with the Ramayana performance. Then the village has counterparts of the stage Ravana
and the stage Vibhishana. Brindaban, who plays Rama in the play within the play is
newly married, but has to go on tour, leaving the new bride behind. There is the cousin
who is trying to seduce the bride, and the news keeps Brindaban in a state of perpetual
tension. The peasant leader in the village is in love with a village girl, but the local
landowner has circulated a story that a Muslim ruffian had kidnapped her mother, hence
she has a shady background; and the young radical hesitates. The girl feels insulted
when she comes to know of this, and takes up a teacher’s job in a primary school far
from the village. The play had fifty-six episodes, but no scenes as such.

In the third part that I could never stage, I went back to the form of the Kathakata
[with a narrator singer giving an elaborately annotated and apocryphally fleshed out
version of a mythological story] that is going through a popular revival at the moment.
The episodes chosen related to Shambuka and Ekalavya, both of them victims of upper
caste dominance and conspiracy. I had completed three-fourths of the script, but then lost
it. When the Emergency was declared, there were people who suggested that it was the
right time to perform the lost play. It was a strongly political play. I was still in the habit
of writing regularly.

_Jagannath_ came much later, after three of our post-Mareech productions—_Ramjatra_,
_Bhalomanush_ [from Brecht’s _Good Person of Schezuan_] and _Spartacus_ had failed at the box
office. _Ramjatra_, with about 100 performances to its credit, scored the best of the lot. No
loss no gain, it was the only one that recovered its cost. _Spartacus_ could have become a
hit. But it had a large cast, and we had to use actors from outside our group. The latter
caused a lot of trouble, and went to the extent of spoiling the discipline of the group. We
had to close the production.

I have produced _Bhalomanush_ twice, in two different versions, but have failed both
times. I genuinely felt that I had failed to improvise an acting style for the theme
character.

At a recent seminar, it came out that though there had been many plays on the
peasantry in Bengali, there were only a handful about the working class. _Roshan_, one of
our later productions, was one of the very few centring on the working class. The IPTA
had produced _Kimlis_, a really good play. Utpal Dutt had of course done plays about the
working class, but there is too much of a middle-class sensibility about these plays. There
is very little about the working class in our plays, and in our fiction. I worked hard on
the _Roshan_ play. The author had given me the whole narrative verbally in Hindi, before
he came to publish it. I translated it into Bengali directly from his narration. It took me
four months to make it into a production. The novel was published after my production.
_Roshan_ has all the potential of a very good TV serial—someone can attempt it even now.
It is set against the communal riots of 1946-47, with the emergence of the RSS—a
wideflung background.

I have seen all the later productions of Bohurupee, barring maybe one or two, and all
productions by the People’s Little Theatre. But the two productions that influenced me
most when Chetana was in the making were _Chak Bhanga Madhu_ produced by Theatre
Workshop and directed by Bibhash Chakraborty, and _Dansagar_ produced by Theatre
Commune and directed by Nilkantha Sengupta. I decided to do _Jagannath_ only after I
had seen _Dansagar_, which was an inspiring experience for me. Once I had seen it, I felt
that _Jagannath_ could be done quite easily. The audience response at certain points in
_Dansagar_ encouraged me directly. The points I refer to were points of good theatre. I was
profoundly moved by both Rajrakta and Chak Bhanga Madhu, particularly by the latter. There is no similarity between Mareech Sangbad and Chak Bhanga Madhu. There are at least some points of connection between Dansagar and Jagannath. It is difficult to explain how exactly we were inspired.

[Paramita Banerjee. How would you explain the paucity of major works in theatre in the eighties?]

There is one explanation that once the Left Front came to power in West Bengal, a theatre that had been basically anti-Establishment so long, found its objectives suddenly blurred, so that even Mohit Chattopadhyay would ask: ‘What theme can I choose? What kind of a character? I’m afraid lest it goes against the Left Front!’ When a playwright faces such a dilemma, it is more our failure than the playwright’s.

Arun Mukherjee interviewed by Paramita Banerjee and Sumita Banerjee for STQ
Transcribed and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay
Bibhash Chakraborty (b. 23 September 1937), actor-director, began theatre career in Nandikar, breaking away in 1966 to form Theatre Workshop which he led till 1985, when he formed Anya Theatre. Was employed in Doordarshan (1974–89) and later for a long period as producer; directed plays for several groups and television serials. Major directorial works include Rajrakta, Chak Bhanga Madhu, Madhab Malanchi Kainya. Has acted in several films, including Parashuram, directed by Mrinal Sen. Recipient of many awards including Special Award for Outstanding Director by the Government of West Bengal (1980), Sisirkumar Bhaduri Award (1988), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1989).
Bibhash Chakraborty. The small towns of undivided, pre-Partition Bengal—the mofussil towns or semi-urban settlements—were influenced by the theatre conventions current in Calcutta at the time. It was true not only in Sylhet town, where I grew up—in opar Bangla [the Bengal on the other side of the Border]—I saw the same tendency later in the tea gardens of northern Bengal, where there are stages with revolving discs. I discovered these stages when much later we were invited to perform at places where we had never expected such stages to exist. There were zamindars and affluent people who had set up small stages to put up plays once a year or on more occasions for their own entertainment or pleasure. In Jainagar [40 km south of Calcutta] there is a theatre—Vasanti Natya Mandir—a hundred years old. Neat and small, but beautiful. The theatre that our forefathers in theatre had learnt and acquired from the British and practised in Calcutta had sent ripples over the length and breadth of the State, in different places in eastern Bengal, north Bengal, with productions drawing on their examples.

Sylhet, in present Bangladesh, where I was born, was pre-eminent, both culturally and in terms of educational standards, with significant achievements in women’s education, with facilities in the form of schools and colleges. There was a college for women in a village called Baniachong or Madaner Chok, in the Habigunje subdivision of Sylhet. When studying for Honours in Geography, I found Baniachong described as ‘the biggest village in the world’ by Spate, an Australian, in his book India and Pakistan. Later when I came to study the Mymensingh ballads [traditional folk ballads and folk plays collected for the first time in 1913 by Chandrakumar De, and edited, annotated and published by Dineshchandra Sen in 1923, drawing the attention of Rolland, Maeterlinck, and later Dusan Zbavitel who wrote a study, Bengali Folk Ballads from Mymensingh, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1963], I found references to Madaner Chok as the locale of several of these legends and tales, like that of Sonai Gaji. Sylhet was thus well in advance in culture and education. And we took great pride in this achievement.
I was born in 1937, virtually on the eve of World War II. When I came to some sort of consciousness, moving from childhood to boyhood, I could see something of the impact of the War, which was felt a little more strongly in Sylhet than elsewhere, because it was a city in Assam, which was close to Burma, and there was the fear of the Japanese entering India from Burma, through Assam. Hence continuous military movements were a familiar sight. We saw black American soldiers, and white tommies. We saw the passing Indian contingents too—they often camped next to our house. In Sylhet, we had a sense of the shadows of war hovering over us. With the rise in the prices of commodities and everything.

Simultaneously something else was happening in the cultural sphere, with the emergence of a peace movement, drawing on the mobilization of the anti-fascist forces and individuals—writers, artists and intellectuals—all over the world. In Sylhet, we could see a small-scale manifestation of this too.

My father was a well-known, powerful Congress leader of the region—Binodebihari Chakrabarty. But whatever he did in the cultural field, he did in close collaboration with the Communists. This was quite surprising, and later I wondered how this could be possible. Was it a sign of my father’s liberalism, or was there something in the situation that made demands and created pressures that drew them together? It is the latter that must have happened. For the cause then was not exclusive to a specific party. Just as the cause of secularism today brings like-minded fellow travellers together, under the umbrella of secularism. Then too several people were trying to take a position under the umbrella of antifascism. That is what must have made it possible for my Congressite father and the distinguished local leader of the IPTA to work together at that juncture. Much younger than my father at the time were Khaled Chowdhury, Nirmalendu Chowdhury, Hemango Biswas [(1912–87), music composer and singer, member of the undivided Communist Party and IPTA], Ashu Sen, later President of the state IPTA, and many others, forming the core of the local IPTA. They held a sahitya sabha [a literary meet] once a week. The participants included people like Satyabhushan Chaudhury headmaster of the local Rasamoy Memorial School (where I had joined in class three), Communist-minded, and maybe a member of the Communist party. As far as I can recall, it was still the local unit of the Pragati Lekhak O Shilpi Sangha [Progressive Writers and Artists Association], renamed from the earlier Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association. I grew up in that setting.

The setting could accommodate the writing of new poetry as well as the traditional kobigaan or the kobir ladai [public debates carried on by poets in verse on political, social and moral issues, assuming the roles of Capitalist and Communist, the protagonist of violence and that of non-violence, or purushakar, the spirit of the self-reliant and independent man, pitted against nityati or destiny, etc.] There was a Phani-Babu who performed in the latter mode. Hemango-da produced shadow plays—I have a faint recollection of one sequence of a shadow play illustrating his Naval Revolt song, ‘Neel samudra laal hoyey gelo nabiker raktey,’ i.e. ‘The blue sea turned red with the blood of the sailors.’ There was an annual literary conference on a large scale, for which a distinguished writer from Calcutta would come up. Manik Bandyopadhyay came for the first session, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay for the second. The last that we attended—before leaving the country, and coming to settle in India after Partition—was addressed by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. My father presided over the sessions. So a lot happened in our house, and we were witness to a lot of things. Father edited a periodical, its office right before our house. Father spent almost the whole day in the office, coming home for lunch in the afternoon. There was a press too for the periodical.

I hung on to my father in all his activities and involvements—in the printing press, the publishing programme, the periodical, the songs, the kobigaan, his regular literary practice. He would write a poem for me to recite in the literary meet, where on other occasions I would recite poems by other poets too. A friend, Amiya Deb [who recently
retired as Vice-Chancellor, Vidyasagar University, Medinipur, distinguished scholar in Comparative Literature, Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University], barely two years older than me, already had quite a reputation as a poet.

Theatre was part of this larger scene. There is something in the blood of a Bengali that will not let him stay away from theatre, whether a policeman, or a doctor, or a lawyer; he must get into theatre somehow, almost as life itself! I saw the same thing in Sylhet. Anyone in the city, distinguished in one profession or another, would take part in theatre at least once in a year—in a big way! I saw a lot of the kind of theatre I have described already, that was performed by the babus all over Bengal, modelled on the professional theatre in Calcutta—like *Karnarjun* [play by Aparareshchandra Mukhopadhyay (1875–1934), legendary actor-manager-director-playwright]. There was a large ground adjacent to the Janashakti Press—a large press—right before our house where my father’s periodical *Janashakti* was printed—my father’s press. That was known as Jindabahar—a central point of Sylhet. Plays like *Uttara* [by Mahendra Gupta (1910–84), playwright, director, actor] and *Karnarjun* were staged there. There was a Rai Sahib who once conducted a jatra performance of *Surath Uddhar*—that I watched. These fascinated me, particularly the spectacles on stage that were imported from Calcutta. Of the four productions that I saw then and remember—*Uttara, Karnarjun, Karagar*, and the jatra *Surath Uddhar*—in *Karagar*, when Basudev crosses the river with his son, across the storm-tossed swirling waters, with a serpent above providing them with a shelter from the rains, with the water and the rain, and the lightning, all made with material brought from Calcutta, it called for encores, the audience crying themselves hoarse with excitement. These are the impressions and images that haunted me, and I started making things—like cummerbunds and bracelets and weapons—designing and fabricating them myself at that young age.

These were exposures to things that actually originated in Calcutta. But my first direct encounter with Calcutta came in 1946, or maybe even a little earlier. My maternal uncle was staying in Calcutta, somewhere around Beadon Street, and I had come to visit them. My uncle used to take us to see films and plays. We saw films like *Maney na Mana* [1945] at Purabi, and *Shahar Thekey Durey* [1943] at Liberty. My uncle took us to see the play *Gairik Pataka*, at Minerva. That was a stupendous experience for the illusion that it offered, something that I had never thought theatre capable of. The rampants of a fortress crumbling under cannon fire, with an enormous stage depth exposed in the process, left a tremendous impact on me. Kamal Mitra [(1912–93), actor] acted Shivaji. I remember his presence. Sarajubala [(1912–1994), legendary actress] too was probably in the cast.

If that was one kind of an experience, that of Rashid Ali Day in Calcutta [12 February 1946, marked by massive demonstrations by Leftist youth demanding commutation of the life imprisonment orders passed on Captain Abdul Rashid Ali of the INA, leading to police firing taking a toll of six lives] on the same visit represented another kind altogether. My uncle’s house was close to Central Avenue [now Chittaranjan Avenue], where I stood watching as people ran chased by the police, and then again turned on the police hurling stones at them. We went up to the terrace to have a better view, and ran down when the police appeared on the scene. Then the police fired. We later picked up bullets from our terrace. Some of these experiences went into the making of my father’s play, *Rakter Lekha* [‘Written in Blood’], which he wrote on his return to Sylhet, and was staged at the annual literary conference, with the IPTA artistes in the cast, and Hemango Biswas as composer for the songs. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay presided over the year’s session, and watched the performance, and enjoyed it. It was a departure from the kind of plays common in those days, from the crass commercial stuff of the public stage, that I could relish as well; but I could sense already in a way the difference that marked my father’s play or the shadow plays produced by Hemango Biswas, like the one he did on the Naval Mutiny—*Neel Samudra Lat Hoyo Gelo* [‘The Blue Ocean Turns Red’]. When I came over to Calcutta after Partition, these are the plays that stayed on with me to prod
me on to get involved in theatre. There were some plays that I read aloud, mostly by D. L. Roy [Dwijendralal Roy (1863–1913), poet, humorist, lyricist, composer, playwright]. I didn’t understand all the words, but I recall reading them aloud—Chandragupta, for example. There were a few plays by my father too, which had appeared in print, e.g. Rajnata about Kaikeyee—which I read aloud. That was when I was feeling the first inner urge to get into theatre.

[Samik Bandyopadhyay. When did you leave Sylhet, and why? Were you in any way directly affected by the riots?]

That’s the point. Now I really wonder why we left our homeland. I was in no state then to get to the core of the situation. As a political figure, my father was quite prominent. Meanwhile a referendum had taken place. Two such referendums took place in undivided India—one in Punjab, the other in our Sylhet. Sylhet decided to go to Pakistan on a small majority of 53,000 votes, and that created animosity between the communities. The symbols were a house for India, and a hatchet for Pakistan. There was even a song circulating, which went something like this: ‘O Brother, put your vote into the box for the house,/ Don’t strike the house with the hatchet.’ A part of the animosity would naturally be directed against a leader of my father’s prominence.

More recently, two years ago, on my way back from Bogura to Dhaka, I had got down from the bus at Nagarberia Ghat. There I met a Muslim gentleman, a human rights activist, who, having learnt of my antecedents, asked me: ‘Why did you leave this country? Wasn’t it your land too?’ I did not have an answer. I had nothing to fall back on for justification. Several distinguished people had left their homes in East Bengal and come over to West Bengal. They included people like Jibanananda Das [(1899–1954), eminent poet] and Buddhadev Bose [(1908–1974) eminent poet, novelist, essayist, translator]—I don’t know when exactly they migrated, before or after Partition. They might have had an answer, those who belonged to my father’s generation. But Sylhet as such had not felt the brunt of the riots. I never saw a communal riot in Sylhet. I am told Sylhet now is a den of the fundamentalists. But all that I recall is the wonderful cordiality that bound us to my father’s Muslim friends, in the political fraternity, those who kept us supplied with rice, firewood, and meat. We never felt any difference between Hindus and Muslims. But this may have been true only for a section of the people, like us, who were somewhat different anyway, in our family backgrounds and environments. It may have been different for the others, for all you know.

We left Sylhet, but did not come straightaway to West Bengal. We stayed for a while in Shillong, which was quite close to Sylhet. There were many Sylhetis living in Shillong then, including relations like a maternal uncle, whom we often visited during the summer holidays! To go to Shillong, we just had to cross the Khasi-Jaintiya hills. It was a beautiful city. From Shillong we came back to Sylhet for a while, before coming over permanently to West Bengal.

We came to West Bengal in 1948—most probably in August. For a while, immediately on arrival here, as we still looked for secure ground to stand on, there was no way we could think of things like theatre, or cultural matters. In West Bengal, we stayed first at Ranaghat for a while, in a village called Anulia, close to Ranaghat town—village, which on a recent visit, I found, shows no sign of progress since then; the reason lying in the fact that it is inhabited almost exclusively by brahmans, i.e. Chatterjees, Banerjees, Mukherjeees, kulin [the highest order of brahmans, tracing their descent from the brahman families supposedly so recognized and honoured by Ballalsena, ruler of Bengal, 1158–79] brahmans all. The village babus had cushy jobs in Calcutta, with little concern for the village, which they visited only occasionally. But as their visits became rarer, their village houses suffered from neglect, and all that remained were abandoned, crumbling structures. The babus were in no way related to the local production process, and they constituted the dominant sector of the village. That explains the backwardness of the
village. These babus put up plays for the pujas—plays like *Dui Purush*, in which my elder brothers participated. Plays were done in the *chandimandaps* [assembly halls that formed an essential part of the traditional mansions of the landed gentry in Bengal, used for pujas as well as performances and gatherings]. My connections with theatre were revived only when I came to Calcutta, in 1951, and settled in Shyambazar, and started participating in plays being staged in the *para* [the neighbourhood community] or the local clubs. Then we moved to Dum Dum.

I somehow never lasted in a school for more than two years. And not for having done badly in the tests, or having been thrown out of any school. The reasons were solely economic. I joined school in Sylhet, in class three, completed class four; and shifted to Shillong, where I spent a year at the Jail Road School; did a few months in class six at the Middle English school in Anulia; then classes seven and eight at the Palchoudhury High School at Ranaghat; came to Calcutta, where I completed class nine at Shyambazar Town School, and was promoted to class ten, but was not enrolled in the new class and given a transfer certificate, because I had not been able to pay my school fees. I studied at home, and appeared for the School Final Examinations. The breaks in my school career only go to show the uncertainties under which our generation drifted.

Then I was admitted to Presidency College. It was there that I got back the links that I had lost and left behind in Sylhet. A new theatre and a new cinema were emerging in Calcutta at the time—Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt in theatre, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak in cinema.

[S. B. When did you start college?]

1953. And that is when I started watching plays and films, and taking the initiative in college theatricals. You joined college immediately after us. You will remember that in Presidency College, girls and boys were not allowed to act together at the time, and boys had to act as girls. And the plays chosen were the old traditional plays, e.g. *Bisher Banshi* ['Poison Flute']. We were the first batch in Presidency College to be influenced and motivated by Bohurupee We invited Bohurupee to perform at our annual ‘social’ [a mixed entertainment package for the students], and watched their regular performances. We got directors from Bohurupee to come and direct plays for us. Amar Ganguly directed one of our plays.

[S. B. In my first year at College, I saw Bohurupee performing *Sedin Bangalakshmi Bank-ey* (Ajit Gangopadhyay’s adaptation of a Chekhov one-acter) for us.]

We did *Naba Swayambar* and *Ajker Uttar* by Ajit Gangopadhyay [(1921–84) playwright, translator, known also for his adaptations of Chekhov and Brecht] and two plays by my father—*Vanity Ban* and *Khadam* ['Wooden Clogs']. He wrote these two plays specially for us, and they were quite successful.

It was while I was at Presidency College that I first learnt to distinguish between the two theatres—the theatre that had fascinated me and that I had adored, and the new theatre. The former did not get wiped away from my mind, but intellectually I recognized the superiority of the latter, which was intellectually richer and a more necessary theatre, a theatre that articulated its own time, even as it took stock of the social and political happenings taking place all around. My college days began in a setting of political protest—the agitation against the one paisa raise in tramfares, in 1953. The first day of the session classes were suspended. Dipendranath Bandyopadhyay [1933–79, Communist writer, physically a midget] leapt up on to the tabletop and addressed us in fiery words. We came out of the class, and went off to see a matinee show! As the movement continued, all kinds of things were happening. My days began in a setting of political protest—the agitation against the one paisa raise in tramfares, in 1953. The first day of the session classes were suspended. Dipendranath Bandyopadhyay [1933–79, Communist writer, physically a midget] leapt up on to the tabletop and addressed us in fiery words. We came out of the class, and went off to see a matinee show! As the movement continued, all kinds of things were happening. Amlan Dutta [b. 1924, economist and radical thinker, has served as Vice Chancellor at North Bengal and Visva-Bharati Universities] was dragged out of a tramcar, when he defied the call for boycott issued by the agitators. All this constituted a new phase.

It would not be quite true to say that the appeal of the old theatre was altogether dead
for us. I had not cared to see the old style plays at Star Theatre—the Mahendra Gupta plays. But in the fifties the commercial theatre was entering on a new phase—with Shyamali at Star, Durabhashini at Rangmahal, Kshudha at Biswaroopa after Bhaduri’s exit. The changes in the commercial theatre may not have been theatrically quite original, but there were new themes, and a greater concern with social reality than with mythological or devotional plays.

[S. B. And a whole new band of actors from a different tradition altogether—like Kali Banerjee, who came from the IPTA, and gave a memorable performance in Arogya Niketan, with which Biswaroopa opened.]

Exactly. There was something fresh in the air, a departure from the old, worn out historical and mythological plays, advertised in the long posters, printed from wooden blocks, or the ‘combination nights’ [with actors from different companies—the big stars—performing together for a single performance, often in a highly competitive spirit, showing off their particular skills] of Karnarjun once again, or Chandragupta yet once again in a futile endeavour to keep the old tradition still breathing; with Uttam Kumar and Sabitri Chatterjee in Shyamali; or the courage of dramatizing a story by Narendranath Mitra [(1917–75), major novelist and short story writer in the realistic mode, at his best when dealing with the everyday reality of the urban middle class], in Durabhashini, for which Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra had been originally cast.

But when we brought Amar Ganguly down to direct plays for us or watched the Bohurupee productions, we came to realize that making theatre was no easy matter, and it called for a lot of thinking, a lot of training and learning, and a lot of hard work. It was a new awareness that came to several of us at the same time. Till then, like the average young Bengali man, we had taken theatre for granted as a birthright, as if born a Bengali, one could just move on to the stage.

All this together constituted the basis or inspiration for my presence in theatre. It is only at this point that one starts asking: How shall I do my bit in theatre? Am I really capable of doing it? Then one adopts a trial and error method, the only choice open to us in this country.

I had to give up studies after graduation, and had to go for a job—and with the job, I was in for theatre in competition.

[S. B. Did you start in the Accountant General’s Office?]

No, in 1957, for a year, I was at the High Court, then in 1958, at the Accountant General’s Office [in clerical-secretarial jobs], where I was employed at a stretch till 1974, when I joined Doordarshan [the national-official TV]. It may sound a little pompous, but the fact remains that as refugees, we were on the one hand struggling for survival—at an essentially personal and familial level—and on the other hand, we were involved in the other endeavour. Theatre in competition was and remains a peculiar phenomenon in our part of the country. I do not know if there is anything like it elsewhere in the country. Lots of young Bengali men and women still find their first opportunity to participate in theatre in competitive theatre, where the costs are low, and there is scope to perform at different sites, to different audiences. Now there is a massive network of such theatre competitions, spread all over the state, and beyond, in cities where there is a considerable Bengali-speaking population. The network was not so elaborate perhaps in the fifties. But we set up a neighbourhood theatre group, and put up plays by Ajit Gangopadhyay, who was then a playwright representing a new trend, or plays by my father, and participated in some of these competitions.

At the Accountant General’s Office, I came into contact—as colleagues—with a group that included Mrigankashekhar Roy, Prabodh Maitra, Snehakar Bhattacharya, Dhruva Gupta, all of them senior to me—my dadas [lit. elder brothers, but used more generally to mean immediate seniors, often mentors]—who led me into the film society movement. I was simultaneously drawn to the new theatre and the new cinema. I had seen films by
Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, but it is only when I came into this circle and joined the Calcutta Film Society—the only film society in West Bengal then, the other one being Anandam in Bombay—founded by Satyajit Ray, and with a membership of a hundred at the time, that I came to see that they represented a new trend, with a different set of thoughts and ideas and culture. Barely twenty or twenty-one, I took pride in being one of the chosen hundred members of the Calcutta Film Society, contributed to the Society’s journal, and assisted Mriganka in matters of its editing and layout. It was in the Calcutta Film Society that I had my first opportunity to work on editing and layout—and then at Nandikar. Shyamal Ghosh played an important role in this direction—as a great source of inspiration.

At the age of ten, I had acquired the skill of setting types by hand—in English. Bengali I found too complicated—with the i-kar [the sign for the ‘i’ sound] and the u-kar [the sign for the ‘oo’ sound], and the chandrabindu [the sign for the nasal], and so many boxes, whereas English had only twenty-six, and there was no trouble whatsoever. I could compose at ease. I knew all the boxes at the age of ten. I had mastered proofreading at the age of ten. Father used to correct proofs. I picked up the craft, watching him at work. I had a living interest in printing and editing.

That was where I developed my interest in cinema, reading books on cinema, watching films. I watched a lot of films in the Society’s screenings. Dhruba, Mriganka and Prabodh had a theatre group, with which I came to participate in theatre too. Manideepa Roy and Purabi Roy, Sushanta Basu, Siddhartha and several others were part of the group. I was the junior in the group, working under the dadas. They rehearsed Ghosts for a long spell, under the direction of Mriganka. They staged Send Me No Flowers, a comedy which had also been made into a film by then. But what I liked and enjoyed most was the production of Sukumar Ray’s Jhalapala in which Prasun Dasgupta acted and sang several songs. An amateur theatre practice was in full swing, but I found it too amateurish, nothing more than pastime for a bunch of intellectuals; hence not of much use, and with little of a sense of serious, regular work.

[S. B. Your role there, I can see, was quite secondary. They were doing things, and you were around.]

Right. I was just around. I was enriched, of course, by the discussions, for my seniors were far ahead of me in their reading and knowledge of things. I could put my acquisitions to use when I put up plays in my neighbourhood for the competitions.

In one of these competitions, I met Ajitesh Bandypadhyay [(1933–83), actor and director, founder of the groups Nandikar and Nandimukh] who lived then at Patipukur, in Dum Dum [one of the northernmost districts of Calcutta], and was active in the Communist Party and the IPTA, and taught at a neighbourhood school, in Deshbandunagar, in Baguiati. I was staying in Dum Dum at the time. It was a competition organized on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Vivekananda, under the auspices of the cultural wing of the SUCI [The Socialist Unity Centre of India, a leftwing political party, strongly opposed to the official Communist Parties], at the Tripal Factory. We staged Naba Swayambar. Ajitesh Bandypadhyay was one of the judges. I had heard of him already, but was seeing him in the flesh for the first time. Large and tall, he was an impressive presence, with a warm personality. Quite infectious. After the performance, he came up to me and hugged me. He was so tall, and I so short and small, and all bones! He said: ‘Marvellous! marvellous! What’s your name?’ I got my prizes, and came away happy.

That was the turning point that brought me to my serious involvement with theatre that I have continued or have been at least trying to continue till now. This was in 1963. Nandikar had already come into being—in 1960. I was not part of Nandikar at its beginning. Meanwhile I had had a short stint at Bohurupee.

Let me fill you in on that. Once I had started watching plays and films, the question
that troubled me was: Where can I learn about these things? Who is there to teach me? I had realized by then that I could not do a thing without learning. I had to learn. Learning through exposure or hands on training could of course be a worthwhile process in a country like ours where there is little institutional provision for training. I was almost coming to terms with such a prospect when I suddenly came across a newspaper advertisement announcing a training programme to be conducted by Bohurupee. I sent in a formal application, and received a card inviting me to come for an interview, to be held at the residence of Dr. Manindralal Biswas, the eminent paediatrician, on Indian Mirror Street, near Wellington Square. The interviews were being held simultaneously in a number of rooms, with Kumar Roy conducting one in one of the rooms, Sombhu Mitra in another, Amar Gangopadhyay and others in the other rooms. I was interviewed by Kumar Roy. I went through the exercise with a certain amount of trepidation, and the uncertainty over whether I would get a chance or not. Finding a place in an organization of the standing of Bohurupee meant a great deal at the time. Soon enough a letter arrived, telling me that I had been selected. That was a great relief, for there had been a large number of candidates.

At Bohurupee, the training programme had two major components—Kumar Roy taking us through several books, what books I do not remember any longer and Sombhu Mitra coming in occasionally—quite rarely as a matter of fact—to read a poem or two with us. We had our classes at 11A, Nasiruddin Road, in the drawing room. We had a feeling of the presence of the hub of activities, somewhere further inside the house, with people coming in and going out incessantly, and scraps of conversation wafting in. But we had no access to all that. We never stepped into that part of the house [also the residence of the Mitras—Sombhu and Tripti—for a long span. Tripti Mitra left the house only when she was terminally sick.] We never needed to. But Sombhu Mitra would rarely make his appearances from within, to read poems with us, reciting them in his characteristic manner. We enjoyed these sessions.

From my childhood, I have carried two traits with me, which may have even caused me some damage. I have never been able to submit myself to anybody as a blind devotee. I have never had blind reverence for anybody or anything. I had supported a political party for a long spell, but had not been able to support it blindly all the time. I have never supported any guru blindly. As for my other trait, I had a strong resistance to any kind of artificiality. I rejected anything that was artificial. In the process, I have often mistaken things classical for the artificial, and have held myself back from them. In my response to the Bengali language too, it has come in the way of my appreciation of modes and patterns slightly rhetorical, or with a little flourish. As a consequence, my own use of language has been too cut and dried. And it is only much later that I came to realize that such a language was not adequate for literary practice, and felt that I should have worked with language differently.

With these traits that I carried with me, I could not come to terms with the atmosphere that reigned in Bohurupee. I remember we used to have a break for refreshments in the middle of our training sessions. We came to our sessions at 5 or 5.30 in the evening. We had the break at about 7. We went up to the end of the road, and crossed the tramway track to a shop opposite the tram depot—for snacks. There I used to mimic the voices of Sombhu Mitra, Amar Gangopadhyay, and their manners. My friends warned me, ‘Don’t Bibhash, you’ll get caught.’ At the end of a spell of six months, I realized that the stifling atmosphere of Bohurupee was no place for me. Stifling, not in the sense that someone was throttling us, but all that went to make the atmosphere—Amar Gangopadhyay’s bloodshot eyes striking terror in us, as he stood at the entrance to New Empire, as we walked in for a morning performance, too scared to utter a word. I remember an occasion or two, when he looked at his watch and then cast a look at me, with an awe-inspiring grimness, as I came to a rehearsal late by two minutes, and that would be enough to give me the terror of my life. Sombhu-da was totally inaccessible anyway. The man we had
chosen to be our mentor, and the one who drew us, was never there for us, and we were left to the mercies of those whom he had taught, and I was not quite prepared to accept a situation where we could learn only at second hand! I told myself that I had come to be trained by Sombhu Mitra, and if all those others had had the privilege of being trained by him, why should I be denied that opportunity? In what way was I lesser than them?

I found Kumar Roy the most approachable of them all. The other thing that I noticed among them was their common feeling that Bohurupee was the best, and there seemed to be nothing else in existence. Even after I had left Bohurupee, and went to watch visiting British companies performing at the New Empire Theatre, under the auspices of the British Council, on concessional tickets that gave us seats in the ‘gallery’ or the upper balcony high above, we met Bohurupee actors sitting next to us, with the snooty look that proclaimed to all and sundry that they did a theatre far superior to whatever they had come to watch! Everyone in Bohurupee, from the youngest to the oldest—the oldest, of course, remained inaccessible—had the same contemptuous attitude for all theatre but their own. I did not like such an attitude.

There were of course things that we learnt, for example, from Anil Banerjee, watching him at work setting up a scene through the night at New Empire for the performance the following morning, and listening to him explaining the rationale of the stage design he was mounting at the moment, and the craft of its making; the preparations that went into a new production; Sunil Sarkar, ironing the costumes and telling me, ‘Bibhash, learn up all that you can; you’ll never have a chance like this again.’ I had my chance when Raktakarabi [originally produced by
Bohurupee in 1954] and *Chhenra Tar* ['Broken Cord,' by Tulsi Lahiri, originally produced by Bohurupee in 1948] were revived to be staged regularly at the Biswaroopa Theatre. I was chosen to be one of the young men, led in by Gokul, then acted by Arun Mukherjee [lead actor of several films, including *Kanchanjungha* directed by Satyajit Ray, *Kanchanranga*, directed by Amar Gangopadhyay, and *Swapna Niye*, directed by Purnendu Pattrea], and asked to bring my own costume, shorts and ragged shirts. We would enter the stage, with Arun, shouting, ‘Burn the witch!’ There was a sense of thrill, acting with Tripti Mitra, who of course didn’t know me; but there she was standing, and we would shout at her threateningly, then run out. We could thus take pride in having participated in *Raktakarabi*. I recall rehearsing at 11A, Nasiruddin Road, for *Chhenra Tar*, as part of the company of *gajan* [traditional folk theatre form, centering on the god Siva visiting the earth] singers, dancing, as Soven-da [Soven Majumdar, outstanding singer-actor (1927–87), best remembered as Bishu in the Bohurupee *Raktakarabi*] sat listening. I saw Latika Bose, one of the Bohurupee actresses, move up to Soven-da, point to me, and whisper something to Soven-da, who called me up, ‘Listen, you don’t have to do it. You can rest.’ It was such a painful disappointment. I did make appearances in some of the plays. I could see the group Bohurupee and its activities at close quarters. That was quite an experience. But the desire to learn directly that had drawn me to Bohurupee remained unfulfilled.

As far as I can remember, I was in the Bohurupee course from March to September, 1961. I was active in the film society simultaneously.

[S. B. Was Asit Banerjee in the course with you?]

No, he was in the course the year before. That earlier batch was a good one, with Asit, with Himangshu Chatterjee and Arun Mukherjee. There was no one particularly striking in our batch. We had someone called Subhas Bose from Jainagar, who wrote plays for the radio. There was Rampada, who stayed on with Bohurupee, handling the lights.

Asit had already joined Nandikar. I had long conversations with Arun, who had become a good friend.

[S. B. Himangshu and Arun were the two who were quite different from the Bohurupee lot. They were more open.]

Quite different. True. With their openness Arun asked me what I thought of Bohurupee’s *Muktadhara*. I told him I didn’t like it at all. I didn’t like its sets. The costumes were the typical gaudy kind, made of saris, the kind we wore in childhood for our plays. Arun tried to justify it, from what he had gathered in the group.
Anyway . . .

But something terrible happened soon after I had left Bohurupee, which had just produced Tagore's *Bisarjan*, and had got a slightly critical review in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* by Sebabrata Gupta or someone else. Playing smart, I wrote a long letter to the editor, criticizing the production, and Sombhu Mitra's performance in particular, and making perhaps a technical error, when I complained that Mitra's voice became too nasal when he came to bass! The only actor I liked in the production was Kumar Roy. There was a rejoinder in the newspaper—not from Sombhu Mitra—quipping, 'One fails to understand how a voice becomes nasal at the bass!'

Several years later, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay on one occasion was describing me, a new entrant to his group, Nandikar, to Sombhu Mitra, as a promising theatre person, who should go a long way if he stayed on in theatre. Mitra asked for my name, and asked Ajitesh, 'Bibhash? Had he written a letter to *Ananda Bazar* on *Bisarjan*?' Ajitesh came back and asked me, 'What had you written?'

[S. B. Sombhu-babu would never forget something like that. Every little thing he would remember!]

Every little thing. In 1963, Nandikar decided to perform *Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhati Charitra* [adapted from Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*] regularly every Tuesday evening at the Muktangan theatre. This was the first real break for Nandikar. I had seen the play already. Ashok [Mukherjee] had taken me to see it. He was junior to me in Presidency College, and was a neighbourhood friend, and had been instrumental in collecting playscripts from my father for college theatricals. Ashok introduced me to Ajitesh at the end of the performance at Muktangan, which left me floored. I had never thought before *Six Characters* that there could be theatre like this. It was like a thunderclap without the warming of a raincloud. It was so radically different from all the theatre that we had been familiar with till then. And yet all the elements were drawn from our own surroundings. There were no unfamiliar characters, no unfamiliar situation—but they had never come into our theatre with the power of such presence.

Ajitesh had seen me in the role of a drunken man in the play which he had seen at the competition, He offered me the role of an actor in *Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhati Charitra*, played by Chinu [Chinmoy Roy, originally a Nandikar actor, now a film star, best known as a comic], a funny role, that does not quite grow into a character, but exudes a spirit of infectious ebullience on the stage. That is how I came into Nandikar, with considerable trepidation. I was lucky in having a role to start with right when I came into the group.

The more common experience of a new entrant in our 'group theatre' would be: 'Start coming. Sweep the floor. Bring cups of tea for the actors. Then we'll see. Stick it around for a year or two. Then maybe you'd get a part to play.' But I had the good fortune of coming into Nandikar—with a part! I had come into the scene anyway at an age slightly above the average for new entrants in theatre, I had had a lot of exposure already, was employed at the Accountant General's Office, was involved in the agitations of the government employees—the Association, the Central Government employees' strike—as part of everything, maybe not mature yet, but *paka* [over-ripe] anyway. Hence I was not in the mood to join some organization as an apprentice. At Nandikar, I got just the right entry—to my great advantage.

What I had missed at Bohurupee—the opportunity of learning directly from the director, or someone who had the position and capacity to teach me to be a better theatre person, so that I could make proper use of the hidden theatre desires I nurtured within myself—I found in Nandikar in full measure. What I have come to realize over the years in hindsight is that I had always had a strong urge to be a leader myself—a craving for leadership—rather than be a member of, or an actor in some group or other. I did not have the temperament of a follower going by instructions handed down by someone in a position of superiority. When I had enrolled for the Bohurupee course, my idea was to
learn the tricks of the trade, and then be on my own, do things as I wanted to. I had no desire to be an actor or an ordinary member of Bohurupee. That feeling persisted.

I came to Nandikar in the same frame of mind. So with all the luck I had when I joined, I left Nandikar too at the first available opportunity. I had no reason whatsoever to be personally aggrieved or offended as far as Ajitesh was concerned. If one talks of personal gain and privileges, I think I enjoyed the most of them, of those who were in Nandikar at the time. It had grown into a habit with me to leave an institution or organization whenever things became unpleasantly complicated—it has been the same when I left my jobs or my theatre groups.

It was in Nandikar that I saw Ajitesh at work from close quarters. He never offered formal lessons or training. His method of work was a lesson in itself. When he took up a play, he would explain and interpret it in meticulous detail, and let the play move through the entire group, not the play by itself, but the play along with the playwright, with his other works. I saw Six Characters as a finished production. I saw Manjari Amer Manjari [adaptation of Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard, adapted and directed by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay for Nandikar, premiered 1964] taking shape before my eyes. I saw how he adapted Chekhov, transplanting the play from its Russian setting, and to transplant it, how he brought into it our own people, people whom we have known and seen and heard, and situations and incidents and history that have been part of our experience. All these he knew so intimately that he could bring them in quite naturally, and there was no way one could find anything foreign in it.

Later, when he did Jakhan Eka [from Arnold Wesker’s Roots, directed by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay for Nandikar, premiered 1966], he dictated the text in adaptation, for me to take it down. He virtually threw away the earlier adaptation by Rudraprasad Sengupta [a scene of which had been staged by Nandikar already as Phul Phutuk Na Phutuk], and he worked it out anew. In the changes that he wrought on the earlier version, I could see an exemplary process of indigenization. It was his model that inspired several other playwrights attempting to adapt plays from other languages—like Satyen Mitra and Ashok Mukhopadhyay (when he came to write Chhayay Aloey, from O’ Casey’s Juno and the Paycock or Bela Abelar Galpa from Wesker’s Chicken Soup with Barley). The method they adopted was that improvised by Ajitesh. Rudraprasad too has been on the same track.

Along with the meticulous care that went into the adaptation, there was also a long programme of familiarization with Chekhov, that entailed reading of his short stories—one after another, so many of them—his reading brought those stories to life before our eyes. I have seen few people with Ajitesh’s capacity for creating pictures out of words. Later, Sombhu Mitra would tell us, ‘To be a good actor you have to master the storyteller’s art, be a good storyteller.’

[S. B. That is at the core of theatre.]

That is at the core of theatre. At the end of Ajitesh’s long account of Chekhov’s life and times, with anecdotes and excerpts from his works, we seemed to be immersed in Chekhov. This method has ever since remained a model for me, and been of great value and use.

In our present day theatre in India, we have neither an institutional base for theatre training nor the traditional gurukul system still prevailing in classical Indian music, with its magnata [immersion/absorption], which cannot serve the modern theatre. How can a person train himself/herself in theatre, in such circumstances, without any institutional or environmental support anywhere? I found an answer to that question, when I went to work with Ajitesh, for the method he adopted was perhaps the ideal method. He taught us, through his example, how one captured the details of a characterization in acting, or worked out the differences between one character and another, for all characters do not speak in the same manner. That is something that we learnt from Ajitesh, for earlier we had seen how a great theatre personality’s manner of speaking would be copied by
actors mechanically, as it happened with actors required to model themselves on either Sombhu Mitra or Utpal Dutt. In Ajitesh for the first time I saw someone who was keen to bring out of me what I had within myself, and realized that this is what theatre should aim at. For all men have the same common features, a head, two ears, two eyes, and yet every single one of the millions who constitute mankind is a distinct being, with a distinctive way of speaking and expressing oneself. It is this variety that makes life worthwhile. And that is what Ajitesh sought in and demanded from his actors, whether it was Radharaman Tapadar or Nemai Ghose or Bibhash Chakraborty or Ajoy Gangopadhyay. He studied the actor as an individual, studied the character, and matched one to the other. The net result of this integration of the individual and the character was a tremendous achievement. He may not have succeeded in every case, but when he did . . .

[S. B. It was so distinctive. That little bit of business by Nemai Ghose in *Manjari*, or Tapasi . . .]

Or Chinu [Chinmoy Roy]. This is something that I haven't seen in any other director, who would rather try to insert himself into the actor, without caring to find out whether the container could contain this alien content or not, or could contain it only under unnatural pressure, or produced an aberration. Ajitesh's method on the other hand was capable of allowing the actor to throw up spontaneously a distinctive self. This was a great lesson I derived from Ajitesh. As a director, I have had to work with much lesser talents than those that Ajitesh had at his command. But I have never attempted to put anything that is distinctively mine into any of my actors. From Ashok [Ashok Mukhopadhyay], Maya [Maya Ghosh] to Suranjana Dasgupta, each of them has drawn on and brought to view his/her own reserves. That is a principle I had learnt from Ajitesh. In our earlier notion of the director, when we began, we expected the director to show the actor his movements, the manner of his speaking, to the extent of acting it out for him, for the actor to merely follow and copy. When we started reading, we discovered that that was not the director's business. The director would sit and direct. He would interpret and explain a character. He would of course have a major say in the composition. But as far as acting is concerned, his role was not that of teaching step by step. His role is to give the actor the necessary directions for the course he/she would take, give him/her the cue, useful hints, and a broad outline; and then draw out of him/her what s/he had within himself/herself, and what he needed for his presentation. This has been my directorial method all through. I have always acknowledged what I learnt from Ajitesh in this manner, through sharing in his practice, through his making process. Though I differ from Ajitesh in the choice of theatre that he performed, politically and philosophically and in other ways; but as far as the working method is concerned, I am convinced that his was the ideal way. The man had a spellbinding personality that cast a spell on those who were around him at the time—like Ashok, Keya and several others. I did not fall under the spell, because, as I told you, I had come as an older person, with a load of experience. But the charm of his presence affected me no less, and my appreciation was as fervent as the rest of them.

There were certain attitudes that Ajitesh articulated time and again, setting him distinctively apart from his peers. He insisted that one cannot make good theatre unless one loved humanity. One need not take that credo literally, for we are aware of cases of bad people creating good theatre. Loving humanity meant caring for mankind to the point that enabled one to understand every kind of joy and misery men are capable of experiencing, to know why a person feels a particular kind of pain, or what brings him joy. This sensibility is an essential element in any characterization, or the making of any play. As an artist, one must love humanity, the generality of common people. That is what Brecht meant when he said that one cannot be a good actor if one is not a Communist. That too you can't take literally. Or later, Fritz Bennewitz would tell us,
when he came down to produce Brecht's *Life of Galileo* [produced in Bengali by the Calcutta Repertory Theatre, 1980] with us, 'You can't be a great actor, or even create a character, unless you are a social being. Never, never!' This would be particularly true for certain characters or certain plays in which the dominance of the individual, or the individual's tendency to show off would destroy it altogether, for those plays and characters demanded a love of humanity that would enable the artist to be one with the people, to become a part of them.

It is a quality that marked Ajitesh in his personal life too, evident in the ease with which he could love people and relate to them. But he was no coward. He never compromised with people. Never. He could criticize someone or something with ruthless severity, with the same ease. I have cherished that lesson I received from Ajitesh, and have found for myself how hard it becomes to work in theatre if one cannot love humanity. It's not a matter of trying to love people to do theatre, you must have it in your nature. Love and respect for people is of great use in theatre.

[S. B. Long after you had parted ways, Ajitesh would often come back to the theme of the publication of the booklets and texts underscoring the significance of the plays that Nandikar chose for production, and how he depended on you for their designing and production. The booklets that Nandikar published and the desire to reach out to the audience with the new ideas that went into both the choice and productional innovations of the new productions were in a sense products or an extension of what you describe as the love for humanity rooted in the man of theatre. The booklets offered clear, unpretentious, straightforward, brief rationalizations—nothing soppy or frothy about them—of the 'difference' of a particular play. The layout of these booklets represented the urge to communicate, to initiate a dialogue with the people, rather than any publishing/designing game. At that point, at that level, Nandikar played a significant role, in taking theatre out, drawing on the philosophy that Ajitesh upheld—call it socialist humanism, or what you like.]

The two immediate forebears, who are inevitable points of reference whenever Ajitesh is taken up for consideration, had also thought along these lines. But before I spell out the difference as I perceive it, let me define the level at which I conceive what I call love of the people. I am not suggesting that the political parties around us—particularly the Communists—do not feel concerned for the people. Ideologically, they speak of love of the people. But people fall back on their daily life experiences to test for themselves whether the political forces really love them or not, whether the former care for them or persecute them; they look for signs in their neighbourhoods, in their homes, in the marketplaces, in their professions, in their workplaces; they ask themselves: Can we sense a touch of that love anywhere? When they miss that touch, they realize that it is only a theoretical love that they have been offered. They identify it as love at a conceptual level, that does not touch them at a practical, experiential level. People seek a warmth that they can feel directly through body and mind. The feeling of the Communist Party that now runs through people here follows from that. They seem to be saying: 'Your theory's your affair! What do we get out of it in our lives? How far is your theory concretized for us?'

Something like that marks the difference between Ajitesh and his forebears. Both Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt had spoken of man in their productions. But they both spoke of humanity, maintaining a distance from it. They seem to take the position: 'We understand the human condition. We know how humanity can move to emancipate itself, how it can raise its status. We shall put it across in our plays.' But they would never come down to their level and be immersed in it. They do not heed Tagore's warning: 'Go down there, for there's no escape otherwise.' It is hard to come to that point. I am not suggesting for a moment the ridiculous possibility or need to get 'declassed'!
What Ajitesh had in him was the felt need to go out to the people for whom he was producing his plays, and relate to them heart to heart—not on a theoretical plane! The others too published books and periodicals. The periodical Bohurupee continues to be published regularly, and still features important and substantial articles, well-written and useful articles, on world theatre, classical theatre, on the components and techniques of theatre. Utpal Dutt published Padapradeep, which too was a forum. Padapradeep was followed by Proscenium, followed by Epic Theatre.

But Ajitesh took a more direct approach—his publications were in the nature of bulletins. Ajitesh chose the route of direct communication, as in publication, so also in his choice of production space. He chose the small, shoddy Muktangan for his theatre, instead of the large auditoriums like New Empire, chosen by both Mitra and Dutt, and catering to a difference class, a different section of people. He chose to perform among the common people, for the common people—by the common people, we do not mean the workers and peasants, but the middle class, lower and middle classes, i.e. us, the urban and the semi-urban. Ajitesh knew how to reach them and touch them. It was there in his being, he was one of them. That is what motivated him to publish those booklets—in which he introduced Chekhov and his play, answering and explaining in the simplest terms: What is Chekhov? What is Manjari Amer Manjar? He was offering in simple terms a total perspective to his viewer, telling him how and why and in what setting Chekov wrote his plays, what relevance they had for his people and his times, and what relevance they could have for Kallol directed by Utpal Dutt upheld the revolutionary trend in the national movement and came into conflict with the more common emphasis on non violence as the means to liberation, and was blacked out by the press leading to an unprecedented movement by the theatre groups joining in a campaign to publicize the play with innovations in theatre publicity. Photograph by Shambhu Banerjee. Courtesy Sova Sen, Utpal Dutt Foundation for International Theatre Studies.
the present audience; so that for the viewer a performance would not be just a show, an exhibition, but something related and integrated to a lot of other things. This is something Ajitesh accomplished. And all in the idiom of the common people. He told his commentators, those who wrote the booklets, how they would have to be written. I heard him brief Pabitra [Pabitra Sarkar, scholar and theatre critic, former Vice-Chancellor, Rabindra Bharati University, at present Vice-Chairman, West Bengal State Council for Higher Education] on how to write one of these booklets. Pabitra is a formidable scholar and critic in his own right, and could of course write an excellent scholarly piece. But what Ajitesh needed was something quite different. A scholarly piece would not serve his purpose.

When Ajitesh entrusted me with the responsibility of publishing these booklets, I had already seen Shyamal Ghosh’s publications and the periodical Gandharva, and Shyamal Ghosh’s work at the Navana Printing Works, and his folders/brochures—which constituted a source of inspiration. Personally, I had an interest in the field, from my experiences with my father’s printing press, composing and proofreading for his periodical, which over time had developed into an interest in typography and illustration (studying the illustrations for stories and novels in the special autumn festival issues of the Bengali newspapers and periodicals, for the individual styles of the illustrators, distinguishing artists like Samir Sarkar or Raghunath Goswami) and layout. Letterpress was then the only printing mode. I started with looking for a good printing press. I looked for the printer’s line in Gandharva, and came upon Swastik Mudralaya, near the crossing of Vivekananda Road and Cornwallis Street. I located the press, and had our stuff printed there, spending a considerable amount of time on design and layout. For a Chekhov booklet, I remember doing a cut-and-paste design job, cutting out from a Russian edition a Chekhov portrait, with the glasses and the pointed beard, with Vishnyovyy sad in Russian, and pasting it to design the cover, and make a block of that. I did all this with a natural enthusiasm, and felt rewarded and proud whenever Ajitesh looked at one of these and warmly complimented me. Here was a man ready to acknowledge and compliment my work, with no nitpicking. Ajitesh published a whole series of such booklets for a whole lot of productions.

This relationship led to Ajitesh taking me along with him to attend the meetings organized in protest against several newspapers refusing to carry advertisements for Kallol [play written and directed by Utpal Dutt for Little Theatre Group, premiered 29 March 1965, at Minerva, valorizing the naval mutiny of 1946 against British colonial rule, and upholding violence as the only means
for revolutionary change, inviting the ire of the government which arrested and imprisoned Dutt, and the bourgeois press that put a ban on advertisements for the play, to the meeting at Overtoun Hall, where an action committee was formed with Krishna Kundu and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay as joint convenors. Ajitesh was entrusted with drafting a statement which I undertook to have printed off. I got it printed at Swastik Mudranalaya, with an interesting improvisation for layout. Tapas Sen used to visit Nandikar quite often at the time, seeking my advice on designs for the advertising of Kallol on different surfaces and channels beyond the daily newspapers. I gave him the ideas that struck me at random.

In other words, theatre was not limited at the time to making theatre, the way it is now, with each theatre group turned exhibitor, with no further function than that. The groups do not care to train up actors and actresses. Nor do they care to relate to the audience or train the audience up. With Ajitesh, theatre had that other concern.

I am not so sure any longer—in fact, I have my own doubts on that score—as to how far one can go with Ajitesh’s passion for moving towards the people, and moving into their midst without compromising on aesthetic values—I am not sure who is right, and what is right. It was Ajitesh who in a way planted into our theatre—the theatre that we have been doing—the urge to reach out to the masses; for before Ajitesh appeared on the scene, our theatre was quite elitist, catering to a carefully chosen select audience. Ajitesh was the first to make it a policy to accept any invitation coming from anywhere; so that within a short while Nandikar became the busiest theatre group in India, performing more than two hundred times in a year. Quite an achievement for a group that was amateur in the sense that its actors and actresses did not make a living out of theatre, it was inconceivable at the time. I do not know if something like this had ever happened in world theatre. Under his leadership, Nandikar was prepared to perform for paltry fees, the best that the hosts could afford. There was no attempt ever to raise the going

_Mala Nath and Bibhash Chakraborty in a scene from Chak Bhanga Madhu, a play marked by rugged realism in a marginal rural setting. Photograph © Nemai Ghosh._
rates for fees! The meagre fees offered for a performance, the inconvenience surrounding the journey to the performance site, or inadequate performance conditions never stopped Ajitesh from accepting an invitation to perform. He led the group by his own example, taking all the strain and trouble in his stride, and thus never giving anyone scope to complain. But what happened in the process was that standards came to be compromised, when performance conditions did not allow for a full scale production as originally designed, and elements had to be cut down to fit the available facilities, compromising on space, on scenic design, on sound. Taking on ‘call shows’ (invitation performances) any time any where—a convention started by Ajitesh—has done more harm than good to later Bengali theatre. What was part of a mission for Ajitesh became a means of subsistence for groups, without adequate box office receipts, or government grants, hoping to sustain themselves on the fees they earned from the ‘call shows.’ The secretary of my group tells me, ‘If there’s money in it, we’d perform just anywhere!’

There’s a contradiction in play here. Those who had been on the scene before Ajitesh insisted on standards of stage size and space, the sound system, etc., before they would agree to perform somewhere. They were in a position to dictate terms, and they stood their ground. They were equally insistent on the rates that they had set for themselves. By giving way at this level, Ajitesh had made his productions too adjustable, too flexible.

[S. B. Towards the end, Ajitesh seemed to have been settling for lower and simpler standards, folding up the more experimental possibilities in terms of energies, visuals, extensions of stage space—beyond acting—that he had opened up in his earlier phase—falling under the dictates of a logic that called for greater scope of travelling.]

Exactly. Changes take over, often unnoticed, that we go on absorbing till a qualitative transformation stares us in the face. This is a change that affected not Ajitesh alone, for he came to inspire a whole generation of theatre workers, who fell for the human tendency to pick up the simple elements in the work of the man one emulates, the popular elements, and refuse to probe and negotiate with the more complex elements behind, where the artist’s mind is at work, with a philosophy, with a whole mode of thinking. We do not take the pains to go for these. We tend to copy and emulate only the most superficial elements. We cannot blame Ajitesh, but the fact remains that there were many who took him as a role model. That would be my assessment of Ajitesh.

There was of course another aspect that I have already referred to, initially Ajitesh showed great capacity in drawing out of an actor his acting potential, integrating his actorial uniqueness and the innate demands of the character in question. But he had to face the inevitable problem of handling untrained actors, who have not been able to train and mould themselves up to the limits of their potential, and hence are incapable of development. Such an actor is in need of rigorous training, guidance, and practical exercises according to scientifically worked out codes. Such actors make an impression when they are used effectively. But when he is not used, and a demand is made on his own acting capacity, he cannot cope with it. Ajitesh had the capacity—as you put it yourself—at one point to make use of such actors, but when he retracted from the daring to experiment, or the challenge of exploring different theatric spaces, so that he could travel a lot, he also came under the compulsion of producing play after play without a break; he had to use whatever material he had in hand. This using can become dangerous, when the director tells himself: ‘I don’t care whether he is trained or not. I have the power, I know how to mould him for the time being, for this particular play,
for this particular character. I mould him to excellent result.’ But in the long run, where
does this take us?

This has been something that has affected all of us. I can get away with a lot only if I
have the skill or capacity to make use of people and materials. And that way I can cast a
spell on people so that they suspend critical thinking, and I can keep my failings neatly
hidden. Talking of plays, Ajitesh would say, ‘With foreign plays, the problem is how to
extend myself and our means to achieve their dimensions. With our original plays, I have
to concentrate on hiding its failings.’ It’s the same with actors. The director’s job is to
hide their failings with his design, his imagination. If an actor has an east Bengal
intonation, I score by putting that itself to use. This is something we learnt from Ajitesh.
Towards the close, Ajitesh resorted to this more and more.

[S. B. You’d probably agree that in the long run that actor or actress would be
finished.]

Finished, of course. Absolutely. For then he is capable of just that. The mounting
meanwhile gives him an image that makes him or her think that he or she has made it.
And maybe that is why Ajitesh left Nandikar without a single real actor.

I’ll give you an example, which may be somewhat unkind. Take Pintu, i.e. Bimalendu
Ghose. When I used him in Chak Bhanga Madhu—I simply used him—people found him a
sensation. But that was entirely part of the director’s design. But later whenever I’ve cast
him for a straight role, what has he done?

[S. B. Or Sandhya in Paap-Punya.]

Sandhya in Paap-Punya. Ajitesh showed the way.

[Anjum Katyal. Doesn’t the actor too bear some responsibility here?]

If the actor or actress realizes where his/her defect lies, and that s/he is being used,
and decides that he will let himself/herself be used, and at the same time s/he will
develop himself/herself . . .

[S. B. There’s a problem here. When in a role, you win recognition, your audience and
critics would not make that distinction between your capacity and your achievement, in
fact they should not make that distinction. If you have given a towering performance, as
a critic I’ll be all praise for you. But if you don’t realize that even if your performance has
been towering, it has really been the director at work, making an extremely calculated
use of your limitations, problems, and strengths, and projecting the use, nobody can
really help you. Going to that length of dropping your ego, that is very difficult. When I
tell you, ‘You’ve done a tremendous job,’ you’ll believe it. And that can destroy you for
your whole life. It has happened in so many cases.]

Yes. Think of how even the critics are deceived. Dharani Ghosh, reviewing a later
production, complained that Bibhash Chakraborty had wasted an excellent actor like
Bimalendu Ghose! For he had Bimalendu’s performance in Chak Bhanga Madhu at the
back of his mind. [Laughs.] This is all about Ajitesh and Nandikar.

[S. B. Why the break from Nandikar? Objectively and historically, this was the first,
the biggest and most significant split in a theatre group in our post-Independence
Bengali theatre, in the sense that in all the other previous splits, there had just been a few
actors/actresses breaking away, and the split had not led to the emergence of an equally
significant new group. There have been significant and productive splits since. But the
only split before yours—in Bothurupee, leading to the founding of Rupakar—was not
really that significant. Would you care to underline the implications, the politics, the
logic, the aftermath of that split? You will recall that at one point I had taken the position
that the splitting up of groups is a good thing, a healthy sign, when taking part in a
debate launched by Theatre Bulletin, which you published. That is something that will
have historical value for us. And then there was of course the conscious shift to a more
visual and physical theatre—beginning with *Handi Phatibey*, away from the Nandikar brand of plays making use of authentic, naturalistic, individual performances—a direction that Nandikar would take somewhat later with *Tin Paisar Pala*.

[A. K. What year was this?]

1966. I was in Nandikar for only three years. Fourteen of us left Nandikar in July 1966. Numberwise, it amounted to a clear majority of the membership of Nandikar at the time. We formed a new group—Theatre Workshop. I did not have much of a role initially in the making of the group. I had decided to devote more time to my film society activities, and gradually move into filmmaking, which was becoming more important to me at the time. It had started haunting me, beckoning to me. Even Ajitesh had started saying, ‘He won’t stay in theatre. He’ll move to cinema.’ He had sensed the passion with which I spoke, when I spoke about filmmaking. I couldn’t think of doing theatre with other people, after having left someone of the stature of Ajitesh. Where could I go? I was in a state of uncertainty. At that point of time I was not particularly keen to continue in theatre. It was the pressure of others, especially Satyen Mitra [(1934–71), playwright, director, actor, one of the founder-members of Theatre Workshop, assassinated by political opponents], who insisted, ‘We can’t form a group if you do not stay with us, you must be there, we need your presence, your involvement’—didn’t say ‘leadership’ at that point—that held me back. Then I was compelled to say, ‘O.K.’ We were all almost of the same age, and none of us had been tested, talentwise, to that extent. Some had promise, but nobody was really tested.

[S. B. We hadn’t seen much of you as an actor.]

Not at all. I was not recognized as an actor. It would be difficult to form a group out of such people, and to project one’s own conception of theatre within the group and through the group, and to establish that conception in the process. That added to my sense of uncertainty. What scope could I have in a group of this kind to get my views across, to express my individuality, my personal desires, yearnings, thoughts, dreams, if I had any of these, though I could not define them? So I had thought of keeping away. Years after I had left Ajitesh and Nandikar, Santanu Das, the poet, interviewing me, asked me why I had left Nandikar. I told him, ‘If you ask me now why I had left Nandikar—after all these years that I have spent with Theatre Workshop—all the reasons that we had given then, or the reasons that we publicly proclaimed, would seem ridiculous. For now I can be accused of all the charges that we had then levelled against Ajitesh. For by now nobody knows better than me what one has to do to keep a group running, and what one does not afford to do! For I have been running this group as director, as leader, as the number one man. So I would not repeat those ‘reasons,’ for that would amount to foolishness.’ That is what I told him. But when I attempt to analyse in retrospect, I can see quite a number of factors that had been at work together.

You have to recall the situation in theatre at that time as well as the political environment prevailing, charged with passion, commitment, and an ideology—maybe it lacked a scientific approach, and was more dream and passion, maybe it was not strong in a discipline of thought. The passion centred on a leftwing vision of the future of the country, seeking to figure out how the people of the country would struggle for their rights and achieve their real freedom—and these political thoughts came to be reflected in the plays.

[S. B. The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, a couple of years earlier, had set off a chain reaction.]

The Twentieth Party Congress. An event every couple of years, each leading off from the earlier one. The contradictions within us had surfaced in the process. They were bound to affect the cultural movement. You will remember the Youth Festival in 1965, with the dispute over whether Utpal Dutt would be allowed to perform the play of his
choice, or not and the controversial solution! The great fight over that! That naturally left its stamp, almost unknown to us, on all of us who were engaged in the practice of theatre, and believed that in theatre we could make statements and project the lives of such people as would further and sustain our political ideals and facilitate their realization. We considered ourselves a facilitating force in the political arena. The changes in position in left politics affected these theatre workers. In his stand on the Youth Festival dispute in 1965, Ajitesh had located himself at a distance from the CPI(M), and stood close to Rudra [Rudradasad Sengupta] who was then pursuing the official CPI line. These differences were not reflected that sharply in the daily circuit of our theatre group as such. These positions did not come up for discussion within the group. The discussions still centred on whether a particular play would be produced or not. When *Neelima* [adapted from Ionesco's *The Lesson*] was proposed—coming after the choice of a Pirandello play, which had exposed the group to a lot of criticism from the Left, with the group unanimously standing by the choice—there were doubts and reservations among several of us. Why should we be producing Ionesco? Why go Absurdist? The doubts came from quite a puerile position, for many of us knew little of what the Absurd meant, or what Ionesco's philosophy stood for. Ajitesh was very intelligent, and clever too. He chose two of us—Pabitra [Pabitra Sarkar] and me—to meet Udayan Ghose, and have our queries and doubts resolved. The three of us had a long discussion, probably at Pabitra's place. And we came back to the group to report our discussion and recommend that the play be produced—as if the decision rested on our opinion! Ajitesh produced *Neelima* as part of our project of one-act plays of different kinds and genres.

One could sense the tensions in the group, with Satyen Mitra, a staunch CPI(M) worker, myself a staunch CPI(M) supporter, Ashok Dasgupta, staunch CPI(M), there were several others who were CPI(M) supporters; and Ajitesh taking a middle-of-the-road position, the kind of position that several had assumed at the time of the big split in the Communist Party, including Jyoti Basu!

Several moral positions were also surfacing in the group at the time, e.g. the importance of a democratic process in the group, the need for unanimous, collective decisions within the group—Sombhu-babu [Sombhu Mitra] joked, 'If one member has a green coconut, everyone in the group should have one!' [*Laughs.*]

A mechanical democracy prevailed in the group, along with the expectation and demand that every member of the group should follow certain norms in his/her life style, clothes, behaviour patterns, all in accord with the ideals adopted. Questions were raised if someone smoked Gold Flake! The Bengali mind, typically distrustful, would immediately start wondering if he were ciiphoning off the group’s funds!

[S. B. It was not being voiced, but the currents were there!]

Lily Bandyopadhyay [wife of Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay] was the treasurer, and there had been no general meeting for a long time. Then where was the money going? They were all unfounded, but the suspicion persisted. And there were suspicions of relationships with women! For between men and women in the group, there could be only brother-and-sister relationships! Other members could have a soft spot for some woman, but how could Ajitesh have such a human failing? He had to be a god! A lot of such trivialities accumulated at a mundane level. And there were ideological issues too. In many cases, issues on one level were put to use to buttress issues on another level. A host of considerations came into play at this point of time—the ideological fervour, the politics of the CPI and the CPI(M), the contradictions, how and to what extent could the arts accommodate politics, who would be rejected and who valorized in the arts, etc.

It was difficult for many of us in the group at that time to comprehend a person of Ajitesh's stature and complexity. A question of sheer comprehension and comprehensibility! Whatever in him we couldn't gauge we'd consider a deviation. The
reasons were manifold—could be the limitations of our experience, could be because we were qualitatively and talentwise inferior to him! We found ourselves incapable of appreciating a lot of his statements, ideas, dreams, beliefs, actions, his organizational steps. On the other hand, there were reservations, complaints, frustrations, bound to accumulate against any director! All these came together to cause the split.

What came to the fore however was Ajitesh’s alleged moral degradation—in matters involving women, money, and politics—his political opportunism! These are the issues that militated us primarily—those of us who were particularly involved in the case. There were others of course, like Ashok [Ashok Mukherjee, now Director, Theatre Workshop, and Professor of Communications, Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta], who were on the fringe, and not so immediately involved, though they joined us when we broke away.

If that was the point of provocation, I still feel that the times should be taken into account, the politics of the period, the passion that the youth of the period breathed, the passion for politics, democratic values, and democratic methods, and moral questions . . .

[S. B. An idealism—that is what was in action. Later, we have learnt to be more strategically oriented, and come to believe in the old dictum—the end justifies the means.]

There is yet another point I would like to make about Ajitesh, or about his conception of theatre. Ajitesh has been a role model for his succeeding generations in theatre—particularly in the matter of choosing plays for production. While it is the consideration of good theatre that comes before everything else, for after all in every good play—whether Brecht or Ionesco, Genet or Osborne—it’s a playwright, writing out of his own belief, for the welfare and fulfillment of mankind, even when he feels imperilled by the breakdown of communication, for he writes from pain, and does not consider it an ideal yet, when we come to produce a play, we hold on to a definite ideology, and are resolved not to bring into our work any thought or value that runs counter to that ideology. We never did Genet. There was a big furore when we produced Pirandello, though there was not a word in support of Fascism in the text that we had staged, and it was quite innocent that way. The man was a supporter of Mussolini—but that is another matter altogether.

There was something erratic and arbitrary in Ajitesh’s selection of plays—it was sometimes Pinter, sometimes Tolstoi, sometimes Brecht, sometimes Tagore, sometimes Pirandello, sometimes Chekhov, sometimes even something as irrelevant as Clemence Dane’s Will Shakespeare. The lack of a consistent theatre philosophy that you’ve charged Bohurupee with, in your recent article was most in evidence in Ajitesh, of the Big Three [the others being Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt]. Then he seems to be only a performer or an entertainer, in the best sense of the term. He was a good theatremaker, a theatremaker par excellence. But he lacked a philosophy. And that has influenced later generations in theatre. Those of us who had grown up with that politics, in that political environment, seen its course, participated in it—it was a partisan participation—held on to a philosophy in that sense, not a personal philosophy, but a philosophy growing out of belief in a political ideology. You will notice that in the sequence of plays chosen by Theatre Workshop.

But with the generation of theatre workers that succeeded us—the younger generation—the choices remain as arbitrary as ever, for they are busy looking only for the good play! Just a good play! There is no longer the concern for a play which would be a vehicle for what I would like to say, in my own way, what I feel the urgency to speak, what I am desperate to blurt out, and once I find it, to use it to communicate with my people, the people of my time, the people of my land. This is a trend that Ajitesh initiated.

[S. B. Then comes your Theatre Workshop phase. Were you in charge from Handi Phatibey?]
Almost. But formally, officially, I was in complete independent charge only from Rajrakta, in 1971. I was thirty-four at the time. That was when I started to work independently. Till then I was sharing and exchanging ideas and opinions with a number of my colleagues, specially with Chinmoy.

[S. B. There was, I understand, a phase in Theatre Workshop, when as a group it was committed to a collective leadership or collective directorial control, instead of the dominance of the individual director.]

There was something unrealistic in the concept of a democratic method that we had chosen for ourselves. It was quite mechanical too. But we held on to that idea for quite some time, with some insistence: why not? It was reflected in the naming of the group—Theatre Workshop. I gave it its name. The logo was designed by Subodh Dasgupta working on a suggestion of mine. There was of course the association with Theatre Workshop, the group founded by Joan Littlewood, who saw Sombhu Mitra’s production, and mocked: ‘Quest? For What?’ We identified with Joan Littlewood’s ideology, from whatever we had gathered about her from our reading. Even while we recognized the art in theatre, we sought to take it as a collective exercise. It had to be art, but at the same time it had to further our ideological and political goal, it had to function as a collaborative force in the political sphere. We believed in this purpose for our work. And we believed in the democratic method too. That is how we chose our name and framed our Constitution. We resolved that every decision had to be unanimous. I drew up the Constitution. It was all so Utopian. [Laughs]. Nothing would be undertaken unless there was unanimity about it. The group selected a triumvirate—Chinmoy Roy, Nemai Ghose, and me—to conduct the actual theatremaking, as people that the group considered to have the necessary skills, and the promise. But in the working process and experience, a sifting took place, and positions and capacities were redefined. It did not affect the friendship between Chinmoy and me. But there was a serious breach between Nemai Ghose and me. He was basically an actor, not a director. He had a passion and a craving to shine as an actor. But he had been chosen to be a director. In our
second play, Chhayay Aloey [adapted from Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock, premiered in the Bengali adaptation on 6 October 1967 at Muktangan], Nemai Ghose was expecting to play the engine driver. But I was assigned the role by a decision of the group. Nemai felt that the group had denied him his due, and he left the group. From this play on, the directorial responsibility lay with me and Chinmoy Roy. Chinmoy is gifted in many ways—not just as an actor—he has an excellent sense of design. I had collaborated with Chinmoy on designing several of our posters and brochures, cutting and pasting ourselves. But Chinmoy had his failings, some of which I could compensate; I had my failings too, which Chinmoy could compensate. It was a good working relationship. But once he had his break into films—he was not a committed theatre worker to that extent—nor a committed political activist—he drifted to films altogether. I was the only one of the triumvirate to stay back. Naturally I emerged as the leader. Chinu and I were responsible for Handi Phatibey—particularly for the art of the ludicrous, a taste for which we shared, a spirit in which we both revelled.

To keep to history, Theatre Workshop had started with Lolita [adapted from Sartre’s La Puton Respectueuse, premiered 1 November 1966, Muktangan], where the racial conflict between Blacks and Whites was changed to Hindu-Muslim confrontation. We were not so much concerned with whether it captured the nuances of the original; but we were tackling a live, immediate issue. We felt the urge to project the issue, and used Sartre’s play as a vehicle. Similarly, Chhayay Aloey brought to the fore the life of the common people, particularly a decaying lower middle class, fast descending to the level of the proletariat; representing the times marked by a rapid degeneration of the lower middle class and the upward mobility of the upper echelons of the middle class—a period of transition that has not exhausted itself as yet. We had felt the urge—in the post-Independence setting—to bring these people into theatre. Their presence was being registered and recorded in the fiction and plays of the period. Handi Phatibey (Utpal Dutt’s Rater Atithi, renamed) was an exposure of a pack of corrupt people—a journalist, a politician, etc.—in a spirit of biting satire. This direct social and critical concern, evident in our first bunch of plays, was
a marked departure from Ajitesh, in terms of content. But theatrically, in the creative aspects of theatre, we were still stuck in several earlier influences, e.g. the Lolita sets bore signs of the Bohurupee style, particularly Khaled Chowdhury’s—you will remember the cut-outs of doors and windows against the black frills, drawn directly from Putulkhela [a Bengali adaptation of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, produced by Bohurupee].

Since the set designs were the handiwork of Chinu and me, particularly mine, the influences persisted. We took off from the change of bedcovers in Putulkhela—to change the bedcovers and curtains in the second act to black and white stripes, to play upon the Hindu-Muslim divide, once the Muslim boy enters the room. Chhayay Aloey—you have seen all these plays, and written about them—as a matter of fact, they were all in the situation of an Israel waiting for a UN recognition. Theatre Workshop had to wait for a number of years to be allowed a place in the Bengali theatre scene, and it was Samik who was the first to recognize us as a separate entity, writing about us at length in a periodical of the standing of Parichay—proved to be very popular. There are several people around us who can rattle off from memory scraps of dialogue from Chhayay Aloey. Its strength lay in an accumulation of naturalistic details—making tea on stage, changing from trousers to the lungi, and back to trousers again—out-Ajiteshing Ajitesh! All these influences persisted. Just as Satyen Mitra’s adaptations bore the marks of Ajitesh, in the earthy spontaneity of the dialogues—in his adaptation of Sartre, or Ashok’s adaptation of O’Casey—such influences persisted. But a different outlook determined the selection of plays.

We made it to a ground of our own for the first time in Handi Phatibey. We opened out to a larger span of influences that included Sukumar Ray [(1887–1923) writer, humorist, illustrator, printer, author of Hajabarala, Abol Tabol], Utpal Dutt, Shyamal Ghosh’s designs, and such a lot of other elements, all put to use to improvise a different theatre language, from the strong realization that theatre is not and need not be a single codified mode or practice; it can have recourse to any subject, any permutations and combinations, any mixture. Theatre is a free medium that way. Theatre can absorb any medium, from cinema to mime, from painting to architecture. We began to think on these lines from this point. Or rather, I began. It was quite childish initially, but once one of these childish ideas or improvisations is accepted by the people, it gets incorporated in theatre, it becomes a component of legitimate theatre. This is what I have seen in my own work, in Rajrakta as well as in Madhab-Malanchi Kainya. I have done things not done in theatre before—a break! The kind of elements that were brought into play in Madhab-Malanchi Kainya, and the kind of game played out with them were there for the first time. Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, or whether it was art, is another matter. But the daring to play such games was in evidence in our work for the first time in Handi Phatibey.

Till 1978 at least we retained the political concern in the matter of selecting plays, till before the Left Front came to power, or rather till immediately after they came to power. In 1978 we produced Mahakalir

A scene from Chhayay Aloey.
Bachcha. We retained it till 1981—till Schweik Gelo Juddhey [adapted from Brecht’s Schweik in the Second World War]. The ideological thrust was retained in every play we chose, till Schweik, even in the shorter plays we produced, e.g. the adaptations of Brecht’s Lux in Tenebris [Panchu O Masi] and In Search of Justice [Nazir Bichar]—and in Chak Bhanga Madhu, of course. And in Ashwatthama, in 1974, in the perspective of the Naxalite movement of the early 1970s—and Mahakalir Bachcha in 1978, with the traces it bore of the Naxalite movement. In Ashwatthama, Mahakalir Bachcha and Rajrakta, we took stock of the struggle of the radical forces in the Left, asserting themselves and getting thwarted eventually. In Rajrakta, it is the young man and the young woman fighting. In Chak Bhanga Madhu, the political element centred in the conflict between the jotedar and the landless peasant. I may be simplifying it all a little, but what I would like to focus is on the line of thinking that was active. Chak Bhanga Madhu is of course not that simple or simplistic. In 1972, the year of Chak Bhanga Madhu, we staged Lux in Tenebris, in which a madam and her customer plan out their business strategy. In Search of Justice was timely in the context of the Indira Gandhi Government spreading its tentacles to curb and control all the democratic institutions. In 1974, in Ashwatthama, we centred on the killings, on fratricide. In 1978, in Mahakalir Bachcha, a ferocious child is born, born of poverty and hunger, bent on grabbing to survive. In 1981, in Schweik, we projected how the little man survives against fascism. Even in Tagore’s Bisarjan in 1984, my last production for Theatre Workshop, the point of reference was Tripura, the location of the original play—Tripura, the site of fratricidal riots in the eighties and the nineties, linking to the situation in Punjab. When I started work on the play, I had the riots between the tribals and the plains people in Tripura in mind—the latter, immigrants, had reduced the tribals to a minority—that confrontation provoked me to choose the play. The political concern was part of my theatre thinking in the Theatre Workshop phase, when I was in independent charge, as well as when I was not in independent charge, and functioned as part of a collective. In the matter of content.

In the matter of style, the artist’s creativity, we had a number of models available and dominant when it came to doing plays of this kind. The first model was obviously Utpal Dutt! If this is your ideology or politics, this is your way, they seemed to insist! I refused to do it that way. I always refused to do it that way. I have done political plays like Schweik or Vietnam, my own play on Vietnam. But I never followed the Utpal Dutt manner—in playwriting or characterization or treatment. I recall having gone to Amar Vietnam, a Vietnam play, written and directed by Jochhan Dastidar, at the New Empire Theatre. At the end of the play, waiting for a 2B bus at the bus stand with Robin Chakrabarty of Nandikar (I was no longer with Nandikar. Mahesh Sinha was also with us), I told them, ‘One can’t stand this any more, with the American soldier barking, ‘You bastard, son of a bitch!’—and hitting out at a Vietnamese—the typical Utpal Dutt style—and the Vietnamese spouting great sentiments—the Americans remain the same, all from Utpal-da’s plays—minus Utpal-da’s skill, Utpal-da’s spectacle. We had already seen Utpal-da’s Ajeya Vietnam [‘Invincible Vietnam’, written and directed by Utpal Dutt, for the Little Theatre Group, premiered 31 August 1966 at Minerva]—and what a show! with the statistics rolling down on scrolls, and the maps . . .

[S. B. . . and, the film clip of the aerial bombing leading us bang into the scene in the field hospital . . .]

To the field hospital. After that, why should we see this? I’ll do it my own way. Romuda [Robin Chakrabarty] told me, ‘Bibhesh’ (he used to call me Bibhesh) ‘it’s easy to say all this, but hard to do it.’ I took up that challenge, and wrote my Vietnam in a totally different style, drawing on Burchett’s book, using poems, poems by Siddheswar Sen, Shankha Ghosh, Mohit Chattopadhyay—poets in Bengali were then writing a lot about Vietnam. I had a character who was a prototype of Ho Chi-Minh, a political leader who was a poet too. Since it was a political play, and of a different genre, the people lapped it
up in a manner we had never imagined they would. The structure I had taken from *Campbell of Kilmore*, a play we studied as a text in college. The play was taken to such a wide range of places, in towns and villages alike, and people felt inspired. It lasted for barely an hour. Where it scored was that it was different from the Utpal Dutt model. This was what I was searching for—to do political plays, but in a different manner—using a level of abstraction in *Rajrakta*—so different from the Utpal Dutt model, and Sombhu Mitra too, who was so far apart contentwise, and also from Ajitesh. This was my quest—to experiment with different modes of expression within the limitations of the proscenium stage. In most of my productions, that is what I aimed at, and often came to tear down the conventions of the proscenium theatre—except in *Chak Bhanga Madhu*, which was an extremely taut play in the conventional mode. The challenge in *Chak Bhanga Madhu* was how best one could do it. Not that nobody has ever done something like this.

[S. B. Its visuals, its energies, its language—Bijan-da [Bijan Battacharya] had set the model for all that.]

Bijan-da had achieved it. It was his forte. I could still pit myself against him for a measure and prove how well I could do it—the conventional, realistic, well-made play.

[S.B. And you produced one of the best examples of that, in terms of acting, moment-building—remarkable!]

But otherwise I have always tried to break those conventions. Even *Bisarjan* I approached radically differently, trying to make use of the form of the jatra, for I had by then come to direct a few jatra productions, and in my exposure to jatra I had gained insights into how the jatra uses space.

[S. B. What were the years you were in jatra?]

In the early eighties, before I came to produce *Bisarjan* in 1984. Later, in several of my productions, I could draw on the traditional Indian way in which they used the space in jatra. I was inspired by the jatra, by folk theatre—in *Bisarjan, Madhab-Malanchi* and *Jochhanakumari*—even in my recent *Adbhut Andhar*. I don’t like the elaborate sets any longer, with walls and all the other paraphernalia cluttering up space. I now prefer an open space—open, open, open—something that suits our culture better.

I have consistently tried to improvise a new style—maybe I shouldn’t call it a new style—rather a new way of making a political statement. That is all I’d claim, nothing more than that.

[S. B. In the second phase of Theatre Workshop, beginning with *Rajrakta*, you start dealing—seriously—with some of our new playwrights—something that Ajitesh had not done. That was one of the complaints we nurtured against Ajitesh. But *Rajrakta* onwards, you handle Mohit Chattopadhyay and Manoj Mitra, two of our finest contemporary playwrights. When we talked to Mohit recently, he said that he found working with you extremely rewarding, for in you he found a director who took his plays seriously and sought to find a new theatre language capable of holding his play, opening up a space for interaction that Mohit has not found with other directors. So can you say something about your handling of playtexts, by modern playwrights and your inputs in the interaction with the playwrights themselves?]

A second question. Would you say that in plays like *Madhab Malanchi Kainya*, and *Jochhanakumari*, you make a conscious attempt to reconcile the politics of live issues and a live sentimentality—I do not consider sentimentality a derogatory term—to reach out to a larger audience, and becoming a strong tendency in your post-Theatre Workshop, *Anya Theatre* phase?

A third question. Could you explain the sluggishness of the theatre activity of *Anya Theatre*? Does it have anything to do with the fact that in *Anya Theatre* you do not have a steady group of actors and actresses whose capacities and limitations you are fully
aware of—as you had in the past—and for every new production, you need to have a new company, drawn from other groups, and for acting resources and inputs, you have to start from scratch? Could you also elaborate a little on how you cope with the hassles, uncertainties and strain of a kind of organization quite different from the pattern in practice in other groups of your kind? Has this not forced you to drop projects midway or back out on projects from time to time, in this phase? In a sense, one can say you don’t have a group.]

Right. But let me begin with my handling of playwrights in the Theatre Workshop phase. We have always suffered from a paucity of playtexts that respond to and capture the issues and concerns of our times. I am not sure, but Ajitesh and his contemporaries may have gone in for a spate of adaptations from European and American plays from the same sense of frustration. Utpal Dutt generally avoided adaptations, and wrote plays for his group. Sombhu Mitra had not staged too many adaptations. He tried to discover plays, exerting himself to mark and project the theatric values inherent in a text by Tagore, or a text by Badal Sircar, and commissioned plays. This endeavour was lacking in Nandikar. With a readymade structure, a well-made play (not in the Scribean sense of course), as a kind of container, one could put one’s immediate concerns into it, and rest content that a certain respectable level was guaranteed. The risk element was reduced with a play tested in other theatres. When we read foreign plays in those days, we were always thinking in terms of how many actresses it called for, which was a standing problem for us, and what other inconveniences would come our way if we tried to adapt it. All our readings of foreign plays tended to fall into this trap of a strange, mechanical pragmatism. All that we looked for was whether it fitted the bill for adaptation. We were just not in a frame of mind to read a play for its own sake, for its intrinsic worth . . .

[S. B. . . . or even the possibilities that it might spark off . . .]

It was a game of looking for something that would ‘fit’ that dominated the scene. found this too mechanical. Ajitesh succeeded with some of his adaptations, but failed nonetheless with Desire Under the Elms, the other Tolstoi play he did, about gypsies—

[S. B. His Right You Are If you Think So was no good.]

It was not good. Nor was his Seagull, which Ramaprasad [Banik] did. Adaptations do not work every time. They do not fit perfectly in every case. There was a law of diminishing returns in operation, when Asit Mukherjee came to produce Bhomma [from Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya]. Not only in selection of plays, but in our entire involvement in theatre, we were too dependent on foreign plays, on a foreign sensibility. In the current debate on the emphasis on English or on the vernacular in our school education system, I do not uphold the primacy of the vernacular which is supposed to be as natural and wholesome as mother’s milk; in fact, I would prefer the English language as a language of utility; it is unfortunate that our vernacular is not the language of utility that we need to possess. Once you make English the language of utility, you cannot make a cult of the vernacular which does not serve me in my daily round of activities and obligations! But in the theatre what you need first and foremost is your own language, your own style, your own means and modes of expression, your own form. Lacking that, we have come to a dead end, a blind alley. Whatever values the foreign sense and sensibility, their modernity and their intellection may have, we have to reach our own audience, located in our space and time. To reach them we have to take into consideration what they are accustomed to, what traditions they carry with them, what modes of expression they can respond to and what they are likely to reject. What is accepted in Calcutta may not be accepted elsewhere. Madhab Malanchi Kainya is accepted in Dhaka [in Bangladesh], but rejected in Memari [in central West Bengal], where the audience stopped just short of pelting us with stones. With such diversity of cultural and educational standards and responses that prevail in our country, we need to have our own repertoire of indigenous plays. If they thought they were on securer ground with a basic structure, we thought we
had less risk with indigenous characters, indigenous situations, our own people. They belonged to a universe I was familiar with. I thought I would be at ease with people and speeches I knew so closely. Hence my preference has always been for our own playwrights, even if they are lesser playwrights. That is how I came to Mohit and Manoj.

I had watched Mohit’s plays in productions by Shyamal Ghosh. I saw every one of Shyamal’s productions, where their obscurity and their excessive ‘poeticness’ was somewhat annoying. As I have told you already, I am somewhat allergic to *nyakamo* [an untranslatable Bengali word suggesting an amalgam of affectation, effeminacy, a strain of the romantic, and facile ‘poeticness’]. I found those productions somewhat *nyaka*. At the same time I was fascinated by Mohit’s fun, grotesquerie, his weird constructions of dialogue . . .

[S. B. His wit.]

Wit, humour, where he was extraordinary. All these had a tremendous appeal for me. In his personal conversation, as well as in his dramatic dialogues, his use of and play with words was so remarkable that I once described him as a real *kathashilpi* [a Bengali critical term for the narrative writer, the writer of both or either the longer or the shorter fiction, but lit. ‘an artist of words’, or ‘wordmaker’], who had raised *katha* [lit. ‘the word’] to the level of a *shilpa* [lit. ‘art’]. When I read his *Guineapig* in *Bohurupee*—Ashok [Ashok Mukherjee] had suggested that I should read it—I immediately felt that this was my material. For in *Guineapig*, I found the political dimension that was missing in his earlier plays like *Mrityusangbad* or *Chandralokey Agnikanda*. What delighted me even more was the discovery that here was a political play that was entirely
different from the conventional round or pattern of political plays, and yet it was so intensely political. I found it a deadly weapon. The other quality that Mohit’s plays have is the sheer range of suggestions he brings to bear upon every play, so characteristic of poetry whose strength lies in concentration and precision, in pregnant imagery, in its undercurrents—allowing the director to play with all these lying in between, if he is inspired and motivated by these, and if he has the capacity. He can use it as a diving board and plunge into a flight of the imagination. That is the challenge Mohit provides a director with, to an exhilarating degree. If the wavelengths match, it is bound to be a thrilling experience. That is the kind of interaction we had when, with Theatre Workshop, we did Mohit’s Rajrakta [Guineapig in the revised version produced by Theatre Workshop] or Mahakalir Bachcha.

Any director choosing a play for production sets off on a series of thoughts, some in a twilight zone; some in sharp, concrete terms, like a draughtsman; some in the manner of a mechanic; thoughts coming from different parts of the brain and memory. All these thoughts have to be accommodated and assembled and given a theatrical shape. When I give my first ideas to Mohit, when I tell him, ‘In your stage directions, you describe a room, with a table, with a calendar on the wall, and a picture too, I can’t accept it, for I can conceive it only as a black prison, I see our world as a torture chamber enclosed by black walls, where we are being tortured; bound and shackled, we are being beaten up mercilessly.’ He says, ‘Of course, that’s how it is. Go ahead.’ Mohit does not insist on a rigid, mechanical adherence to his stage directions. When I pursue my vision of the torture chamber, and go ahead, with the young man and the young woman in the torture chamber, yearning to be free, and held back, and the Rajasaheb who keeps them imprisoned, and the agents of the Rajasaheb in so many guises, representing so many forces, forces operating in the home, in the education system, in the familial mechanism, the forces that operate everywhere with their inhibitive power, insisting on unquestioning adherence to the codes and rules, ‘Follow the rules if you want to survive, or you’ll be crushed.’ The play appeared in print in the seventies, when Mohit himself was compelled to leave his neighbourhood under threat of violence. Mohit never stuck to his original ideas, when such new ideas came up in our discussions. I went to the length of proposing a different ending. As far as I remember, the play ended with the victims turned persecutors—the version staged by Rajinder Nath in Delhi. I found it a case of simplification, a translation of sorts of the popular saying, ‘Whoever goes to Lanka turns into Ravana,’ or ‘History repeats itself,’ or ‘Power corrupts’—cliches with no basis in science or logic. I did not find it correct. From my position, at the given point of time, in my own state in India, I could see signs of hope, promises—forces coming into being and growing. I was confident that those forces would triumph in a not too distant future. That I had to show. I would not treat reality literally. So I told Mohit that he would have to change the ending. We had long discussions on that score.

You will recall, that with Nandikar, we had done a short poetic play called Ratri, from Zimmerman’s A Dream, a play that I had picked up at the USIS Library, and brought to Ajitesh, whom I had told, ‘I like it. Why don’t you produce it?’ He suggested that Ashok should adapt and direct it. Rudra [Rudraprasad Sengupta], Keya [Keya Chakrabarty], and I acted in it, under Ashok’s direction. That play closed on a dialogue that ran: ‘Strike. Strike. This state of things cannot continue.’ I proposed a similar ending to Rajrakta, with three of us raising a similar slogan in chorus against the Rajasaheb, with a pantomime. Mohit gladly accepted the change.

Mohit is an extremely wise person. He respects the freedom of the director. I was guided by my philosophy when I made the change in Rajrakta. When another director, producing the same play, gave it another ending, Mohit did not stop him. I don’t know whether this is a right position, but I did it my own way, so it could very well be the
other way too. I have seen texts of Tennessee Williams' plays, with changes made by Elia Kazan (during production) appearing alongside the original version. There is no clash of egos in such a case. Both Mohit and Manoj have been such good friends that I have had no problem in reworking their texts while producing them.

The case of *Mahakalir Bachcha* was quite interesting. It had appeared originally in a skeletal form in the periodical *Theatre Bulletin*, edited by Rajat Ghosh. I decided I'd do it, but I knew it would need a lot of rewriting. I told Mohit, 'I can imagine that the edifice of the *jotedar* has been erected out of and around the blood, the flesh and the bones of these poor people.' So I needed more flesh to the play, which could come to the play if the people acted as a chorus, making comments, and singing, while the events unfolded, and also constituted the set. Literally, they would provide with their bodies the pillars and arches that would sustain the *jotedar's* power. It would serve more than one purpose in the process. I could fill up and dynamize an empty stage with mobile sets; and this was before Sekhar Chatterjee had adapted and produced *Pontu Laha* [premiered 24 February 1975]. I told Mohit, 'I want a chorus. I want songs. These you have to provide. I can take care of their passing comments.' I asked him to remodel the second part completely. What Mohit came up with was for all practical purposes a new play for me. Now tell me of a playwright who'd do this for me ungrudgingly! Here was a playwright who was such a trusting and warm-hearted friend prepared to consider the director as one who was keen to take up his ideas and raise them to a different level in terms of actual theatre—so that his ideas, his text remained his, and yet gathered greater strength in the theatric realization.

The second act was a disaster in the first performance. We met for a session—
Debashis [Debashis Dasgupta (1934–91), music director and critic] who directed the music for the play, Tapas-da [Tapas Sen], who designed the lighting for the play, Mohit [Chattopadhyay] and I—all four of us totally committed to the play, and to getting the best out of it. What a wonderful collaborative spirit we had at the time! Through the long meeting, individual inputs came in from all four participants. And Mohit went back to write a whole new second act.

I would uphold this instance as a model of theatre making for a country like ours, where we need not fall into the supposedly professional model of picking up a play, and doing it. There remains before us this other model of the collaborative act, building a piece of theatre out of so many creative inputs.

Working with Manoj, the challenge of Chak Bhanga Madhu was of a different order. The text itself was not so much of a challenge. The challenge lay in re-creating it in terms of our theatre. But there too there were a few obstacles. Some of the characters initially appeared quite mechanical, against the others that were so lively, so tangible, so palpable, so powerfully visible. After the first performance, I felt all the more strongly that the characterization of the young man needed to be changed. It lacked acceptability. It was just a character educated in the nearest town, who would remain an alien if he tried to interact with the events and relationships in the village, from that position alone. He had to be more closely tied to his father’s ‘business’, as involved as his father, but more modern in his attitude, hence more of a strategist, and shrewder still—a typical later generation! If his handling of things came to the fore, that would give a different dimension to the play. Manoj agreed, and changed the entire character from the play version that had originally appeared in Ekshan. The endings for both Narak Guljar and Chak Bhanga Madhu were different in our productions from the versions in the texts initially published in the periodicals.

In the originally published text, there was a piece of overlapping in the interval, the second part going back a little to repeat what has gone before, which I found a little gimmicky in this kind of a play. It does not go with the character of the play, which is very realistic, and grim—and does not allow for such a gimmick, which is just uncalled for! It does not serve any purpose. All these points we brought to Manoj’s notice.

There was yet another level to the interaction with Manoj that I would like to put on record and acknowledge, in this interview, for there are few who would be aware of this. I have a special aptitude for dialects. I relish picking up dialects and using them. When Manoj read the play out to us, he gave a wonderful reading of it; the dialect was of the place to which he belonged, and it came naturally to him. But I knew I would have to teach it to my cast, for I couldn’t have Manoj to teach them the dialect. So I asked Manoj to read the play out once again, and let us record it on our Grundig TK20, on a quarter inch tape.

Once I had it recorded, every morning I would set the tape playing and go about my daily chores, with the words and their sounds running on. What happened in the process was that, without being consciously taught or trained by anyone, I imbibed it internally. The entire music of it, the essential charm of it—the poetry and the rasa of the dialogue, its rhythm and pace—are an extremely important component of this particular play. It became so completely internalized in the process that I found that I was not copying Manoj, it had become my own language, my natural medium of communication. I had no problem with it any longer, and no difficulty in teaching my cast.

The play was set in Chaitra Sankranti [the last day of Chaitra, the last month of the year in the traditional Bengali calendar]. Manoj took us—Ashok, me, and Tarun Ghatak—to Malatipur, a village close to the site of the actual event that had given Manoj the idea of the play—on another Chaitra Sankranti day. We carried a tape recorder with us. We went around the village, watching the village houses, talking to the people, recording their songs, and the drums played for the Chadak festival [dedicated to Shiva]—those that later came to be part of the performance, recorded on the spot, with nothing
re-created in the recording studio. We got hold of an ojha [traditional witch-doctor supposed to have a mastery of the jhad-phunk, a system using spells, charms, wielding of the broomstick, burning of incense, etc., with healing powers for several diseases, snakebite, etc.], who was prepared to lengthen the ceremony if he were paid more, or cut it short if he were paid less. For him it was performance pure and simple—though the ceremony was supposed to be one that could draw the venom out of the body of one bitten by a snake. He put up a whole mock ceremony for us, with someone acting the victim in a faint. We came back with all these recordings. We felt privileged, with the playwright accompanying us to the locale, and helping us have a feel of the place and its people—helping us also with the dialect he knew so well, and with his familiarity with the people living there. It was an ideal instance of creative collaboration. I never had any problem with playwrights. In fact, I had cast Manoj in a role in Ashwatthama, one of his plays, and he never insisted on having it his own way against my directorial instructions, never raised any such question. I had of course discussed things with him, but I never had serious difference or problem. We always have this fear of a possible difference or dispute between two people who rightfully consider themselves authorities in their own field . . .

[S. B. . . . where it could be a clash of egos.]

But we never had anything of the kind. I do not know if there have been any other such instances of playwright-director interaction in Bengali theatre. When you ask me about this specifically, and I think in retrospect, I recall such a lot of these creative interactions . . .

[S. B. . . . that you had once taken for granted as only natural, and it is only now in retrospect that you realize how exceptional they were . . .]

Now I can see how exceptional they were. The ending of Narak Guljar, with all of them turning into cattle, with cow masks, was not there in the original. Once again, as in so many of my productions, it was a change made after the first performance, involving considerable rewriting by Manoj. There was never questions of a hurt ego, or exhaustion or annoyance.

I have never been able to come to terms with the conventional models or prototypes of the political theatre popular in West Bengal—not that there have been too many of them beyond the one associated with Utpal Dutt or the IPTA model. I didn’t find any of them adequate to my needs or urges. I was looking for means to express my political position on my terms, seeking to communicate to my people in my own way. In the process, I produced plays written in different forms, in different styles—Rajrakta, Mahakalir Bachcha, Chak Bhanga Madhu, and Schweik Gelo Judhhey—constantly in search of new expressions.

I tend to change more radically from time to time in my attitudes and positions than most people in theatre, while remaining committed to a fundamental ideology—or philosophy, which may be a more loaded word.

In a sense, you can call me a Constitution expert in the field of Bengali theatre. There’s none on the scene who has drafted more Constitutions than me, for theatre groups in West Bengal. The first Constitution I drafted was for Theatre Workshop, which was very democratic. But in course of time I came to realize that it was not working properly; with the three joint directors with equal authority, and the insistence on unanimity in any decision that we had laid down. These were found to be impractical. Then we felt the necessity of a new Constitution, and I drafted another Constitution. I drafted one for Calcutta Repertory Theatre, even while I was in Theatre Workshop. It was a Constitution that placed some people in the CRT in a fix, and they found that they could not do a thing, bypassing us. Then I made the Constitution for Natya Sanhati. These different Constitutions reflected my sense of the need for organizational changes in changing contexts and circumstances.
My breach with Theatre Workshop can be traced to a difference that developed between me and a section of the company that was not prepared to accept the changes that I thought the company should make to cope with the needs of changing times, and to keep the good work going.

In think I told you once in another interview what I had sought for. You were the first person to know about it, on the very day . . .

[S. B. The historic day!]

A historic day. [Laughs] The point that we had reached in theatre was not the point we had set for ourselves—in spite of the best of intentions, maybe because of our own limitations. What we had aimed at was an ensemble that would do everything that needed to be done, be responsible for everything that had to be done, and not go in for professional inputs from outside, with someone coming in to do the lights for us, and so on. We were resolved to train ourselves in a manner that would enable us to handle every single element in the making of our productions, our theatre. That was what led us to call ourselves Theatre Workshop. But soon we realized that with all the hassles we had to deal with, there was no way we could handle everything about a production—we had to fall back on Tapas Sen for lights, and Khaled Chowdhury for sets, and on actresses too from outside the group! And we had to pay all these professionals. I had to pay the lighting designer, the lighting operator, hiring charges for the equipment and lights, the music director, the musicians, the sets maker, even the man who plays the tapes—for none of them belonged to the group. The group could provide only the actors—and they were again not that competent. So I was permitted to hire everything and everyone from outside, but I had to take all my actors from the group, even if they were duds because they've been in the group for so long . . .

[S. B. That's democracy for you!]

That's democracy. Immediately after I left Theatre Workshop, in an article in Desh I tried to put across some home truths, centring on the mutual exploitation in operation. I needed those boys to carry and set up those sets for free for every show, and carry them back to the godown after every performance, to load them on and off the bus when the group went on tour or for performances out of town. To keep the boys, we had to give them roles! This was the real psychology behind the democratic pretensions. I had a point against this scheme of things. I asked: If I needed a better actor from outside to do justice to a play, why should you stop me? If you allow me to get actresses from outside, why won't you let me have actors as well? Give me a logical explanation, I said. Nobody had an answer for me.

Secondly, why should a director be forced to perform only with the actors in his own group? If Sombhu Mitra or Utpal Dutt had had the option of doing a production with actors carefully chosen from groups other than his own, it would have been a wonderful thing. But Dutt, in his final phase, was doomed to perform with a worthless bunch, and that only exhausted him all the faster. Sombhu Mitra faced the same fate, as all the better actors and actresses left him and dropped out one by one—though the actual end was somewhat different in his case. Why should I be denied the right to make productions with better actors, or work with a better group? On the other hand, why should not members of the group have the opportunity to be directed by other directors? Why should they be left with the notion that Bibhash-da was the only worthwhile director, the one and only omniscient one, the greatest? Why can't they have the opportunity of being trained by good directors like Arun Mukhopadhyay or Asit Mukhopadhyay? Why can't they have access to the productions methods adopted by those directors?

What this theatre has never had is an adequate infrastructure, a professional platform that could sustain such a tradition of mobility between the groups. It's still an extremely limited groupishness—you're with the group and for the group, as long as you're in it,
and you’re out of it all if you’re out of a group! That is where I came into a confrontation with Theatre Workshop—when I had this new idea, and raised the issue. Till then, a member of one group was not allowed to appear in or participate in any way in a production by another group. There was no such strict prohibition when it came to films, or to TV serials, when they came in, some time later. I could see no logic in this rule of absolute fidelity, except perhaps in that it could serve to keep the group together. It was on this issue that there developed a difference between my group and me. There grew the fear in the group that Bibhash-da would now bring in better actors from outside the group, and the loyalists who had kept on supporting the group all along would become nobodies! They were in a pathetic situation. And they drove it to a point where the distance between me and the group grew, and with it came distrust and difference of views—and I decided to leave Theatre Workshop.

Once I had left Theatre Workshop, I decided to pursue my new approach. I was an individual in theatre in search of my own theatre. That is where it ultimately stood. We had thought of other possibilities which had not, after all, come through. So let us come to terms with what we were left with. If I had to do my theatre, then it would be determined by my own ideas and desires. I would welcome anyone who felt the urge to associate with a good project, to work with Bibhash Chakraborty, and hoped to find mental or artistic satisfaction out of working with me. I needed people with organizational skills. For it would be a kind of a company where there would be a team taking care of fund raising, management, the box office, and all the mundane details; and the rest would be just actors. But they would have to act with total dedication and, discipline, through the rigorous order of rehearsals; and that is where their responsibility ended.

This was the basis of the new group I formed—Anya Theatre [lit. ‘the other theatre’]. When a new system is introduced in a field that is not and has not been prepared for it, the system is bound to be abused. And that is what happened—the new system came to be abused all over, with several actors and actresses stepping out of their own groups to act with several groups at the same time, with no clear purpose in view, ending up in a great confusion. In the process, most of the groups came to lose the integrity and discipline of a well consolidated group, in which they could once take pride.

I soon came to realize that my scheme could have succeeded only in a situation where there were a substantial body of genuine artistes, and I could choose those that I needed for the roles in my plays. But without such a body of artistes present, I had to fall back on the old device of training up and teaching the actors!

[S.B. And then again you’d have to take precautions to hide their defects and failings.]

To hide their faults—that becomes my task. Then I thought maybe the earlier system was better. But by then, a lot of time had been lost.

[S.B. And, after all, it was your own choice.]

Exactly, my own choice. The first band of members never became the well integrated organizational unit that I needed. All that I had on my hands was a band of hired hands, hired artistes and hired theatre workers—part timers in theatre, part timers with my company. I made use of them to make my productions, and in the process I could see only too clearly that I did not have the material with which one can make really good theatre, or form a good ensemble or a good repertory company. Every production was a one-off exercise—you make it, and it’s over!

In a Third World country like ours, where resources and infrastructural facilities are woefully inadequate, our kind of work can sustain itself only on the spirit of a voluntary collective and its natural zeal, an ideological binding, and a sense of solidarity. It shows when you cannot achieve this. And that would explain what you’ve called the sluggishness of several of these productions. You are very right.
Several people have followed me in this direction. I cannot say if I’ve done harm to the theatre, or if this was only inevitable. Maybe this is the destiny of a theatre that cannot draw any longer otherwise talented young people—the dreamers, the ideologically committed. Theatre today has nothing to offer them. Why should they opt for theatre?

The responsibility does not lie with the theatre practitioners alone. The larger sociopolitical system has not accommodated and absorbed theatre in our country—into our social, political, economic and State structures; has not given theatre the dignity it deserves. Look at the way our footballers are made. He trains himself up—in a state of virtual starvation—kicking and kicking and kicking at the ball in a ground somewhere in Madhyamgram, with his poor family breathing down his neck, complaining: ‘What’re you going to do for a living?’ He sticks to it doggedly till he has made it; and once he’s made, he’s picked up by a spotter, and introduced to Mohun Bagan or East Bengal—or maybe, it’s Aryans first, and then East Bengal. There’s a pack of young talents among the three clubs, viz. Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, and Mohammedan Sporting. Otherwise a lot of energy gets lost. For sports in our country does not have the infrastructure to discover and nurture all the potential available. The State does not respect sports, just as it does not respect theatre. It does not recognize theatre as an essential organ of our culture and life. How can theatre survive and prosper in such a state of things? With the demise of the professional theatre here, the only theatre still surviving somehow—our theatre—has to depend entirely on voluntary work. How far can it go, on a voluntary basis? How can it acquire professional skills? Can a theatre worker in these conditions devote all his time to theatre? How can he bring to his work in theatre a rich enough store of knowledge and thought? How can this theatre develop, without such inputs? How can we expect young people with the right talents to join this theatre? The dreams that we brought with us when we came to theatre are impossible now, with everything crumbling around us—the political system, the institutions, education, health, industry—in West Bengal.

[S. B. There is the other factor, Bibhash, with success becoming so easy in so many sectors.]

Of course, success has become so easy. . .

[S. B. And when success is so easy elsewhere, why would they come to drudge in theatre? When you came to theatre, it called for hard work in every field, theatre included. Everyone had to work hard.]

Exactly. We were prepared to work hard without the certainty of a definite gain. With the TV dominating the scene, these actors make a lot of money, get daily exposure, get recognized. Why would they join Bibhash Chakraborty’s group and hang around, waiting for a role, and that too maybe way down from the lead, with all the hassle of rehearsals? It comes to demanding too much.

To answer Paramita’s question as to whether I have compromised, I would say, ‘Yes of course.’ Anyone who has striven to keep a group running in Calcutta knows what a precarious balance one has to maintain—to survive. When people charge me with breaking up or breaking away from so many groups in Calcutta, I retort that it is a case of looking at it from the other end, finding a glass of water half empty instead of half full. Why wouldn’t you recognize that I built Theatre Workshop, and then Anya Theatre? In West Bengal, a theatre director does not afford solely to be a pure artist. He has to be a good administrator, an able organizer—organization becomes very much a creative part of his work, creativity and organization getting enmeshed in each other. At the organizational plane, you have to treat every individual member at a personal level, as a human element, and think simultaneously of the production costs, of godown facilities, of the portability of the sets, of coping with the rising prices of wood. The director is thus a bundle of several selves—the organizer self, the artist self, etc.—difficult to balance, with one dominating at one point, another at another, often giving the impression of a
compromise that is often only too inevitably a part of the theatre which is ours. If Ajitesh had kept on waiting for the opportunity or facilities necessary for a pure theatre, he would have got stuck to the New Empire or Rabindra Sadan or the Academy of Fine Arts...

[S. B. And would have happily retired from theatre fifteen years before he died.]

He had that choice, of course, to go into a comfortable retirement fifteen years before death. But with the choice he made, he opened up several questions—how far and to what extent can one compromise—or would it be counted a compromise at all—to reach out to audiences way beyond the metropolitan centres, to carry theatre to places with no access to theatre, leading on naturally to questions like: What is art? What is the purpose of our theatre? In the context of these basic questions, I cannot accuse Ajitesh of a betrayal of theatre, though I have pointed to certain elements that came to bedevil our theatre consequent on Ajitesh's choice, because I am following the same path myself. It is a path I have to follow if I have to survive, if our theatre has to survive. I am not claiming I am synonymous with theatre, but it is a choice that so many directors in our theatre have had to make.

When I left Theatre Workshop and formed Anya Theatre, here too politics played a role. It was in 1985. The Left Front had come to power in West Bengal in 1977. The first signs of disillusionment with its claims and achievements were evident in the early eighties, both with the Party and the government. I have always had an oppositionist streak in my character. We have grown up in an oppositionist culture. The disillusionment with the new power alignment led me to choose a strongly aggressive oppositionist stance, which naturally opened up an area of conflict with the Party and the government—a section of which started cultivating and nurturing a potential alternative leadership within my group, and tried to corner me in the process. Time has proved my suspicion to be very true. I would not like to elaborate any further on this.

As a matter of fact, when I had raised the organizational and artistic issues in the group initially, these outside forces had started operating, supporting the opposition set against me. That is what expedited the split, and made it inevitable. I wouldn't maybe call it a split. I left Theatre Workshop. I was following in a great tradition of directors leaving the group. There was a time when officer's wives measured the importance of their husbands by whether they had been gherao-ed by their subordinates or not; one of them telling another: 'So your husband has not been gherao-ed. What a shame! My husband has been gherao-ed already, you know!' There was a tradition by then in our theatre of founder-directors being forced to leave their groups—Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar Chatterjee, Shyamal Ghosh...I added myself to the list.

[S. B. In great company.]

The bitterness of it all came through in my first Anya Theatre production—Hoccheta ki? [lit. 'What's Up?' adapted from Dario Fo's Trumpets and Raspberries or About Face—premiered in its Bengali version in ]—along with my impression and evaluation of the ruling Communist Party, the Establishment Communist Party. Then—you can very well ask me—why did I do Madhab Malanchi Kainya immediately after? That's because I've always been a devotee of variety—something that you underscored when interviewing me on the TV after I received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.

The more I age, the more a strong bangal [East Bengal] identity asserts aggressively in me. In a recent article in Proma, entitled 'Bishvasghatakatar Dalil' [lit. 'A Document of Betrayal'] I have characterized the first fifty years of India's independence as fifty years of betrayal. Being a bangal Bengali, I insist that no one has the right to alienate me by decree from my land, my soil, my profession, my people. And that is exactly what has been done to us. That I cannot forget or condone, or forgive. Hence the older I grow, the more I am haunted by Bangladesh, eastern Bengal, it air, its water, its partition; and that...
explains Madhab Malanchi Kainya and Jochhanakumari, and Gaji Saheber Kissa. Call it my obsession.

In Adhmut Andhar, I come back to the theme of Hochheta Ki?—but in a different manner, in a different vein. Not in the familiar manner of the political play. It has a different kind of story, conceived in the manner in which politics lies entangled with our everyday life.

I do not subscribe to the notion that whoever makes it to Lanka turns into a Ravana. A person or a party with integrity, with a scientific temper, with genuine commitment should not fall into that trap at all.

[S. B. Whatever be our reservations about the CPI(M) in power in West Bengal, I am sure it does not affect your ideological position in the least.]

Not at all. If it had affected our ideological commitment, then why Dario Fo? Then why the statement made in Adhmut Andhar? There are any number of anti-Communist plays available. Dario Fo is one of those who stay on the right side unflinchingly and fight the limitations and aberrations of Communist politics all their lives. But there is of course the obvious difference between the Italian Party and the Party here. [laughs.]
MANOJ MIRTA (22 December 1938), playwright-director, actor in theatre and film; Sisirkumar Bhaduri Professor of Drama, Rabindra Bharati University; major works include *Mritury Chokhey Jal*, *Ashwatthama*, *Chak Bhangas Madhu*, *Alokanandar Putrakanya*, *Shobhajatra*, *Sajano Bagan*, which have all been successful productions, particularly the last one, with the playwright acting the decrepit Banchharam; major film appearances include *Gharey Bairey* and *Ganashatru* by Satyajit Ray; *Banchharamer Bagan* and *Adalat O Ekti Mey* by Tapan Sinha. Recipient of numerous awards including Girish Puraskar (1978), Award for Best Playwright by the Government of West Bengal (1983 and 1990), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1985) and Nandikar Award (1991).
There is nothing very striking about my coming into theatre. It would make a story too trite and trivial. In Satkhira, where I grew up, theatre was very popular. There was no sign of modernity about anything there, but we had theatre—and not the jatra. In our house, we had painted 'scenes'. Nobody in our family ever took part in theatre, but they played sponsors.

[Samik Bandyopadhyay. What was your social status?]

We were moneyed people. How can I put it?

[S. B. Did you have land?]

Yes, we had land, but were not landholders as such. We had a lot of land. My grandfather's father may have been a big talukdar [owner of a landed estate]. But things were going down fast during my time. My grandfather lay ill, bedridden for thirty years. There was no one holding a salaried job in our town. My father was the only one employed in a job. He had come away when he was quite young, and we had come away too. Things were slipping away, we were in a state of decline. We had had a lot once, we were told. But we still had the natmandap [performance space in affluent, traditional homesteads]. People in the village put up theatricals. But we were not allowed to take part in them. The elders in our family were strongly opposed to theatre, as a matter of fact. But if you’re one of the heads of the community, you have to patronize a lot of things, whether you like them or not.

I felt drawn towards theatre. The first performance I saw was a dramatization of Ramer Sumati by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. All the actors were people we knew. I was very young—ten or so. I found it strange to find people I had been calling uncle so and so all dressed up for their roles and one of them entering with a pair of live fish. That is when I perhaps found the theatre live and real, and full of possibilities, and decided that this is how it is. Maybe that is why I would never find myself at ease outside the proscenium theatre, though I’m fully aware of the importance of off-proscenium...
theatre. The other life, the other world built within the proscenium offers infinite possibilities. That tiny cube of a space defined by the proscenium, offers possibilities that are endless, endless, endless. When I came away from our village home, I carried with me that notion of theatre. I had started writing stories from a very young age. We had a house in Basirhat where I came to stay and started going to school. This village too had its theatricals in which I took part. Not that I was particularly enamoured of theatre. When I was engaged in theatre, I thought, this is what I would be doing through life. But then again when I was not doing any theatre, I thought I would never go back to theatre. I was in a state of restless indecision.

Then I joined the Scottish Churches College, in 1954, when I had permanently settled down in Calcutta. The friends I made there were all enthusiastic about acting. So was I. I had never thought of writing plays. I had developed a passion for acting in Basirhat itself. Many of my friends here later became reputed actors. Rudra [Rudraprasad Sengupta] and I acted together in college plays. We also had Partha pratim acting with us. All of those who formed the group Gandharva were from Scottish. Many in Nandikar too were from there. Many of those who are involved in theatre now, and many who were part of it once, but have now moved away, had links with Scottish; Shyamal-da [Shyamal Ghosh], for instance, was never a student of Scottish, but he had so many friends there that he would go visiting them often, and rehearse plays in the college premises... 

[S. B... and spend hours at the restaurant, Basanta Cabin, close by, where students of the Scottish Churches College gathered.]

There were some teachers at Scottish too who were theatre-mad.

[S. B. There was Sushil Mukherjee...]

There was Gurudas Bhattacharya who had written a few plays. When we were leaving college at the end of our fourth year, Chitta-babu [Chittaranjan Ghosh (1930–96), Lecturer in Bengali, and playwright] joined. Dr Taylor, the Principal, was a theatre buff. He played scenes from Macbeth in several cultural evenings at college, a different scene each time. When he did the dagger scene, he had got hold of a dagger from somewhere, had stuck it at his waist, and jumped around a lot. The college used to have an inter-class drama competition—something that doesn't happen in any college even now. Badal-babu [Badal Sircar, b. 1925, playwright and director], we came to know later, had graduated from the same college. For about eight to ten years, till 1980, Badal-babu, Rudra, Keya and I acted in the annual play put up by the Alumni Association, directed by Sushil Mukherjee. We were regulars all those years.

While in college, I wrote stories, some of which got published. Some of us got together in college to form the theatre group called Sundaram. There were few such groups around in 1958–59. There used to be two major one-act play competitions in Calcutta then—one of them organized by Tarun-babu [Tarun Roy (1927–1988), playwright, director, and actor] at his Theatre Centre, the other at Biswaroopa [a regular commercial theatre, with its own repertory company, popular and successful throughout the sixties and seventies], both with a lot of fanfare. The competitions exposed and projected several new directors and actors. We wanted to put up something for the competition. I lived in Belgachia, in the far north, then, and came down south to the group and its rehearsal room. On my way home one evening, I decided to write the play entirely truthfully, keeping clear of all conventions of theatre. I wrote the play overnight. A short play Mrityur Chokhey Jal [lit. ‘Tears in the Eyes of Death’ written 1958; premiered September 1959 under the direction of Partha pratim Chowdhury at a one-act play competition organized by Theatre Centre]. If you study it, you will find it a very different kind of play, if not so much in content or setting, in its dialogue and other aspects at least, which were straight out
Playwright as actor: Manoj Mitra in Sajano Bagan, with the young couple who are determined to keep him alive (above); and with the landowner and his agents who plead with him to die (below). Photographs © Nemai Ghosh.
of home, totally different from the notions of theatre current at the time. It had no conventional theatricality about it, either in text or in the production. The play was broadcast, and came first in the competition. It was directed by Partha.

[S. B. Played by you and Shanta Sengupta.]
Initially, it was me and Ratna Goswami.

[S. B. I saw it, with Shanta—at Rangmahal.]
That was later. In 1959, we did it with Ratna, who was with the IPTA, in their South Calcutta Branch. She was better. The two of us were in the cast. I gained quite a reputation as an actor. Entered for the All India Radio play competition, it won the first prize. I acted in the broadcast version too. That is how I came to be accepted as playwright and actor. That was the beginning. It was all so trivial. There was nothing significant about it. If it had roots in or connections with my childhood, my life, or my thoughts, they are too subtle and mysterious to be dragged to light. In fact, I would like them to remain hidden forever. Let them remain hidden. As they say in psychology, once you get into a friendship, you can rest assured that you have had a long, concealed preparation leading towards this point, you must have been developing a special kind of liking, you must have been desiring someone like that person. Maybe it was something like that. I may have been desiring it. And then I just carried on, doing both—playwriting and acting.

I call it trivial, because there are others who have come to theatre through the IPTA, or through other larger theatre experiences or projects, or through longer theatrical practice. I did not have any such experience behind me, before I came to write plays. I had done no reading on how to write plays. I hadn’t even tried to write plays earlier. I had been writing short stories till then, and then I suddenly wrote the play. But maybe because my first play was so well received, I could never give up playwriting, and I fell in love with it, discovering as it were the friend I had been waiting for so long.

The next play I wrote was Nilkanther Bish. We had one additional advantage by then, for the theatre group Gandharva had become quite famous, well established, and respected. It had come to have a position next only to Bohurupee. The other groups on the scene like Rupakar and others, we considered somewhat old fashioned, though they had several extremely talented people in their ranks. Gandharva, made up of younger people, was more full-blooded, energetic, and raring to go. Those other groups, made up of older people, we found quite ancient. Gandharva had started publishing a theatre journal that proved to be the most popular, among our generation at least. But the best theatre journal we have ever had was of course your Theatre [theatre fortnightly in Bengali, edited by Pabitra Sarkar and Samik Bandyopadhyay, 1965-66] some time later. But in its own time, Gandharva, the journal, created a big stir, and drew in a lot of contributors.

[S. B. In content, in design, in all respects . . .]
It threw up a whole lot of new writers, and prodded established writers in other modes like Bimal-da [Bimal Kar, novelist and short story writer, b. 1921] and Shakti Chattopadhyay [poet, 1933–95] to write plays or write about theatre.

[S. B. The verse drama in Bengali had a fresh beginning in Gandharva, with Dilip Roy’s plays.]

Krishna Dhar [b. 1928, playwright, especially famous for his verse plays, journalist by profession] and Ram Basu [poet–playwright, b. 1925] came to write verse plays in Gandharva. Gandharva as a theatre group presented a festival of one-act plays, the repertoire featuring four or five verse plays, including one by Girishankar [Girishankar Das (1921–1995), poet, playwright, actor, producer]. Do you remember Girishankar? He wrote Cherag Bibir Haat and many other plays. He used to write a lot at that time.
[S. B. Dilip Roy wrote Circus, Ekti Nayak . . .]

Niren Chakrabarty [poet, b. 1924], Krishna Dhar and Ram Basu, had their verse plays staged by Gandharva. For the next eight or ten years, I wrote a lot of bad plays . . . I’ve written more bad plays than good.

We started the group Sundaram in 1957. We were in the first year then of our graduation course at Scottish Churches College. We formed a group. Gandharva too started as a group at the same time. The actual initiative for the setting up of Sundaram lay with a friend of mine, Parthapratim Chowdhury, later a filmmaker. Till then or even for some after I had not thought about involvement with theatre in any capacity other than that of an actor. After two years spent as an actor in theatre, I wrote my first play. Gandharva called me up for an acting assignment, with Shyamal-da as director. But then they asked me to direct a play for them. I had just written a play—a bad play, called Moroger Dak ['The Call of the Cock']. I directed it for Gandharva, but couldn’t do much about it, for I didn’t have any notion yet of directing plays. It was mostly handled by Shyamal-da. There were others too who helped out. It was probably Tapas-da [Tapas Sen] who did the lights. I sat through it all almost like a puppet. I had no desire to be a director.

Soon after, I left Calcutta for three or four years with a teaching job at a college in Ranigunj. I came back to find Gandharva closed, and Sundaram in shambles. Then we started yet another group—Ritayan. With Ritayan, I did a revival of my Mrityur Chohkey Jal, and produced Nekdey ['The Wolf', written 1968, published 1973 in a thoroughly revised version; premiered 27 September 1968, Rangmahal]. We did Wilde’s The Importance of Being Ernest in an adaptation by my friend, Atanu Sarbadhikary. I directed the Ritayan plays, simply because there was no one else around, but there was nothing worthwhile about the little that I could do.

I came back to Sundaram much later, in 1975, after Partha had left, and Sundaram had become practically inactive. Ritayan too had meanwhile folded up. We had not been able to do much serious work in Ritayan anyway. None of its productions had been worth anything. But in the period we’re talking about, I had written plays like Chak Bhanga Madhu.


[S. B. Did you use the village life you had known in your childhood—in Satkhira—and that had a strong hold on your sensibility for the first time in your Nekdey, or had it come in, even earlier?]

No, when I wrote Mrityur Chohkey Jal, I was working through the village life, though may be not the typical rural life—the life of the peasants or the agricultural labourers—but the life of the village middle class. I had very little intelligence then, and could make a character enter with a hurricane lamp in his hand, in a Calcutta setting! Quite gaffe, maybe from a notion that the light of the hurricane lamp would provide the stage with a different kind of illumination, or I don’t know why, for ‘loadshedding’ [a powercut] hadn’t yet become so common then in Calcutta. It obviously came from the impressions I
carried with me from the village, where I would see grandfathers or grandmothers coming in, hurricane lamps in hand. The play was about them. It was about old age and growing old in the village. The two people I showed on stage were people I knew closely. I used their own speech. They were still alive. They heard the play over the radio, and had a mixed reaction, not quite joy nor sorrow, a strange kind of reaction, as they heard the story of their own life. The old couple couldn’t quite understand it, and were not sure whether it was a story that had been made up, or their own story.

The rural experience came in, in a larger way, with a larger span, in Nekdey. It was there in smaller doses in several later plays, before it came in again, on a bigger scale, in Sajano Bagan. Since you’ve given me this opportunity of talking about myself at such length, and going into trivialities even, let me tell you something that I’ve noticed about my plays. There are a lot of trees in my plays. When I have produced my own plays, I have often retained trees on stage that served no direct, visible purpose. In my Galpo Hekim Saheb, for instance, I put up a palm tree at the centre of the stage, and weave all the action around it, behind it, beside it. The tree conveys something of the village setting maybe, but there could have been other things instead to evoke the village. But the tree somehow dominates my scene. The tree has to be there.

I conceived Kinu Kaharer Thetar [lit. ‘Kinu Kahar’s Theatre’, written 1988; premiered 2 May 1988, Academy of Fine Arts in a Bohurupee production directed by Kumar Roy] similarly around a date palm tree. But it had no function in the play. Hence the director dropped it unceremoniously. Didn’t you find the style too Tagorean? [general laughter] Wasn’t it strange, with the ringing of bells? And two people holding up a screen? So decorative all around! I suddenly thought they were staging Muktadhara, and was quite taken aback. Bells and the over-pretty backdrop!

You asked me how I reacted to productions of my plays by other directors, particularly when they made changes to my text, added or had thrown out elements; or refused to understand something, or tried to make me understand something. I have just recalled some relevant episodes that I’d like to recount to you.

The first one concerns my play, Darpaney Sharatshashi [‘Autumn Moon in the Mirror’, written 1991], which was produced by Soumitra-da [Soumitra Chatterjee, b. 1935, major Bengali stage and screen actor, played the lead in several Satyajit Ray films, e.g. Apur Sansar, Abhijan, Charulata, Shakha Prashakha, Ganashatru]. It was set in a village called Panchkhira, actually Satkhira, in the Khulna district, now in Bangladesh, the neat little subdivisional town where I had grown up. It centres around a production of Nildarpan in the village, exactly a hundred years ago—with an actress who comes down to the village by boat, accompanied by a young village girl, who had been brought into the trade; but the older actress has taken her under her wing, stolen her out of the brothel, hoping to initiate her into acting in the village performance, thereby giving her a chance at a decent profession. In those days, theatrical performances were put up in the local landowner’s house, around the time of the Durga puja and the Kojagari Lakshmi puja. They start out from Calcutta in a boat during the pujas, going along the Ganga, then the Ichhamati, then the Bhairav and the Kapotaksha. To the reluctant crying village girl, the older woman describes some of the sights on their journey: ‘When in the evening the sun was going down in the distance, our boat moved into the little Kapotaksha river from the larger Bhairav, and we passed by the little landing stages marking the small villages with their
small settlements. Images of the goddess Durga were being immersed in the river at the end of the puja, with small crowds gathered at those landing stages, with drumbeats on the traditional drums accompanying the fall of every image.’ And then she adds, ‘As I saw them flinging the image of the goddess into the water, I had a feeling that someone had tossed you in the same manner into my arms, given you to theatre.’ The charm of those sights was that there was no great fanfare over the ceremony. When the boat passed a landing stage, there was no sound of the drums from the next landing stage, then there would be a spell of silence before the drumbeats were heard from the next stage, the first rumbling beats growing with the passage till again there came into view a small group of people—common peasants—with their little image of the goddess, standing at the next landing stage. All this the older woman described.

At the rehearsals, Soumitra-da decided to cut that piece out. He found it too long, and was not sure if people would take a piece of narrative so long and leisurely, though the actress who was performing was a good actress! Our producers and audiences alike seem to prefer our joys and sorrows presented in one-to-one situations—I share in your sorrow, or share in your grief, I laugh with you, I cry for you, in a limbo. They refuse to relate these one-to-one empathies to those larger segments of life to which they are ultimately bound. Those pictures of life they refuse to envisage. Our theatre prefers these emotions to remain disembodied, rather than be enmeshed in concrete events or phenomena. A few days later, I saw a production of the play in Bangladesh, directed by Ali Zaker [actor-director based in Bangladesh, b. 1944] who had retained the long section. It was beautiful in its economy and restraint. The words came like the beats of the dhak [the large traditional Bengali drum] from the distance, with pauses, all bathed in a gentle glow. I liked it very much. Then when they presented me to the audience at curtain call, Zaker said that that was the section he had liked best. And I had to tell him, ‘Well, that was the first section to be cut out in the production that we had in our country!’

The play had been published in a periodical, from where Zaker had picked it up. He said, ‘I liked it because I come from a village, though not from a hundred years ago of course.’ Twenty to twenty-five years ago, the Bengal villages were like that, small villages with their little festivals, I mean, in the remote villages, life flowing through them, along a meandering river, a life I have known and seen. A cool and gentle life, not gloomy, but delicate; small laughers, small sobs, no one expresses his sorrow too loudly, no one laughs too loudly, or protests too loudly. They generally accept life. The scenes flit by like pictures.

I had different reactions in the two different places. When Soumitra-da decided to cut it out, as a theatre person myself, I thought I saw his point. I knew it could be boring, and it might not be able to hold attention, particularly in their theatre, where they have their own calculations as to what is likely to hold attention; though I must say that I do not quite understand these calculations that they go by in the commercial theatre. It’s the same people doing it and doing it the same way. And watching it, I wonder how the calculations can be so different. But they somehow have it at the back of their heads that they go by a different calculation, have a different code of their own, a sort of Bhisma’s oath which they will never violate, with no real concern for or connection with the society around them, the people and their values and tastes and receptivity which they never care to assess. So I had accepted the cut. But it had hurt me nonetheless, for I had written all those words with love and care. I had consoled myself with the thought that the words would stay in the book anyway, and maybe they wouldn’t work in the theatre, after all. I could see that they were not being able to convey the picture I had put into the words, and had no experience of their own to draw upon.

The words held a picture of the boat witnessing an immersion of the image of the deity, then moving into silence against the setting sun, then the low rumbling of the dhaks in the distance, bringing in the presence of yet another community in yet another village,
and yet another immersion. This is what had appealed to Zaker, and the Dhaka audience too, from their familiarity with that kind of life lived close to the water, and the peace of it all, the peace that people in Dhaka and Bangladesh have retained in the midst of all the political troubles and tribulations, the peace that they have lovingly nurtured not merely in their geographical setting, but also deep within their souls, and out of that sense of peace they appreciated that section in my play.

A major producer in Calcutta, who has produced my plays, has this curious complaint against me that I have thought over quite a lot. He complains that when writing a play, I pay more attention to the scenic design, suggestions for lights and sets and clues to the psychological states of the characters than to the dialogue proper. He found all these parenthetical inputs quite meaningless, and understandably so, for he was not going to have sets according to my suggestions, or light it up in line with my scheme. So naturally he queried: why waste time on all this? I tried to argue that that is how I conceived it, and I wanted to keep it on record, and then of course he was within his rights to do the play the way he wanted to do it. But he insisted: There’s no need really.

I do not really know whether these are needed in theatre or not. But I have found playwrights offering these hints time and again. Take Girishchandra Ghosh [(1844–1912), legendary actor and playwright] for instance. I don’t like his social plays, but it’s not a question of liking or disliking. In his Prafulla, one of the classics of our early theatre, and an oftstaged work, in Act III, scene iv, he provides the stage direction: ‘Kashi Mitra’s Ghat, in Baghbazar’. I wondered: Why does the playwright specify this? What special bearing or value can it have in the scene in question? This is the scene in which you have perhaps the best known one-liner in Bengali theatre: ‘Aamar sajano bagan shukiye gelo’ ['My bountiful garden has gone to seed'] A cremation ground could be the ideal setting for such a statement, that I concede. But why so specifically Kashi Mitra’s Ghat in Baghbazar at the top of the scene? Why did he have to put it right there? After all, he had written more than a hundred plays, was a fabulous actor, a theatre teacher, a man who had trained so many actors, and a man so dedicated to theatre, so immersed in theatre. Would he write something that had no message to convey to the reader or producer, had no point to make? Why should he write something without a purpose?

I went back to a lot of stuff written by Girishchandra Ghosh and Abinashchandra Gangopadhayay, his biographer. At one place Girishchandra says: ‘I don’t like writing social plays, for to write them, one has to wallow in slush, and all that you’ve seen and heard pours into it, and people are unnecessarily provoked.’ That has led people to conclude that he hated writing social plays. But doesn’t it give one the opposite impression, as it underscores to what length he was prepared to go, the distance and depth he was inclined to probe, to drive his roots deep into the world he had known and seen, to produce a realistic work? Doesn’t that give his producers at least a clue as to the source from which this man gathered his resources, the extent to which he had cast his roots? As a producer, I would not seek to reproduce Kashi Mitra’s Ghat on the stage, for this is not a historical play. A historical play, located in Agra, needs Agra to be specifically suggested on stage. But what I can draw from the playwright’s stage direction is his intention, his philosophy.

Of all the productions of my plays directed by others, the one that pleased me most, in fact thrilled me, was Chak Bhanga Madhu, directed by Bibhash Chakraborty for Theatre Workshop. I enjoyed working with them. I would call it ‘work,’ for I did a lot of work with them besides writing—and all that with a lot of excitement. Bibhash himself had directed barely a couple or so of plays by then. He was bubbling with inspiration.

I have noticed in most cases that the points of strength in my plays, the points I drive at, whether in situation or in dialogue, get lost, with the emphasis coming somewhere else, to the point of contradicting it. The point that needs stressing to make my play come
true, what my play needs to reveal its soul, is rarely touched. And then watching the play on stage becomes a painful experience, producing no effect at all, failing to touch the audience. This would be as true for an insignificant playwright like me as for a master. The director must have the sensitivity to tap that delicate, concealed point in the play, that switch that needs to be pressed to strike the right illumination. But in most cases that switch is not pressed. In its place they press other switches, more formidable ones, sparking off more formidable arclamps.

This did not happen with Chak Bhanga Madhu, because Bibhash could identify with the milieu. As I was telling you, my homeland in Khulna, the little town of Satkhira, was close to the Sundarbans. Life there, and its rhythms, have nothing in common with the life-flow this side of the border. I had spent a long time there, coming over to West Bengal only in 1950, when I was twelve. That explains why that region comes into my plays again and again with such a powerful presence. I don’t feel so comfortable in other regions. I feel the draw of those old times and those regions. Chak Bhanga Madhu was set in that locale. I knew that life, I knew those people, I knew them all by name. There was actually a man called Kinu Kahar in our town—his name I chose for the title of my play, Kinu Kaharer Thetar. I wrote about Kinu Kahar, a folk actor, in the Sangeet Natak Akademi journal—and then rewrote it as a play. An essay made into a play. Parts of the essay went into the play. The opening of the play was straight out of the essay— with a man talking to Kinu, doing an interview of sorts with him, bringing up several episodes in the process.

Bibhash made me give several readings of the play Chak Bhanga Madhu. At an earlier stage I had thought of producing the play for my theatre group. Then Soumitra Chatterjee had thought of producing it. In the process I had read the play at least fifty times. I would read it again and again, and make corrections every day. I had had to read it out so many times that I reached a point when I could act out all the roles with my voice, conveying what each of them wore, where they were dozing, where they rose to their feet, what parts of the dialogue they spoke drowsily, I could convey all that with my voice, like an elaborate scenario. That’s one play I can read very well, though I’m not sure if I’d be as good as I once used to be. Bibhash made a cassette of my reading, listened to it for days to acquire the dialect, and still unsatisfied, wanted to go to the village, to the interior. So we made a trip to the village—Bibhash, Ashok, [Ashok Mukhopadhyay, b. 1940, actor and director, Theatre Workshop, and Chair, Faculty of Media and Communication, Rabindra Bharati University], and others, with a camera and a large tape recorder—deep in the interior, where we collected folk ballads and songs—the Manasa panchali [ballad celebrating the glory of Manasa, goddess of the snakes and worshipped for protection from snakebite], and the bhasan [a more elaborate and literary form of ballad celebrating Manasa].

That was a production that tapped every point of the text to perfection. About the one or two awkward points in the play, Bibhash consulted you, and I recall he told me that you had pointed out how the two retainers at one point seem to give Aghor Ghosh, the devilish moneylender, a lift of sorts, as they convey their love for him so gushingly, evoking his childhood—quite unexpected from the two toiling men, and quite uncalled for.

It was a literary point. The way I had conceived it, it was an evocation of the man’s childhood, the retainers recalling how they had carried the child around on their shoulders, in the palanquin. The man had turned into a devil in later life. But you were right in pointing out that the conventions within which we are accustomed to watch and read plays could somehow sentimentalize the character and soften the growing rage, which was far from my intention. I did some corrections after this discussion and I got better results. I had the palanquin-bearers say that they had never imagined that the innocent little boy would turn into such a monster. They don’t leave it in the past, they
relate it to the present, and bring their reactions into play.

I have a lot of such acquisitions, insights and ideas that I have gained from such dialogues, feedbacks and inputs of information, and the changes that followed these. In the case of this play, for example, we could accomplish these changes to great effect. In the same play, initially there was a problem in placing the character played by Manik [Roychowdhury], earlier played by Ram [Mukhopadhyay]. As far as I recall, Bibhash spoke to you about this character too and then reported back to me, and we could shape Manik to a more tangible characterization. My command over the material stood me in good stead in this case. As a matter of fact, when you are not in command over your material, you tend to resist any suggestions for change, for there is too little scope before you anyway. When you have no firm ground to stand on, how can you incorporate something suggested by anyone? If you try to do that, you can only get more enmeshed in the state of confusion. But with the kind of control I had over my material, in this case, I could catch the essence of any suggestion at once and make the changes almost overnight; for whatever suggestions came, they were not against the
grain of the work, they related only to what went to build and frame the dramatic experience for the viewers. As long as the criticism did not affect the core of the work, it would be a matter of rearranging a few bricks, opening up a few knots, to strengthen a few weak points. That’s how it worked for this play, but never again quite to that extent. Bibhash also did the comedy *Narak Guljar*. It was good, fun, and a hit. But *Chak Bhanga Madhu* was the one that I found absolutely right.

But to come back to the trees. If I could come to a more recent instance, I wrote a play last year. For the last few years, I have thought that I had to write about the present time, and that it was the theatre’s prime responsibility to enlighten people on all that was happening right now around them. That is what we have been taught from boyhood. That was one of the first lessons we imbibed when we came into theatre in Calcutta, viz. the obligation of projecting the present-day problems. I have great respect for that ideal. For a long time, that is exactly what I had been doing, or anyway trying to do. But now, of late, I have been feeling that it is time that our people were introduced to another set of people, located beyond our immediate times. It is something that the times need. I do not consider a portrayal of the narrative of our immediate present to be the only task of our theatre. This is a feeling I’ve developed recently. And that is the feeling that has gone into the making of my new play.

I have felt the need to expose my people to other people, other experiences, other beliefs and perceptions, and let them move beyond the confines of their immediate reality. This is the notion that led me to attempt for the first time a play in a historical setting. There was of course the instance of *Debi Sarpamasta*, dealing with contemporary issues, but deliberately set back in an imaginary past, imagined history. *Galpa Hekim Saheb* too was not a historical play, but had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that I sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms. It’s a secret that I’m sharing with you. It’s a candid confession I’m making.

But now I’ve written a play on an actual historical period, centring on the Emperor Bindusara, father of Asoka. The line ran from Chandragupta Maurya, through Bindusara, to Asoka. The play ends with Asoka’s birth. My play is set in the reign of Bindusara, the king who comes between Chandragupta and Asoka: the history of his time remains extremely disputed, obscure, and shrouded in mystery, with very little information available. The one personality who comes through, glowing out of this period is Chanakya, a controversial figure, known under three different names, and with several disputes over questions like the authorship of the *Arthashastra*. But from the little that is beyond dispute, one gathers that there was a popular rising against the Nanda kings, that brought the dynasty down, and placed Chandragupta, a commoner, on the throne. It was left to Chanakya to codify an order that offered protection both to the ruler and the ruled, and set down the principle: ‘My happiness lies in the happiness of my subjects. Their misery casts me into misery. To ensure the happiness of my subjects, I shall be only too glad to bear the burden of their misery.’ These lines appear in Asoka’s rock inscriptions. Asoka seems to have been yet another ruler rooted in Chanakya’s political ideology. Chanakya had served as minister to Chandragupta; and on the latter’s early death, to his son and successor, Bindusara, in whose reign Chanakya formulated a new code of social justice. He had the authority and guts to release the untouchable shudras from the obligation of wearing bells on their body to warn people of a higher caste of their proximity and thus enable them to stay clear. Such steps taken by Chanakya led to a conflict between Chanakya and the followers and interpreters of the Shastras. The slow rise of Buddhism before Asoka’s emergence on the scene was related to these developments. Chanakya had taken a stand against the continuing Shastric decadence and degeneration of the Hindu system, evident in its rituals and ceremonies, and with communalism rearing its ugly head. People had started saying: ‘Is Chanakya going
Buddhist?'

But the Chanakya in my plays is no activist hero: he is a crippled, sick, immobile person, with his dying energies dedicated to the task of continuing with the writing of the *Arthashastra*. I don’t mention the *Arthashastra* however, for it got its name much later. It’s somewhat like the Red Book. He goes on codifying administrative law, social justice, punitive measures. The *Arthashastra* stands out as the only seminal political work of its kind in India. He writes slowly, with nothing of the vigour with which he would tug at his long tuft of hair, in the manner made familiar by Sombhu-babu [Sombhu Mitra, referring to his performance as Chanakya in *Mudrarakhasa*, directed by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, for the Bangla Natmancha Pratishtha Samiti], writing with stiff fingers. He does not speak much, his eyes have receded far into their sockets. I have given him a strange disease—a bone disease, something like spondylitis. His neck is bent double, his shoulders unable to carry the weight of his head. He watches Bindusara’s decadence and decline. Bindusara appears in history as a self-indulgent, sensual, flippant prince, revelling in luxuries. I had felt the need to bring to our audience, our readers, our people a historical figure like Chanakya, along with the kind of experiences that have gone to mould him. Our audiences cannot remain enmeshed for ever in the mundane day-to-day happenings of our time. Those happenings have their importance of course, that I don’t deny. But equally this other area of life is as important.

The play has another character—not a historic figure, an unusual, unfamiliar character. What kind of a man is he? I have to tell you who and what he is. He is one of the priests who do the last rites for the dead at the cremation ground itself—a *smashan thakur*—the one who offers rice and water to the mouth of the dead person before he is set on fire. He is somewhat feminine, he dresses like a woman. There are a lot of things—an creatures too—that come to the cremation ground with the corpse—objects that the person had cherished and adored when alive, from books and pens and ink-stands to plates and bowls and mugs and other utensils; their children, their cattle; several of them to be left behind, to be given to the dead. He gathers these and brings them back home. He acknowledges that he is incapable as a man; he lacks the capacity to have a physical relationship with a woman. He sets up a home of his own with all these abandoned objects that he picks up. He marries a champak tree—an old Bengal custom, practised by kulin brahmans. He had found the champak tree getting singed beside the funeral pyre, and uprooting it, had brought it home and replanted it in his courtyard, and then anointed it with oil and vermilion, as part of the wedding ceremony. He had also collected an abandoned girl and an ox from the cremation ground. He sets up house with all these till he is thrown out of the village. That is where the play begins, with the man, with the young girl and the ox in tow, on their way to Pataliputra, where they first visit Chanakya, now a retired statesman, and then the Emperor Bindusara. It is the young girl who had been banished from the village as a *pishachini* [witch/ woman with supernatural powers] and eventually it would be her illegitimate son Asoka who would be crowned King. They had been driven out by the King’s man, by the village elders, who were then extremely powerful, like our panchayat now. The village elders had set their house on fire, burnt it down with all their possessions.

He is a man who gathers and nurtures all that is insignificant and abandoned and trivial, all that is neglected and spurned by the rulers. At a point in the play, the Emperor acknowledges this. The world endures only because there are men like him—the preservers! The rulers destroy such a lot. They do not take care of what they should be taking care of. They let things crumble to extinction. But there are people in society who protect and preserve. If they had not been around, there would not have been a single State Transport bus surviving! He is one of those who snatch things away from the jaws of ruin, and save them.

I was talking about the tree that he saves and marries. The story of *Sajano Bagan* is an
interesting one, but at its core stands this man who loves the tree so passionately. In my
desh [homeland], I’ve seen women gathering and crying around a big tree, a nut or a
mango tree, cut down at the roots—one of these trees that had stood there for so long,
close to the house—and lighting lamps at the stump in the evening! I know a man who’d
say, ‘Walking along the path, I am never scared, for I know that the trees are walking
along with me.’ That’s how people who belong to a land of waters and forests would
feel. I knew closely an old man just like that.

I have written quite a few plays around that theme of preserving and nurturing—
adoring trees with a passion, loving all those objects abandoned at a cremation ground,
caring for neglected children, being drawn towards unwanted, trivial things, and
protecting them, till they blossom forth and grow.

In this new play that I hope to produce in May [Chhayar Prasad, premiered 23 June
1998, Academy of Fine Arts], and which I am still working on, this man calls the ox his
son, the one he got from the cremation ground. The tree he brought from there is his
wife. A girl he picked up at the same cremation ground, he treats as his daughter. And all
four of them are bound together in a warm intimacy, the togetherness of a family. The ox
never eats the tree, for the tree is his mother. Sharing in a co-existence. Unusual creatures,
maybe not quite real, made of the stuff that fairy tales are made of. And yet not turned
entirely into fairy tale, they are pulled and tugged into some kind of a realistic pattern.
But a man who saves, or a woman who protects children (as we had in another play), or
a man who nurtures trees—this theme of preservation keeps coming back again and
again in my works.

I feel this urge—I feel it strongly—to reach beyond the familiar, immediate community
of ours. As I look at the people around me, university students, people at home, people
in my theatre group, I feel that they all need to be exposed to bigger experiences, to
confront an unknown sphere, something out of the ordinary. I find them too blindly
immersed in the immediate time, seeking ways out for themselves. I’m not talking of
moving away. You may think I’m being an escapist. But I’m not suggesting anything of
the kind. All that I am saying is that theatre also has the power and the obligation to
present/project the unknown and the unfamiliar. Every playwright will bring his/her
perception to such a project. I may consider something to be the bigger experience.
Someone else, greater than me, may consider something else to be the bigger experience.
But that commitment to the experience of the strange is part of theatre’s power. I’m not
denyng the importance, the social and contemporary relevance, of the current reality
that we’ve projected in our plays all through.

Maybe not so consciously, but I have been trying to get beyond the topical and the
immediate for some time now. Debi Sarpamasta [‘The Snake-headed Goddess’, written
1995], for example, offered a different kind of experience to people. It need not be my
own personal experience. I was using a made-up history in this case. All that I am saying
is that theatre needs to approach the unfamiliar and the unknown. I’m not claiming that
something unfamiliar or unknown will necessarily be beautiful or large or great. But a
really great playwright has the capacity to bring his audience into contact with an
experience unfamiliar and large at the same time.

[S. B. You are speaking of the need to extend the experience of life itself that we have
come to assume as complete.]

Yes, extend a little.

[S. B. And perhaps that will help us in solving our immediate problems from the
insights we gain from grappling with larger and more momentous problems . . . There’s
no question of escapism here. It’s a question of extending the scope of both life and
intelligence.]

That’s what I mean. It’s something that we need. We can only become more powerful
in the process. It's not as if I won't ever write the other kind of play. I may write one tomorrow. I've written one yesterday. But when I sit with you here, and think it all over, I only become more aware of the mess in which our theatre wallows, with a limited stock of subjects or themes or positions that you need to merely touch to rouse your audience to a pitch, to get them to laugh and dance to your tune. There are those sensitive issues that need to be merely referred to, and you're sure to get the claps! One can play about with these. You don't have to deal with them even. You can just arrange them into some kind of a sequence to create a sort of theatre. There are such things happening. There is truth in the persistent complaint that theatre was different and more meaningful thirty years ago.

I had never felt the urge to become a director. Nor had I ever seriously trained myself to become one. For whatever little I've achieved, I've drawn
on my experience of the theatre, as an actor for all those years. But now when I look back, I think I have gained more from working in films. I have learnt more about acting, about scenography, and production, from films—from observing them in the framework of cinema—than directly from theatre. I have never quite acquired the skills required for theatre by independent effort, or haven't even achieved much in theatre. Whatever I've done has been quite trivial. Nothing I've done has been significantly good. Everybody says that there was nothing striking about the production of *Sajano Bagan*. I barely managed to carry it along with the acting. That is what people say, and they're right about it. The sets, etc. were shoddy and amateurish.

There's only one play that was a worthwhile production, at least by my own standards, and by my own estimate. That was *Shobhajatra*. The play had its limitations; the production too had its problems. But I was able to accomplish some new things. There was something about the writing too. I had gone for a shoot to Mahishadal in Medinipur. We were staying at the mansion of the Diwan, which was as grand as that of the zamindar. The Diwan's family was in a bad shape at the time. The head of the family and his wife invited a few of us one day to lunch. We had been seeing him moving around, the dhoti coming down to his knees, gun in hand. The place was in a shambles, the old edifice crumbling all around; the surviving walls were covered with moss. At the centre of the courtyard lay an old abandoned *ratha* [a ceremonial chariot used once a year to carry the deities Jagannatha, Balarama, and Subhadra in procession]. While serving us, the lady of the house had a lot to tell us. She began haltingly—she sounded embarrassed and awkward—then continued in an undertone. 'We never have a chance to taste a mango from all those trees in our mango grove,' she said. 'They come from all over the village and even from beyond and pick them all.' 'Can't you stop them?' 'What can I tell them? They tell us, you've eaten enough of these, your ancestors too, who were horrible people, arch villains. Stop us if you dare!' She told us how they'd even take the doors and windows off the hinges—'We can't do a thing about it!' she said. 'With all the vicious tales in circulation about our forebears, my father, my grandfather, up to fourteen generations backwards. Such a horrendous load of scandals! We just can't push the load out of our way, and take a stand with our heads held high.' There were just the two of them—husband and wife. Their children probably lived elsewhere. They left me with a strange feeling.

One can make theatre out of such an impression or a memory of a place or a sight that sticks, even without any training in theatre. One can draw lessons from such experiences. The more I thought of the scene in the daytime, in the long afternoons, in the night—we had lived there all those days—I conjured up the *ratha* as it looked, covered by moss, in the morning; the daily chores that the couple went through; how they interacted with people; how they perceived their immediate surroundings, how they recalled the past, how the man brought his gun down . . . all those sights and images glowed so clear and bright in my memory that in my enactment I could just remain faithful to those impressions, and get the same experience out of my actors, and in the process get quite a few striking scenes in my production. I had succeeded in drawing the pictures faithfully from memory. That gave me a lot of joy. The play had a lot of pictures, impressions that proved to be quite effective in theatre. There was a song that I almost picturized. The elder sister sings a song while offering water to a thirsty Muslim peasant. The younger sister carries on from the *antara* [[ in another scene. The same song stretches over two scenes, with the musical accompaniment bridging the break. There was a sense of satisfaction at the end of it all. All my other productions look dull and poor beside the work of my friends. As a producer, I'm quite a sad case.

[Paramita Banerjee. As a playwright, looking at one of your own plays in your own production, don't you find places where a subtle point or a nuance has gone untapped or untouched? How do you tackle it as a director?]
My actors must be cursing me inwardly for the way I go on changing a production, till I hit the right note. Take the play we are working on at the moment. We are making changes almost every day. We are scheduled to put it up on 14 May. I rewrote portions even yesterday. I'll go home after this interview and continue working on the text. I've cancelled rehearsals for the evening, I can't bring them to speak the text as I would like it to be spoken. They can't imagine the characters they are supposed to play. The actor must conjure up within himself the character he plays—the way he would appear, stand, even the way he would look at the cow! It's either overdone, with too much of it all along, or so facile that it would have no impact. Particularly the manner in which he addresses the cow and talks to it. We do often address a cow as baba or bachha [i.e. ‘my child’] or even give it a name. What is so special about talking to it? I don't have an actor capable of bringing that special element into that relationship. So I have to change all along. It has become such a task for me. When I give a play away to someone else to direct, I don't face this problem. I don't feel this urge to go for the perfect ‘expression’, when the play is some other director’s responsibility. The other director doesn't even ask me for such an intervention. With other directors, I have often made the necessary textual changes to facilitate ‘expression’, and even carried the ‘changes’ in pieces of paper in my pocket, and offered them to the director, pleading with him to do it this new way, and he has not found it acceptable. But with the role the way I've conceived it and the actor I'm dealing with, it is always so difficult to find a match.

How a man will tell a woman, 'I'm an imperfect man!' The kind of man that would make a statement like that! As I was saying, our actors are badly in need of exposure to various other modes of life, other kinds of people, other experiences. Without that, they remain confined to an extremely limited range of gestures and movements. They are capable of actions that have little to do with real life. They are capable of several actions: they can sway, they can play with their hands, they can crack their voices, they can fall flat, but when it comes to giving a character a presence on the stage . . . Theatre moves in two parallel directions now, and the theatre that we are asking for may be an old fashioned one, but it has its own wealth nonetheless, and its attraction, and a joy in achieving it. Becoming another person involves a process of creating all the way, creating a self and re-creating oneself. My actors don't understand—how the eyebrows tremble when a man makes such a statement to a woman, and with such honest candour, and from what sort of a feeling. Our actors know all the emotions, but they cannot convey indifference as an emotion. They cannot produce a perfect poker face. They do not know what a face without a trace of emotion would be like. For them it has to be a face either laughing or crying. Or at the most in between, one turning up one's nose. That's how our actors are. It's so awkward. And I have to go on changing the text to cover up their limitations. I conjure up pictures, but I cannot realize them.

The Pataliputra palace was on the banks of the Ganga. Khaled-da [Khaled Chowdhury] had made the sets for us. I wanted to bring into the scene reflections of the river water from the landing stage at the right. That's how I conceived it. That's how I wanted it to be. The reflection of the rippling water, swaying against a surface. That's how I had conceived the place; but I couldn't get it. Even if I had got that scene, I knew I wouldn't get the quality of acting to match it. The people in the scene needed to act to the grain of the scene. They don't know how to become people that they do not know. Not one of them is capable of either drawing from a different experience, an experience not his own, or conveying it. The words spoken should throw up pictures, and be set within pictures, showing the speaker in a state, this state or that. These are not things that can be taught, that people can be trained in. So ultimately I cannot match my words to the scene or to the people who speak or listen to them. I can't. And when I can't, I have to dilute my words, dilute and dilute, day and night, to bring my text down to their comprehension.
If one is more of a playwright than a director, he cannot remain content with an inadequate representation of the text. It may be a minor work, still he would not be able to accept it.

[P. B. Would you say that you are left with a dissatisfaction when you are driven to make these changes, or playing both playwright and director at the same time, you end up with a sense of achievement?]

At one level, I enjoy it. As a man of theatre, I have the satisfaction of fitting my text to the demands and exigencies of theatre in practice, the feeling that, well, I have made something that the boys in my group would be able to tackle as well as boys in some other group, and the play will work!

[Sumita Banerjee. Isn’t the play ultimately a piece of literature in its own right? And aren’t you betraying it as literature when you dilute it to allow your actors to cope with it?]

Maybe I’m being a little too harsh on the actors in my group. Let me put it across with more caution. I have to dilute my text quite often, and every time I have to do it, it is annoying. And only too often the play suffers in the process. But the opposite is also true, for in many cases I gain in the process. One discovers different ways as one sets out on a search, ways that had been unknown and unexplored till then.

[S. B. You are after all writing for the theatre, you want your plays to be staged. You are not interested in merely getting them into print. With that objective, as you write and produce for your group, you have the advantage of finding out for yourself and carry out experiments in the process—how your ideas work in theatric terms. You would have had to go without this experience if you just wrote the plays and handed them out to any group that would like to produce them.]

That is where I gain substantially.

[S. B. If a large part of it had to do with grappling with the incompetence of your actors, there must be a part of it that brings you face to face with the limitations of your own text, the flaws in your construction, and allows you to try out solutions and amendments.]

You have to confront a problem before you can seek ways and means to solve it. It's not that I am infallible in my writing. I have often left loose ends in my plays, calling for rewriting. The structure of a play is an extremely delicate affair. Seventy per cent of the value or strength of a play lies in its construction. Playwrights tend to suffer from a fixation, a kind of stifling loyalty to a kind of construction.

[S. B. A sort of maya.]

Maya. And if there’s been success in it, then it’s greed added to attachment. Maya, moha, matsarya. This search for ever new modes of construction would have come to an end if these problems had not come our way. Can we really take a superior stance? Haven’t we had producers in our country who have picked up potential actors from the remotest villages and small towns and made major actors out of them? I have to halt in my tracks when I recall their achievement, and ask myself in all humility if I am not after all indulging in sheer egotistic arrogance or stupidity! There are many directors who have produced results with less than the best acting talents. Our ideas may be just outdated, for all you know.

[S. B. But would it have been the ideal solution if you had easy and immediate access to the actor of your choice for every role in a play you have written, and the means and facilities and freedom to engage him? Wouldn’t there have been other problems then? Other dangers?]

So many of them.
[S. B. As a playwright, you face the same danger, the same risk of the actor, perhaps a more competent and powerful one, destroying the character as you had conceived it, and imposing his style on it!]

Absolutely, when it becomes theatrically more effective and valid, but only at the cost of my conception. Come to think of it from another angle, there is not much fun in handling a too well trained actor.

[S. B. He will invariably fit it to some well practised formula.]

He will apply his formula. It’s more worthwhile to train up someone less prepared . . . To break him down, to build something within him, to instil something in him. It’s time for acting in theatre to change. The more we discover through experience, the differences and distinctions of men distinguished by their thoughts and ideas, emotions and feelings, acting needs to change to come to terms with these distinctions. We cannot afford to stick to the old formulas, a single style or stylization.

We have lost the mode of acting that captures life as it is. Someone once told me that in theatre one can laugh where one is expected to cry, in other words, one can make a laughing face and yet give the impression of crying. I’ve watched actors holding a handkerchief to the lips and actually laughing, while giving the impression of crying. Something that the camera will never take. Using this for a clue, people have suggested that theatre can do without a lot. What is the point, they say, of using your eyes, so small in the stage, to convey crying, melancholy, exhaustion, contemplation, sadness?

What’s the point of straining after that, in theatre? I was debating this issue recently with some of my important theatre friends. I was telling them: You ask me to do a particular piece of acting. But what do I get out of it? What purpose does it serve in theatre? What you are actually asking for is acting cinema style. A tremor of the eyelids, that twitch of the eyebrows with which a man tells a woman that he is an ‘imperfect man’—where is the scope for that in theatre? To convey that, you have to improvise some other device, some other style, some other theatric idiom altogether. A theatric idiom has to be different from that of the cinema, or of life, part of another style. That I grant. But an actor who compromises on this point, one who holds back on that ground, will fail in either mode. These may remain unnoticed, maybe those gestures or movements will not reach beyond the first three rows. But without those, how do I get my own continuity? How do I get the joy and sense of achievement of piecing together a character and a performance? As a matter of fact, if I hold back on those details that the audience are likely to miss, I shall fail to perform faithfully in the scenes that the audience will perceive! I can give my best and my entirety only when you let me play it whole, not trying to make any distinction between what can be seen, and what remains unseen! Only then can I excel at every point, physical or otherwise. You can’t teach an actor to leave out parts of a total human act, because they are likely to remain unnoticed, and instruct him to play half of it, or a quarter of it! That can’t work. That way you don’t get the man.

[S. B. That’s where the strength of realistic acting lies. Even when I can’t see that twitch of your eyebrows from beyond the third row, the absorption with which you act it all out is transmitted to your other limbs and your speech, and the totality of it conveys that unseen twitch.]

Of course, of course.

[S. B. Sisirkumar Bhaduri was wonderful with his eyes. He was always complaining about his ‘minuscule eyes’ and we could rarely see the eyes and their actual expression, but we had the feeling that we could see them in all their expressiveness.]

Exactly.

[S. B. That was communicated by his muscles, his speech.]

Every single part of his being. A truth, when it is genuine, appears as truth even when
you see only a part of it. When the whole is played out, we can guess the unseen rest from the part that is seen.

[S. B. At one level, the totality we experience in a total performance conveys an unreal totality, a totality made up of both the seen and unseen.]

Definitely. And then there are of course the debates over how much of the totality one can portray. But you have to build an unreal totality.

[Anjum Katyal. What are the particular values you bear in mind when you come to write a play?]

I’ve told you already of the kind of stuff I would like to write right now. I have a notion of the subjects. When I start writing, I try to capture the people as alive and whole. And I have a few calculations, the kind any playwright would have, call them norms of construction. I have another working principle, viz. to capture a character in my play, I would try to place him in different light conditions, in different relationships. That is how one has to go about when one seeks to get to the totality of a character.

One day, when I was shooting for Gharey Bairey ['The Home and the World', novel by Rabindranath Tagore, filmed by Satyajit Ray, 1983], Ray asked me what I thought about the make-up he had designed for me. I said, ‘I look like Shibnath Shastri [(1847–1919), social reformer and thinker, and outstanding prose writer], short and squat and bearded like him.’ Ray was delighted, and the people around him thoroughly amused. Ray must have recollected and responded to other associations with Shibnath Shastri. He had obviously not thought that I would refer to Shibnath Shastri.

Ray appreciated the little acting pieces that I conceived or improvised. One day we were shooting a night scene in Chakdighi, near Tarakeshwar. The shots were taken, and seemed to have gone quite well. But Ray came up to me and said, ‘Why don’t you do something? I know you can use several voices. Why don’t you make your voice deeper? You can of course use that voice when you go for dubbing. But why don’t you do it right now and let’s have another shot?’ I was game. For the next shot, I used a deeper voice, and the punch on the words was lost, leaving it all at a flat monotone. Later in the evening, on our way back to Barddhaman, where we camped when shooting at Chakdighi, I asked him, ‘I haven’t used that deep voice anywhere else in the film. Why did you ask me to use that voice here?’ He explained, ‘People change in different light conditions. When you wake up in the morning, you have a clear, fresh, sparkling voice. In the afternoon, it is a reedy voice. After sunset, you have a strange lazy spirit spreading over your limbs, your body, your voice. The voice becomes weightier and deeper. You can feel these changes even better when you go to a village.’

I recalled how in the villages where I had stayed, people called out over distances in a long drawn out, lazy tone, almost circling over the landscape. True, light conditions, times of the day affect the character of people. People are different in the daytime and at night. Our shastras tell us how our tamogunas [sensual drives] are aroused in the night.

Ray told me how people, placed in different light conditions, revealed the myriad shades of their emotions, their hidden secrets, emotions within them of which they themselves have been ignorant. Untapped mysteries. It’s a lesson that I’ve valued.

Things like these I bear in mind when I come to write a play. They have maybe little to do with theatre as such. These considerations are not quite theatrical. They have to do with human beings, their situations, their reactions to situations, how their thinking and ideas change. Actually, all the effort is directed to capturing a man to the utmost, a difficult task. Can one reach that end? Maybe not.

[P. B. Badami, in your Chak Bhanga Madhu, gives the impression of a particularly living character, because we see her grow in the course of the two hours or two hours and a half of the performance time. Is this something that is peculiar to this play, and
from the demands of this particular play?]

Now let me tell you something. It’s nothing peculiar to Badami. Even within a realistic framework, there is scope for the explosion of something unreal, or maybe what you could call the truth of the Expressionists. I often introduce it quite purposefully. When I lifted Badami to that point in my play, I was not thinking of nor was aware of its theatrical potential. I didn’t know at the time that it would fit into the theatrical terms so well. But it is still unreal, the way this pregnant woman, in the midst of the terrible struggle for survival, holds her stomach from time to time and says, ‘Something moves there!’ Something that may or may not happen, maybe didn’t happen at all, but it proves to be so effective theatrically.

There are lots of such things in my theatre that do not belong to reality. But that person will not be revealed unless that switch is tapped, and yet it is unreal, for no woman will say those words, ‘It kicks me with ten feet’. And yet with those very words, the woman at once grows in stature right before our eyes, grows ten feet at once. The child doesn’t actually kick. But with that realization, she returns to herself, tearing through layers in a manner that no strict realist or naturalist would accept. But you have to concede that it has a truth of another kind to claim for its own, revealing or suggesting a different notion or a sensibility. Those depths and dimensions belong to that character. It is a character that moves at different levels, and draws shades of mystery and power around herself. When she raises the machete, for example, the stage directions tell us that the sun sets, there are shadows gathering all around, spelling the end of time, and the dhaks rumble in the distance. It is part of the magic of theatre to accommodate and valorize the unreal, giving it a real presence in its own terms, and making it meaningful.

[S. B. In Sajano Bagan, too, the state of utter decrepitude in which the old man makes his first appearance, offers no scope, if you go by realistic terms, of the recovery and rejuvenation that leaves him firmly standing on his feet at the close of the play.]

It’s out of the question, it’s impossible.

[S. B. But it is the standing up that has all the significance.]

That is an essentially theatric contribution.

[S. B. At one level, it is totally unreal and impossible. And yet it becomes so plausible given the man’s attachment to life, to food, to the trees, to everything, an attachment that is biological and organic . . .]

Biological.

[S. B. . . . and hence bound to grow and give him growth in the process . . .]

It is the biological organicity that raises him. That is what you have to accept.

[S. B. It operates almost like a primeval force right from the beginning, a force that is a natural part of him, nothing supernatural about it. His language, his scraping movement along the ground, his efforts to stand up are all so physical and tangible, . . .]

. . . and real. And yet it adds up to something totally unreal, almost impossible. It’s the same with the woman in Chak Bhanga Madhu.

[S. B. It’s a pattern that you seem to repeat.]

It’s now a set pattern with me, with the real and the unreal rolled into one, and that is something essentially theatrical, for it is only in the theatre that one can cope with something like this.

[S. B. The way the pattern works in Chak Bhanga Madhu, every time the old man enters the stage from his house, he changes physically. He has a different form, a different movement, a different gait, almost a different personality. After this has happened the first few times, every possible entry by him is charged with suspense, is something one waits for. Every entry by him gives the audience a theatrical thrill.]
Exactly. Every time it’s a different person. It’s something that only theatre can give you. Satyajit Ray had once thought of making a film of Chak Bhanga Madhu. We had just put up Sajano Bagan, and he had seen it, and had asked if I would act for him. That’s when he told me that he was toying with the idea of filming Chak Bhanga Madhu. Then after a few days he told me, ‘You can have it in theatre, but it won’t do in cinema!’ I asked him, ‘What particular scene do you mean?’ He said, ‘The one in which he’s just restored to life and from the hearse itself he makes a grab at the girl.’ I said, ‘You could provide for a time lag.’ He said, ‘No, that wouldn’t do. If he went back home, and then ran after the girl, it would be a different story altogether, not your play any longer.’ All such situations are elementally theatre. The girl stands apart from the rest. Her love for life, her effort to save and revive the man dying of snakebite is intense almost to the point of unnaturalness. Her reactions against her father and the rest of the family are so robust and strong that they verge on the unnatural. She is a woman with tremendous energies, and she feels the vibrant presence of another living body within herself, it’s all so impossible, and yet so natural and real in the theatre! Then when she raises the machete against the evening sky, in the holy hour of the evening, like a Durga, one sees the woman growing and growing to greater heights. She grows to a height where she is capable of anything, nothing seems to be impossible for her, she has grown beyond the human limits.

[Sumita B. A pairing of the old man or woman and the child]
seems to another pattern that you use, with the old man leaving something to the child."

Maybe that’s because I can act those old roles well.

[P. B. Since you bring the point in anyway, can we ask you if you have considerations of your group in mind when you come to write your plays?]

No, no. I have never written with that kind of a calculation in mind. One can have the impression that I am tailoring my plays to the strengths and limitations of my group. While it is true that my plays have over the years lost their scale and richness and come to fit the dimensions of my group, but I haven’t ever written specifically for my group. There are several plays that could have been done by any other group as well. There are plays which have been done by my group and then by other groups.

In the production process, I shall admit, the strengths or limitations of my actors may have determined or redefined my characters, scaling them higher or lower, as the case may be. That’s not something peculiar to me or my group. One has to accept it anywhere and everywhere.

[S. B. If one comes to write another Chak Bhanga Madhu today, one will have to think who could do that woman’s role. And that’s where the playwright would be stumped. It is humanly impossible that a playwright will write a play, totally oblivious of whether an actor or actress will be at all available for a role as he conceived it. How can he ever write in the ideal condition where he can create a role for the ideal actress for that role. But when you wrote Chak Bhanga Madhu, in that given time, there were two or three actresses capable of performing that role.]

[P. B. Why do you think it’s impossible? There can very well be, among actresses in our time, actresses equally capable of doing the role as the earlier ones.]

[S. B. True, but how can the playwright avoid looking at the theatre scene around him and draw his own inferences? He will obviously be thinking of the stage possibilities of his play even while writing it. And he will have his own assessment of the resources available to him in Calcutta or West Bengal.]

He has done his own stocktaking, he has his measure of the theatre he lives with. We know what is possible and what is not, in the given theatre. And we’d have written differently in a different period, in a different setting. That’s only natural.

[P. B. What I’d like to know is how the director Manoj Mitra handles and reacts to the playtext handed over to him by the playwright Manoj Mitra.]

The two, since they are one after all, cannot separate from each other so radically. A part of one always stays with the other. There is joy and challenge too in the act—dealing with the human material through which my play passes, finding out for myself how and to what extent my play works, and making the necessary modifications. That’s a necessity. I have to do it.

[S. B. Manoj will probably agree with me if I say that in Sundaram, when Manoj started, he did not have the advantage of a really excellent band of actors. But over the years Sundaram has come to a point where it can boast of at least two or three actors who are competent and can deliver the goods. And this has been achieved in the process of acting these plays out. This development owes as much to Manoj’s directorial input as to the inherent richness and demands of his texts. The actors have grown slowly in the process of coming to terms with the demands the characters make on them, while struggling and grappling with their limitations. When Manoj came on the scene in 1975, assuming directorial leadership over Sundaram, there were quite a few groups on the scene, with far better acting talent, with much stronger actors and actresses.]

Of course.

[S. B. But we have seen how they have declined over the years, acting-wise.
Sundaram may not have thrown up three or four really big actors or actresses—Manoj still has to strain a lot and carry a lot of the burden himself to carry a play through—still Sundaram scores over most of the other groups with a general level of competence that the group can claim as a group, an achievement that I at least would trace back to the quality of Manoj’s plays and the demands they make on the actors. More maybe than what Manoj brings to it directorially, I am somehow convinced that it is his plays and the roles he conceives that challenge the actors and for sheer survival they have to extend themselves, the way someone flung into the water has to learn to swim to survive. That’s how they grow, whereas in several groups like Nandikar, where plays are picked up from anywhere and adapted to the scale and limitations of its capacities and resources, the actors do not grow. The play makes the maximum contribution to the making of the actor.]

You will remember our Dulal Lahiri, who had a major role in my Mesh O Rakshas—I saw him grow with the role to a remarkable level of competence. And soon he had made a place for himself in the professional circuit.

[S. B. We had seen Dulal earlier, and had seen nothing special about him. But Mesh O Rakshas raised him to a height.]

There was nothing special about him, till he came to Mesh O Rakshas. And then Soumitra Chatterjee cast him in his production, and he was quite a sensation. Chitra Sen is of course a major actress in her own right. But she had been out of theatre for quite a number of years before she came to Alakanandar Putrakanya, and the role called forth a tremendous performance. A role contributes a lot to the making of an actor. Yet another actor I have seen growing with a couple of roles is Ashok Mukherjee of Theatre Workshop, who grew formidably in scale, with the role of Rajasaheb in Rajrakta, and could rise further to his role in Chak Bhanga Madhu. He had seemed such a limited actor before that. He did not seem to be cut for theatre. He seemed a foreigner to theatre, an alien. And then how he grew! It’s harder to act in the comic mode, and yet how competently he performed in Narak Guljar, after the first two or three big roles. A role can change a personality, an acting assignment can change a personality.

The theatre groups now are in a very sad state. I’ve not had the opportunity of gathering what the younger generation feels about the situation. It would be worthwhile finding out. But our groups, the older groups I mean, are in a miserable state. Bohurupee or some of the other groups should be in an even worse state than my group. We don’t get the bare minimum of young men we need for a production. We have to do with the few older men who have stayed on with us—old men, half-old men—we don’t have younger people visiting us. Bohurupee once had a regular flow of young aspirants. But can you cite a single new young actor that they have gained in the last two or three years? Have you seen a single new face in their recent productions? You can’t have. It’s only the old-timers that have survived from habit, from old love, for love of theatre, for various reasons. They have just stuck on. But there is no fresh inflow of new actors.

This is the situation that led me a few years ago to suggest that maybe turning professional could be a solution. For now every single field of creativity has become professionalized. All the new actors run to the TV now. There are long queues at the TV, seeking roles in the serials. Whenever we get a new actor, he gets engaged in a mega serial, and would be shooting evening after evening till ten at night. I can’t stop them, but when and how are they going to rehearse for my play? How will they find time for theatre? The TV has taken our actors away. It is not true that we have lost our audiences to theatre. The TV has damaged our theatre not by drawing our audience away, but by keeping out new people, the young actors with their loyalty and discipline. Our groups have run as voluntary organizations, with too little to offer in terms of money.

But to what extent can theatre professionalize itself? In our situation, it does not seem
to be possible. How much can we pay our actors? Fifty rupees at the end of a show is nothing! It is a vicious circle, no doubt about it.

[S. B. I can even raise the other question: why should a bad actor—which goes for a large majority of the actors now acting in these groups—at all be paid that sum? What training, what skill can he claim to have?]

Right. You are absolutely right. You can, of course, raise that question. That’s a question often raised—even more forcefully—by people in our theatre. We did a large number of call shows of both Sajano Bagan and Alakanandar Putrakanya; and with some money to spare, we began to give every member a hundred rupees or a hundred and fifty for every performance. This is still being paid—from the little money we gain from the call shows. But that small excess has now come close to exhaustion. With a smaller number of call shows now, the older productions having completed their circuit, we shall not be able to pay this sum for much longer. But this payment has not contributed in the least to any improvement in the loyalty of these beneficiaries to the group, their dedication, their initiative, their sense of responsibility.

[S. B. There’s been no change in their attitude.]

Not in the least. On the contrary, he has been spoilt to the extent that he has become a worse human being. Let me tell you how bad he has become. He gets his pay even if he doesn’t do anything for the evening’s performance. Being present on the occasion is enough. He’s there just for an hour or an hour and a half.

[S. B. Just like recording your attendance at a government office!]

That’s how it is. Professionalization with this kind of a mindset will lead nowhere. Professionalism in this context can only cause more harm than good. Moreover, we can’t compete with the electronic media with the kind of money we can offer. The shows we have in Calcutta run at a loss. We gain a little from those that we have outside Calcutta. We can pay a maximum of maybe two hundred rupees per actor per show. The same actor will earn anything up to three times that amount for a couple of hours’ work in a TV serial. Why would he stick here?

[S. B. He would get that money from a TV serial with acting at a poorer standard. Really bad acting.]

Really bad acting. Most of the acting in TV serials is scandalously shoddy. In theatre we don’t get actors to play the young roles. The few young actors we get join us only to get their diction mended and set right before they leave us to join the TV serials. Fathers bring their daughters to us; they tell us they’d like to have their daughters trained in acting. But who’s there to teach anyway? Who’d have the time? And who’s interested in learning? So they invariably leave in three days, having earned the right to go and tell anyone that they’d been part of such and such a group. This is the common experience of all our groups.

Can you spot ten or twelve really good new actors and actresses who have appeared on the scene in the last ten or twelve years? You could perhaps cite two or three at the most. But even they are more products of a certain set of circumstances than acts of independent choice. Take Arun-babu’s son for instance [Suman Mukherjee, b. 1966, who directed Gantabya (1997), for the group Chetana, is the elder son of Arun Mukherjee, playwright and director of Mareech Sangbad (1973) and Jagannath (1977)]. He has grown up in a theatrical environment. He has been with his father for a long time. His parents have put pressure on him. He has a whole group to support and sustain him. There is money in it for him. He has the right connections.

[S. B. He has other engagements that bring him a regular income, and it falls into a scheme. Thus it’s a special case.]

I would say that it’s the case of someone who has grown up in theatre staying on with
it. But where is the actor who comes into our theatre from an entirely different background? A really new entrant?

Asit Bose (b. 7 March 1943), playwright, actor-director in group theatre and jatra, filmmaker; began career in theatre with Utpal Dutt’s Little Theatre Group (LTG) and People’s Little Theatre (PLT), before forming his own group Calcutta People’s Art Theatre (CPAT); best known for his *Kolkatar Hamlet*; has directed and produced documentaries on Jyotsna Dutta, the prima donna of jatra and Tapas Sen, renowned lighting designer; has directed two documentaries on Ustad Faiyyaz Khan and Ustad Abdul Karim Khan for Doordarshan. Recipient of Samir Lahiri Smriti Puraskar (1980) and Abhinay Puraskar; Award for Excellence in Jatra by the Government of West Bengal (several times between 1977 and 1982).
Asit Bose. Sisir Bhaduri stands at the source of my interest in theatre. I grew up, fed on a Sisir Bhaduri production almost every week, from when I was about five or six. My father had two reserved seats in the theatre and I insisted on accompanying my parents whenever they went to see a play. Some of the images and impressions have stayed on. My mother’s family—particularly my two maternal uncles, both bachelors—had a tradition of jatra-cum-theatre, putting up performances during the pujas. My mother’s grandfather, Swami Niranjanananda, was one of the twelve original disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He had erected a temple, a large *atchala* [lit. eight roofs; an architectural style originating in Bengal, which uses a unique construction design of covering a single space with eight thatched roofs with no walls in between, commonly found in temples] at Rajarhat-Bishnupur, his ancestral place, where my uncles were living.

I was in the technology stream for my Higher Secondary examinations. I chose Physics in college for my graduation, but broke off to take up a job at Hindusthan Motors, and while taking special training for a course abroad, I gave it all up and came into theatre. It was what we call the ‘commercial theatre’ that was the greater draw for me; it haunted me. Utpal-da’s theatre and Sombhub-da’s theatre came to attract me some time later.

My college days—from late 1961-63—were years of political turmoil in India, particularly with the Communist Party heading for a split—for a leftist orientation was an inevitable part of growing up at that time. I was yet to mature to a strong ideological commitment, but the inclination was there. It was Saibal Mitra, one of my friends, who took me to Utpal-da for the first time. The LTG [Little Theatre Group] production running at the time was *Ajeya Vietnam* ['Invincible Vietnam', premiered 31 August 1966 at Minerva].

It was Sraddhananda Bhattacharya, an extraordinary scholar, who had taken lessons from Sisirkumar Bhaduri in the latter’s last phase, who had already initiated me into serious, methodical
theatre practice. He taught me the science of theatre. I have known smart, scientifically oriented so-called theatre workers, who have not been able to give me anything of that science. He gave me lessons in every single sector of theatre. He was a younger brother of Karunamoy Saraswati [(1905–77) scholar, musicologist, linguist]. As a student of Physics, he offered me insights into the use of sound in theatre. He brought his sense of geometry into play in his treatment of the visuals. And all these inputs went to whet my curiosity about theatre.

When I joined the Little Theatre Group, *Din Badaler Pala* ['The Play of Changing Times', premiered 1967] was under preparation. You may call it luck, or coincidence, but I became a protegé of Utpal-da’s rightaway. I hadn’t yet done anything worthwhile in the theatre. For *Din Badaler Pala* I was made the stage manager, and, in addition, played the role of the Peshkar [lit. the bench-clerk]. Dilip Bose, Bimal Dasgupta and I were mainly in charge of the stage. This was the beginning of my serious work in theatre. You have known Utpal-da in several capacities, from several angles. But my understanding of Utpal-da was from a different perspective altogether. I went to him to learn theatre. I had been to other people too—to learn. But, working in Utpal-da’s theatre, working with him over a number of years, I found him an unmatched teacher in the totality of theatre. I had the privilege of enjoying his confidence to an extent denied probably even to Rabi-da [Rabi Ghosh (1931–97), one of the founders of LTG, comic actor, famous for his role as Bagha in Satyajit Ray’s films for children, *Goopy Gagen Bagha Bayen*, *Hirak Rajar Deshey* and Sandip Ray’s *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo*], and being trained by him in his inimitable manner. I had once asked him to provide me with a set of guidelines for my own training, and for the training of younger people in a school situation. Utpal-da had written out for me a page-long list of points to be borne in mind. I had misplaced it, and as luck would have it, when I rediscovered the note only yesterday after all these years, tears came to my eyes. I joined at a time when the decline had already set in—midway through *Kallol* [premiered 29 March 1965 at Minerva]. The strength and weakness of Utpal-da’s theatre lay in his own overall control over and mastery of theatre. For he had the capacity to make use of people like Nirmal Guha Roy, an extremely powerful designer, and Tapas-da with his lighting, to create a perfect harmony, a choir, to which every actor, every character contributed her/his individual input. The audience would never feel in it the handiwork of a single teacher, for Utpal-da was a past master in capturing the vitality of theatre that lies in the magical harmony growing out of diversity. It was a mastery that ultimately rested in his casting, his capacity to match the actor to the character, and then to exploit him! Financial pressures mounting on Utpal-da at this time did not leave him the time to work with the ‘suitable’ choices whom I would not call actors. His last endeavour to make actors was probably directed towards me and Debesh Chakrabarty. The rest of them he merely fitted in, and with his individual genius alone he could create an exemplary theatre by using them. The human material that went into the making of *Manusher Adhikarey* [premiered 14 July 1968 at Minerva] would have been woefully inadequate—without Utpal-da’s great individual performance and his productional values that made it the peak point of Utpal-da’s theatrical career. I can take legitimate pride in the fact that I was entrusted with the responsibility for the costumes and make-up of this production. For the materials, I went to every nook and corner of Calcutta, looking for the least expensive things—for our means were extremely limited—and picking up things at sales. Utpal-da paid me a tribute when he told me, ‘Without you, I wouldn’t have been able to put it up.’

**[Samik Bandyopadhyay. Just think of it, he did it all virtually with non-actors!]**

Absolute non-actors. Utpal-da used to joke about it: ‘If I throw a shoe up into the air, at its fall it will turn into an actor.’ He turned shoes into actors, and had to do with shoes turned actors. Audiences went mad over actors in an Utpal Dutt production, and when they saw the same actor after he had left the group, performing with some other company, they would ask in utter annoyance: ‘Is this an actor?’ It’s there that Utpal-da scored, and his weakness lay right there.

Utpal-da produced *Juddhang Dehi* ['Call to Arms', premiered 24 November 1968 at Minerva]—*The Generals’ Tea Party* [by Boris Vian] and *Schweik in the Second World War* [by...
Bertolt Brecht] punched together—in the worst days of the Little Theatre Group. It was an outstanding production, and I don’t have an explanation for why it flopped. If the production is repeated now, it would stand out as an exceptionally modern production. The only point on which it tripped was acting, for few of the actors had the flexibility to meet the demands of the production. It is the failure of the actors that was the major reason for the failure of Juddhang Dehi, and for the step by step decline of Utpal-da’s theatre.

When Utpal-da made a fresh beginning—I won’t go into the political compulsions—with Tiner Talwar ['The Tin Sword', premiered 12 August 1971 at Rabindra Sadan] and Suryashikar ['Hunting the Sun', premiered 13 August 1971 at Rabindra Sadan], constituting the peak of that phase, when he had left Minerva Theatre, he had with him only a few of the LTG actors from the Minerva phase—Sova Sen, Chitta Pal, Anil Ghosh, and myself. Only when it was clear that the new organization would go a long way did a few others from LTG sneak in. We interviewed fresh people, and recruited Samir Majumdar, Mukul Ghose and several others. The first few productions for Bibek Jatra Samaj—Shonrey Malik ['Hey, Capitalists!', premiered 31 December 1969 at the Tollygunge Agragami Maidan] and Rifle [premiered 23 September 1968 at Kashi Biswanath Mancha by New Arya Opera. Asit Bose is referring to the performance by Bibek Jatra Samaj, which premiered at the Tollygunge Agragami Maidan on 1 January 1970], which initially had the redoubtable Ponchu Sen making a guest appearance—he could not at the end—proved to be a useful exercise. Utpal-da rose to the determination to make a stand, and it was the new spirit that

In his search for a theatre idiom of his own, Asit Bose tried out a variety of formal experiments, trying out things at random, some of which ‘proved to be fun’, like an adaptation of Clementine Dane’s Will Shakespeare: An Invention with Asit Bose as the young Shakespeare and Aparna Sen as the Dark Lady of the Sonnets.

Photograph © Nemai Ghosh.
sustained him to produce Tiner Talwar and Suryashikar [premiered 12 August and 13 August 1971 respectively, at Rabindra Sadan]. But once he had made it to that peak, a downward graph set in.

One of the problems with Utpal-da was that he chose this political pose to bring the members of his group closer to himself, to give them something to hold on to. There was something childish about it, as about the man himself. Rather than assume this political pose, he could have very well taken his stand on theatre itself, and found in it a wider and stronger position. In his urge to become a political figure overnight, he had to take utterly contradictory positions, alienate several close friends, create enemies unnecessarily, and thus wasted his energy. He had the choice of sticking to theatre, to committed theatre. But he did not choose that option. The leftwing political parties took advantage of that and utilized him. He could get away with things that would have led them to fling away any other theatre worker. They treated him as an invaluable asset.

Even before we came to split, I resented some of the compromises in which he indulged, for example when he produced Thikana [premiered 2 August 1971 at the Academy of Fine Arts], set against the Bangladesh war of liberation, and glorified the uprising beyond all proportions, and made a great hero out of Mujibur Rahman, almost a Surya Sen [(1894–1934), revolutionary, popularly known as 'Master-da', formed an armed revolutionary group, trained them in combat, masterminded guerrilla attacks on the British, led the historic Chattagram Armoury Raid in 1930], when we knew by then, through our contacts in the Bangladesh Left, that Mujibur Rahman did not deserve such valorization. When I told Utpal-

Satyen Mitra's assassination was the immediate provocation behind writing Kolkata Hamlet. Seen in this still from the play are (from left to right) Jagannath Guha, Joy Sen, Asit Bose, Partha Bandyopadhyay and Aparna Sen. Photograph © Nemai Ghosh.
da, ‘Why are you doing this? We know the whole affair for what it is really worth,’ he said, ‘Why don’t you see that the market will lap it up?’ That is when I began to develop a hatred for this theatre. It was shocking to find that this theatre too was fighting to be in the market! We had thrown up jobs to come to this theatre, for the love of it, and we were prepared to go against the practice of doing hit plays only, or looking for a hit. In fact, as you know Samik-da, later we would give up a successful play, running well, to experiment with something more risky. We had no regrets when we had to close down Baghbandi [by Mohit Chattopadhyay, produced 1972] after a single performance. The joy of doing it was enough to compensate for the financial stress. I have always felt that those who enjoy experimentation and exploration should be prepared to take the risks involved, and I am convinced that the risks are affordable; and we have taken the risks.

When we took those risks, we were jobless, and yet we could take the plunge. I broke away from People’s Little Theatre when I found the group succumbing to the demands and pressures of the market, and formed a new group. I had grown up under the protective shelter of a giant tree that had borne the brunt of all the storms and stresses. It was difficult to outgrow or give up the several elements of theatre practice that I had imbibed from Utpal-da. But I began to look for a theatre idiom of my own. In the process we did a variety of formal experiments, trying out things at random, some of which proved to be fun—like Clemence Dane’s Will Shakespeare and Jyotirindranath Tagore’s Aleekbabu—till we came to Kolkatar Hamlet [a play written and directed by Asit Bose, who also played the lead, premiered 16 August 1973 at Kalamandir, Calcutta].

There was continuous pressure on me from fellow workers in my group after
the roaring success of *Kolkatar Hamlet*—which scored simultaneously on the levels of political theatre, ideology, and total theatre—to take it as the model for our next production. I faced conflicts over this issue. I have never been seriously bothered about the commercial success or failure of a production, and have tried to explore the possibilities of theatre and relate to living issues. With all our leftist and progressive pretensions, we have remained basically middle class, with the characteristic middle class position of hanging in between. I would like to make the point unequivocally and firmly that most of those who serve the so-called present-day group theatre have not come to it out of commitment to our love for theatre, but from an obsession with themselves and their personal reputations. If they had loved theatre, theatre would not have been in such a state in Bengal. The theatre described as the Hatibagan theatre, the theatre that gave birth to today's theatre which nonetheless denies its origins, had once given us a theatre much better than what we are offered by the present-day theatre groups, who do not have the capacity to emulate the older standards. The middle class has brought theatre down to this pass.

You know better than me that every theatre group today would have a single visionary or maybe a couple of them at the most, with a second category around them—of organizers, devoid of any creative imagination whatsoever. These ‘organizers’ cultivate contacts with bureaucrats, with the ‘secretaries’, with the neighbourhood establishments, to provide the group with an efficient and effective support system, and come to have a position in the group and in the market, till they jump on the dreamer director himself, to exercise their clout on him, and tear his wings. Drawn into this vicious game, I came to a point where I could not take it any longer, and left the racket.

For me, the proscenium theatre is not the only kind of theatre. When people ask me, ‘Why aren’t you in theatre any longer?’ I feel like telling them, ‘Fools! I’m in theatre still. I’ve given up the proscenium theatre. That doesn’t mean I’ve given up theatre.’ When I moved into the jatra, it was another kind of theatre.

I went into jatra, with Utpal-da, at a time when the traditional jatra was taking a new turn. It had started drawing a substantial metropolitan audience from the festival at the Shovabazar Palace, and had begun to feel the need for modernization and change in terms of content, for the times were changing and so were the spectators. Utpal-da appeared on the jatra scene at this particular point of time, and struck a formidable blow for a new jatra, with *Rifle*, his first work in the jatra. Utpal-da had an uncanny capacity—something I have not seen in anyone else—to acquire an immediate insight into any situation in which he had to work, feel it on his pulse, I would say, and then build upon it. The title of the play *Rifle* had already been announced in the press and through the potential local sponsors spread all through West Bengal, but at the first reading of the play to the company, Utpal-da realized that it would not do. The title remained the same, but the original play—incidentally on Bahadur Shah Jafar, the last Mughal Badshah—was replaced by a new script, within a few days. *Rifle* was the trendsetter, that brought in its train *Jalianwalla Bagh* [premiered 1969, for Satyambar Opera, a jatra company, at Minerva], *Delhi Chalo* [premiered 1970, for Loknatya, a jatra company, at Mahajati Sadan], *Samudrashasan* [premiered 1970, for the same jatra company], *Bhuli Nai Priya* [premiered 1970, for Sreema Opera, a jatra company at Pratap Mancha]. On all these productions I was Utpal-da’s assistant.

There was a snobbish contempt for the jatra in our circle at the time. It was considered to be feudal and rustic. I too had something of the same attitude. It was a reflection of the typical half-educated, uneducated middle class mindset. We all fight for the people, do all our people’s theatre in the city, while the real
people sit out there watching the jatra! If I had not been in the jatra for fourteen years—directing and writing scripts for the jatra, and acting in the open, I would not have had the larger perspective of Bengal, and of my people that I now have.

When I look back at my work in the theatre, I realize that I had had some theatrical sense and had had glimpses of the real life through a window only half open, and working upon these, I had produced plays that had somehow worked. I had been provoked by the cowardice of a theatre—inheritors of a tradition that had once shaken up the colonial rulers—that did not have the guts in the late sixties or the early seventies to take stock of a political situation in which young men were being gunned down in the streets of Calcutta, or even give an insertion in the Press condoling the death of Satyen Mitra [1934-71], a theatre worker, shot to death. And they were all so close to us.

[SB. You were witness to what happened when Prabir Dutta was killed [on 20 July 1970] by the police at Curzon Park, and you went out to mobilize a protest . . .]

And Sombhu Mitra refused to be a party to it because he preferred to trust the official police version, disclaiming responsibility. I was not expecting anyone to attack a police outpost to register protest. But when people in theatre do not shed a drop of tear for a colleague killed, I do not find any sense in their doing theatre. The theatre is for humanity. If it abandons humanity, and turns into a free-for-all for pimps and suckers, then it is better to give up theatre altogether. It was Satyen-da’s killing that was the immediate provocation for my Kolkatar Hamlet. I conceived a situation where someone I had met and talked to the evening before is killed at midnight, and when I discover and stand before the dead body the following morning, Satyen-da stands up and challenges me, ‘So nobody did a thing, nobody said a word?’ The silence was a symptom of a degeneration, a test case that demonstrated how a half-educated middle class had brought the dream of a people’s theatre down to the level of a theatre for personal gain. Later on, a government in power for over twenty years, seeking a place in the Guinness Book of World Records, has incorporated this theatre, and projected a band of pimps.

There was something horribly dishonest and insincere about the wailing over Safdar Hashmi’s killing, with everyone jumping on to the bandwagon to pay tribute to a martyr, after years of keeping up the pose of a radical theatre worker and playing it safe. In my play Nautankilal [1989-90], I have
representatives of all the parties offering garlands to and appropriating the dead man, claiming him to be a martyr for the party, building up to the climax of a large festoon raised, proclaiming, ‘This play is dedicated to the memory of Safdar Hashmi, martyr.’ The CPI (M) was not prepared to pardon this sin of mine. They had taken offence on an earlier occasion too—over my play Lohar Nupur [‘Anklets of Iron’ (written between 1974 and 1975)], where I had criticized the economism of Leftwing politics, and how it made a game of closing down and reopening factories. To get a date at the Girish Mancha, a theatre owned and run by the State Government, one has to stand in a queue on a particular date the preceding month, and register one’s application for a booking, with the dates to be allotted according to the order in which the requisitions are registered. For three months at a stretch, we kept on registering our requisitions, at the fifth or eighth position in the register, but were never allotted a date. I knew the caretaker of the theatre, who was a distant relation of mine. When I complained to him, he advised me to meet so-and-so at the Writers’ Buildings—‘You have to go and ask him. You just have to stand before him, and it’ll be done!’ I didn’t take up theatre to ask for favours from Writers’ Buildings. If that is what I had bargained for, I could have gone to Subrata [Mukherjee, erstwhile State Information Minister in the Congress government] who calls me Asit-da. Manu-babu [Siddharthashankar Ray, erstwhile State Chief Minister in the Congress government] too had considerable affection for me. I never went to them, seeking any favour. If I have to go to Writers’ Buildings, to plead for the basic facilities for my theatre, I’d rather give up theatre. The present government has destroyed the guts of this theatre by distributing grants, awards and favours to those who kowtow to them, and by leading those engaged in theatre to promote one another within the coterie of the favoured. Theatre in West Bengal had traditionally taken pride in its leftist orientation and its spirit of protest. Nothing remains of that theatre, once that core of protest has been nationalized. I am not suggesting for once that theatre is synonymous with protest. But all those young men like us, the best of their generation, who had scorned the temptation of cushy jobs worth three thousand rupees (or even more) a month, given up everything else, not given a thought to their own sustenance, and came to theatre, neglecting their obligations to their families, had come to a particular kind of theatre. Where did we stand in these changed circumstances?

When I moved into jatra, our kind of theatre had come to a dead end, and I chose jatra, because I needed money for my survival. Even a man of the stature of Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay had to take the same step.

There were people in theatre who held meetings, and wrote articles condemning us and slandering us as greedy birds running after crumbs! But who were these critics? Who had given them the right to set the norms for an ‘honest theatre’ and sit on judgement on us? After all, we all belong to the middle class, bound within all those middle class conventions and prejudices. The Marxist ideals may have enlightened us a little. But fundamentally we remain unchanged. What have my accusers to show for themselves? Gandhi said it all when he said that if the means adopted to accomplish an end, however noble it may be, are not noble, the end is not worth anything. My accusers have been engaged in various professions. Some of them are college lecturers, others highly placed government officials, others in responsible positions. They absent themselves from their workplaces to serve their obligations in theatre. They are part of a theatre movement. I do not know what their movement is worth, but when they visit their workplace once a week, or maybe even once a month, and collect their pay cheques for the whole month, are they not perpetrating an act of dishonesty? And what are they really sacrificing, after all, for the cause of theatre? How can they speak of ideals and idealism in theatre when they practise such dishonesty in their personal lives? We were fools when we trusted our political leaders totally, and did not appear for our final university examinations, because they had told us that studies and courses were useless and irrelevant! Maybe it is our stupidity that allows the clever lot to gloat over how
smart they have been. But I’d rather stay stupid than play the smart game, for it is this ‘playing smart’ that has brought theatre to this pass. What is now passed off as theatre, I do not consider to be theatre at all. It has never bothered me to look for a new theatre idiom. Whatever you say, theatre for me is something quite different. A good play, a good actor, or a good storyteller does not ensure theatre. Where is the theatre in any of these?

Of those who are engaged in theatre in Calcutta at the moment, only half of one or one and a half are aware of the grammar of regular proscenium theatre—something that I have studied with my masters, and learnt with a lot of personal effort. That is what gives my understanding—and I can see around me people in theatre who cannot do the fundamental drawing, and will claim to be a Picasso! One has to have the skill for naturalist drawing that Picasso had, and prove it first, before one tries to break it up or break off. That’s where the theatre here stands. It has no inner life, no inner warmth. And the audience too is corrupted.

[S.B. Could you go back to the point where you left Utpal Dutt, and explain maybe a little more theoretically the point of departure, for Dutt was still basically working on a realistic plane, while in your Kolkatar Hamlet [written 1972] you moved out of it altogether?]

Theatrically, I now find Kalloj quite childish.

[S.B. In Kolkatar Hamlet, formally you break out of realism, when you bring the reality at its most immediate confronting something anti-realistic or maybe superior to the realistic. The common Bengali theatregoer, who liked Kolkatar Hamlet, responded to it at two different levels, reacted to its political charge at one level, and to the confrontation of different theatric idioms, in other words, the theatre of it all, at another level.]

Utpal-da had started breaking away from his earlier semi-naturalism or realism, when he returned to the proscenium theatre after his stint with the Bibek Jatra Samaj, the jatra company he had set up, primarily because he had just lost his regular stage. From now on he would have to perform at various theatres, on one night stands, and in his desire to attain a productional flexibility, without losing out on the productional excellence, he had started exploring other possibilities and modes, and I got engaged and involved in his explorations.

Immediately after we had to move out of Minerva Theatre, there was a phase when I

spent long hours with Utpal-da, from eight in the morning to ten in the night, sharing his thoughts, having discussions on different kinds of theatre, and playing with ideas. Utpal-da would read up a book, and pass it on to me, insisting that I must read it up in the following two days. That was the phase when I learnt most about theatre, and was most enriched. I still have with me the original paintings and sketches I made for the stage design of Tiner Talwar that Utpal-da approved. I'll show them to you some day. Utpal-da recognized the expressionist thrust that they had, but when it went to Suresh Dutt for execution, it got considerably changed, though the alignment followed my design. Utpal-da knew better than anyone else that he was compromising, and that he had to compromise. For he did not have in his possession the materials that he needed to accomplish his ends. Economic and political pressures and bindings did not allow him the time to improvise what he lacked.

Both Suryashikar and Tiner Talwar were departures. I was production manager on Suryashikar, for which I made all the ‘requisitions’ with my own hand. There was nothing that we just bought from the market. From the first set, you will recall, we took advantage of the formalistic structure of the Rabindra Sadan stage, and drew the trident flag of the Gupta Emperor in a manner and placed it so that it bore associations of the Nazi Eagle. The gloomy setting gave a different dimension to the variations on the stage. The girl singing ‘Oi pashan-kara tutlo bujhi aaj’ [‘The stone walls seem to have cracked open today’] and the handling of the mass were elements new to Utpal Dutt’s theatre. With these elements, Utpal-da had already started breaking away from realism. There was even more of it in the last project on which I worked with Utpal-da—Tiner Talwar—with all those games of theatre within theatre, with actions between two revolving discs, the ring in two diametrically different orientations. But with Thikana Utpal-da started regressing. There was a little bit of departure in Ebar Rajar Pala [premiered 6 January 1977 at Kalamandir], but Utpal-da had already used up a lot of his innovative creativity. And that is why a production like Titumeer [premiered 26 January 1978 at Rabindra Sadan] had to fail in Utpal-da’s hands.

[SB. He was using material he had already used elsewhere, and was stuck with it.]

The expressionist dimension had appeared first in Teer [premiered 16 December 1967 at Minerva], in what came to be called the television scene, with faces set in holes on the large curtain, against which Sukra Tudu enters with his dholak [a barrel-shaped drum, played at both ends], and the faces interact. I discovered my theatre here. A book on Vakhtangov’s theatre that I read about the same time provided me with another strong point of attraction; there was no way I could see anything of it, but whatever I could draw from my reading and from the illustrations was enough to give me the feeling that this could be the right theatric idiom for us, this should be the direction for us. The theatre that I had watched from my childhood was never a copy of life. The Alamgir that I had seen as a child or the performances of Ahindra Chowdhury [outstanding actor, 1895–1974] as Samandesh [in Misharkumari] and Naresh Mitra as Katyayan [in Chandragupta ] did not belong to naturalist theatre, and had something in it that I was still trying to identify, and was missing out on.

When I began writing Kolkatar Hamlet, I was writing as basically a production manager, and was getting bogged down only too often with the potential production problems: how could I make this shift? How could I bring this element in? And so on. There came a point when I resolved to write away, as it came. I fell back on Hajabarala [lit. ‘nonsense’, a collection of stories by Sukumar Ray (1887–1923), writer, humorist, illustrator, printer, where the narrative strings together the encounters of a little boy with weird characters from the animal and human world alike—a precocious cat, a businessmanlike raven, the elusive Gechho-dada, Byakaran Singh, the erudite goat, and Hijibibbij, the juvenile gnome.] for a model, allowing a kind of stream of consciousness to come into play. That is how I wrote Kolkatar Hamlet.
As I moved on to production, the one consideration that grew to be important was that the theatre now has to be more flexible, as it comes into proximity with the celluloid media. The TV was yet to come in, in a big way, but the signs of its rise were quite evident already. Our theatre, stuck within the groove of cover-and-discover for scene-shifting, had gone too cumbrously slow. The revolving disc on the turntable had not been much of a help. We needed to achieve the speed of film. And why couldn’t we? That’s how all those transitions emerged—with overlaps, montage and mixing.

For the scene where Hunko’s gang chases Aveek into our rehearsal room, beating him all the way, we got into a discussion—Jagannath [Guha, now a filmmaker], Reena [Aparna Sen, actress, film director, editor], Indra and I. Reena was not particularly aware politically at the time, but she had a wholesome stock of sincere, genuine feelings. I don’t know how she is now, or whether she denies all that now. But as we discussed it, it struck me that, that was just what was actually happening all over the world at the time. But what lay behind it? That was how I came to conceive the balletic movement growing out of the cigarette butts glowing in the darkness, till the saptarathi [the seven charioteers who surround and crush Abhimanyu, in the Mahabharata story] rise and fall and move in a circle in excellent harmony, with the counter lights playing with them till they turn into a jumble, and a whole row of posters are virtually superimposed on them, carrying slogans of political, economic, social, and other import, all disjointed, interspersed with a poster proclaiming again and again: ‘The time is out of joint’, all in fluorescent colour, giving it all a floating, glossy hue. We did not have access to sophisticated technology at the time. We did not have the financial resources to go for glowsigns. We had to make do with our limited resources, but by turning all the posters around at once, forming them into a panel, a powerful image of total military repression, overlooking large boots with studs pressing down on lying human figures, we could make a tremendous impact.

We staged Kolkatar Hamlet in extremely remote places, and were widely appreciated, with the applause continuing for long spells at the end of a performance. It was the visual power of the imagery that scored. We had managed to create a new kind of visual imagery, from the realization that while it was difficult to carry the stock traditional visual ‘property’ to the remote places we were visiting, the visual element remained extremely important. If we had actors of the stature required, we could of course hold the audience glued to two performers on stage, but, sad to say, we haven’t produced more than four or maybe three and a half real actors. We have actors who are experts in ‘soft’ roles or flippant roles, and that is all they can live off. There is a strange idea making the rounds that actors have to underact. I am yet to understand what they mean by underacting or overacting. For the London actors or Hollywood actors I have seen on screen have at times been loud, at other times butter-soft, and have never had any problems in the medium of cinema.

In our miserable plight, we use the appellation ‘behaviorist actor’ for people who are essentially non-actors, and put them on pedestals as the greatest Bengali actors of their time, unconcerned about the decline of acting in the state, and the fact that there is no proper place or scope for acting in our theatre any longer. All our gloating over the supremacy of West Bengal is nothing better than a big joke. Look at all those young actors and actresses in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh flaming across the horizon. You don’t have to travel to those places, you can just turn the knob of your TV set. You’re sure to discover at least a couple of new artistes every day.

There’s nothing to match it in West Bengal. There’s no theatre here. Theatre is bankrupt in West Bengal. All that remains to be done is to crack it all up, and make a fresh beginning. For there are no signs of fresh thinking in the theatre here. At a seminar the other day you taunted me, Samik-da, on my insistence that theatre cannot remain tied to the story. There are no new stories coming into our theatre, but where are the new visuals? Unless the visuals are there, unless people start thinking on those lines, our theatre has no future. I went into the jatra, but what I practised and learnt there was
theatre. The theatre work that I did on my return from the jatra has been marked by a strong influence of the jatra, and I've had crowded houses for my shows.

What I've drawn from the fullblooded vitality of the jatra, the contemporary cinema, the nautanki or the bidesia from Bihar (that I put to use formally/structurally in my Nautankilkal), I wouldn't have had access to if I hadn't travelled with the jatra, and remained stuck to the local theatre. There was no need for me to wait for one of our 'elder' producers to invite a group from Bhopal or from Kerala and provide us with a model! We have enough around us still to observe and discover! It's not even a hundred kilometres from Calcutta—you can go to Jainagar on the last day of Chaitra [month in the Bengali calendar corresponding to mid-March to mid-April], and get exposed to a whole gamut of fantastic theatre forms—theatre for the gajan [celebratory rituals and ceremonies offered to the god Shiva]. With my interest in a diversity of media, I have studied the traditional schools of Bengal puppetry, and have tracked its roots back to turn of the century Bengali proscenium theatre and the influences that the theatre drew upon. It was my extensive travelling with the jatra companies that brought me into contact with a wide range of such forms.

I came to the jatra, to assist Utpal-da, and brought to the jatra the same iron discipline that I had imbibed from him. I tried to impose the discipline on every company that I worked with. I found the jatra companies somewhat loosely organized, with little order or discipline, but with respect for someone who sought to instil discipline. So, naturally, when I came to jatra, I came as an IPS officer [a highly placed policeman], not as a constable. That was an advantage I enjoyed. I'll tell you of two of my experiences.

Chandan Mitra, the proprietor of Anandaloke, was a strange man. Born in Calcutta, he had once carried loads and grown up in the ranks of the jatra company, and had eventually started his own jatra company. He was a racing addict. On a racing day, a crore of rupees would not draw him away from the races. I recall a morning rehearsal that he interrupted to touch my feet—he was my age, or could be even a year older, but it was part of the social conventions of the jatra!—and tell me: 'Carry on with the rehearsal, dada. I have to go.' I asked: 'Where?' 'To the races,' he said. He had a carry-bag with him, the kind you take to the vegetable market, stuffed with money. When he came back, the rehearsal was over, and I was having a session with Prashanta-da [Prashanta Bhattacharya, b. 1934, music director and composer], for the music. We were busy trying out tunes. He came in, saying, 'I can't take it any more.' I asked: 'What's happened?' 'Look at this,' he said. And I could see that the carry-bag had in the meantime been converted to a folded handkerchief with which he was wiping away the sweat on his forehead.' In other words, he had lost all that money! Then there was the other day when he told me, 'Dada, please extend the rehearsals by an hour this evening, and ring up your home to tell them you won't be going home tonight.' I asked 'Why?' 'We'll have a feast after the rehearsals this evening.' And what a feast it was, with every 'plate' costing a hundred and fifty rupees, in those days! There was everything in it. And you had to eat everything—otherwise he'd hurl the choicest swearwords at you—he had a veritable treasury of those! He had won a jackpot that day. To be a jatra producer you need to have the heart of a gambler! Chandan was an example.

I was still working with Satyambar Opera, when Prashanta took me to Chandan for the first time. We got into a rickshaw after rehearsals, taking care not to be noticed—detective story style—as we made our way through the narrowest of lanes, to Madannohantala, where Chandan was waiting for us. He told me, 'I had seen a film when I was a child. I would like to do the same boi [lit. 'book', used for film texts, jatra and theatre scripts] in the jatra. I know for sure that you'd be able to do it for me. No one else will manage.' I told him, 'You have to tell me the story. Unless you tell me . . .' "The story's not from here, he said. It's from "foreign". Helen of Troy—from the Iliad. He had read the Iliad and the Odyssey in Bengali, in children's versions, and he wanted to do it in the jatra. No educated, respectable man of the stage, whether commercial or
experimental, would dare have such an idea. But Chandan Mitra dared. I told him, ‘I wouldn’t mind
taking it on. But it needs a wooden horse, out of
which soldiers would emerge. We have to get at
least two of them out of it, by whatever device we
manage. We need that horse, and the means to carry
it along.’ He said, ‘Don’t think of the expenses. I’m
prepared to mortgage my possessions, or sell them
off, if it comes to that.’ I mumbled, ‘But the
costumes . . .’ He said, ‘It’s for you to decide. You
have to do everything—from sewing the shoes to
reading the holy texts. But you have to do that play
for me.’ What an offer! Whoever gets such an offer?
The challenge of doing the *Iliad* in the *jatra*!

I wrote a script for *Helen of Troy* within the *jatra*
structure, and was waiting for the final reading to
the company, in the presence of the producer, the
manager, the veteran actor Abhoy Haldar. Early in
the morning, the day before the date scheduled for
the reading, Abhoy Haldar turned up at my place.
He lived in the neighbourhood. I asked him,
‘What’s the matter? The reading’s tomorrow, not
today.’ ‘I was passing by. Didn’t Chandan ring you
up?’ I said, ‘No.’ ‘He’s coming, anyway.’ Chandan
turned up in a little while. We had a meal together.
And it was only after the meal that he came out
with it, for, if he had spilt it before the meal, ‘we’d
have choked on it’, as he put it. He now told me:
‘You have to save me . . . I won’t do *Helen of Troy*.
Give me a play about Cleopatra.’ It seems someone
close to him—maybe his wife or someone else—had
seen a dream, warning of dire consequences if he
staged *Helen of Troy*. By then, I had worked in the
*jatra* for two or three years, but this was a new
experience. He went on pleading, ‘I’ll be in real
danger if you insist on doing *Helen of Troy*. I’ll give
you your entire fee for the *Helen of Troy* script
anyway. I’ll pay you one and a half time more for
this.’ I told him, ‘It was a tough job writing the
*Helen* script. And now I have to do a lot of fresh
reading.’ He said, ‘Go ahead. Tell me what books
you need.’ I gathered a fresh lot of books, following
on references, and wrote a new script. But after I
had read out the first two scenes, Chandan changed
his mind: ‘That’ll do. I’ll do *Helen of Troy*. Keep the

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Top. The redoubtable Sujit Pathak. Advertisements issued by
two of the leading jatra companies, Madhabi Natya Company
(*centre*) and Natyabharati (*bottom*), which produced Sonai
Dighi, a play that made Jyotsna Dutta famous in the lead role.
*Courtesy. Samik Bandyopadhyay.*
new one for the future.’

For my cast, I had some of the best of the jatra—Sujit Pathak, then at the height of his form as Achilles; Ajit Saha as Priam, Meenakshi Dey as Helen; Gurudas Mitra as Agamemnon; Devkumar as Paris. Stars who had the standing and authority to make tigers and cattle drink from the same trough. For the costumes I chose dress material that would give a rugged look, on the lines followed in films based on Western epics. I told Chandan, ‘I’ll need some special lights, to raise it to the level of the epic.’ Chandan asked me, ‘Tell me what you’ll need.’ I told him, ‘I’ll need some gelatine lights—colour gelatines.’ He asked me ‘What’s that? That gelate thing?’ ‘It’s a kind of filter, different from the paper ones we use here.’ ‘Where do you get them?’ ‘We’ll get them from Bombay.’ ‘What do you get out of it?’ I told him—and that was a mistake I made—’Haven’t you seen films in Eastman colour? You must have noticed that the colour there has a different tone.’ ‘So you’re telling me that it will be like Eastman colour?’ I said, ‘Yes.’

Three days later, there were advertisements in the newspapers, ‘Helen of Troy—entirely in Eastman colour.’ [General laughter.] There were a series of phone calls—Utpal-da asking me, ‘Can you tell me where there have been black-and-white jatra performances?’ Tapas Sen was on the phone soon after: ‘Now, what’s this?’ Then you rang me up. I rushed to the proprietors, seeking means to stop it. I told Chandan, ‘You’re misusing a trademark. You are liable to face a legal suit.’ ‘I’ll face the suit. In the three days since I advertised, I have booked forty shows. There’s no way I can withdraw it.’

We had all the weapons specially designed, and several costumes for each character. I was playing Odysseus, I had two or three scenes in all. I didn’t need to change costumes too often. I had kept two costumes for the role. But Chandan insisted, ‘That won’t do. You must have four. Isn’t it the same as Ulysses?
Isn’t there another whole epic on him? However small a part he may have here, he must have four costumes. I cannot think of any other medium where a producer will have the guts to be so extravagant. That’s the kind of producers I got in the jatra. Helen of Troy was a hit in the jatra that year.

It took me to a town near Bankura. We had driven through the night and reached the place in the morning. Late in the morning, all the members of the company were fast asleep, recouping their energies for the evening performance. I went over to the local grocer’s cum tea shop, where a group of locals sat gossiping, and I became part of them. A poor-looking old man came along, accompanied by an old woman, and his sons. He had brought rice in two wicker trays to sell to the grocer. As he sold the rice, collected the price and left, the grocer said, ‘What a charm you’ve woven! He came to sell the rice, to have money to buy tickets for your jatra.’ For me it has stayed on as a lesson for a lifetime. As a professional, I have often had to work in pieces or on themes, whether in the jatra or in other performing arts, with which I have not been able to identify in any way. I have accepted it as an assignment, and never held my participation in contempt. I have always retained in memory the face of that old man who sold two trays of rice to buy jatra tickets for his family—evidence of the value that live performance has for the people living in our villages—for them it’s worth more than their daily bread. I may make mistakes, I may fail in my effort, but I have no right to cheat or to let these people down, who have sold away their food to have a taste of our art! This is a lesson I picked up at the jatra. No other performance experience could have given me this sense.

In the jatra I have found actors and actresses with an incredible range, and yet this is a theatre that we have treated with disdain. This was our theatre, this should have been our theatre. This is the theatre that Girish-babu and his generation transplanted in the proscenium, and gave us our theatre. What a band of tremendously powerful actors I found in the jatra! I have had the privilege of acting in the jatra with actors like Purnendushekhar Bandyopadhyay, Menta Bose, and Sujit Pathak. For two years I shared the asar [the jatra stage space] with Jyotsna Dutta. Her performance began right from when she started making herself up. For the scenes in which I did not appear, I would stand watching her performance. I never missed any of the songs she sang on stage with such elan, and followed up with such relaxed, casual acting, which was not actually casual at all. The art of acting in the open air that the great Ponchu Sen taught me painstakingly—theoretically and with demonstrations—in his room, over days, I found in glorious practice in Jyotsna-di’s performance in the asar over those two years I performed with her. Acting with her on the jatra stage, I could see the art of alienation, the actress alienating the character, alienating herself from the character. Acting with Jyotsna-di gave me an insight into this art that I might not have even known if I hadn’t had the privilege of acting with her.

There was another actor of the same stature and equally technically competent, in the proscenium theatre—Sekhar Chatterjee. There was the occasion when one evening Malay fell ill, and I had to stand in for him in Kallol at Minerva Theatre. You will recall the scene just before the interval, where Subhas Desai brings food to the ship for the mutineers. And there is a confrontation between Sardul Singh—played by Sekhar-da—and Subhas Desai, the role I was playing that evening—both revolutionary leaders, but so small in their personal lives, when it came to relationships! Right at that point I had a total blackout—actors face it at times. I couldn’t remember a single word of my dialogue. Sekhar-da assured me, ‘Go ahead.’ He went on, speaking his own piece, and prompting me, and letting me speak, a masterly exercise of voice projection and holding it low from moment to moment, with flawless technique and precision—something that only an actor at the highest level of technical competence can accomplish. He was somewhat stiff and constricted in his movements, but he could create those small ‘situations’ that were masterpieces of technique. Think of that scene on the deck of the ship in Kallol where he refuses to shake hands with the ‘traitors’ who would like the mutineers to come to a
compromise, and swings gently, with his hands at his waist, and his eyes held fast on his interlocutor. A tremor runs through me when I recall that scene.

Jyotsna-di had the same stature. Maybe she was even better, for she did not have even that little bit of stiffness that Sekhar-da had. It's a shame that neither of them received the recognition that they richly deserved. Swapana-da [Swapankumar, eminent jatra actor, b. 1933] has a staccato style, a cultivated stiffness, out of which he can create such great patterns, particularly at the 'gate' [the exit from a scene in the jatra, played out at the edge of the arena stage where the long ramp to the greenroom begins, usually played in silence, or with a minimum of words, in mime and silent gesture], where he is superb, a real King of Kings! I have always admired the charm of Sekhar Ganguly's voice, the life in Shibdas Mukherjee's performance, the grip and quiet, controlled, reticent, penetrating acting of Niranjan Ghosh, and would love to slave for them! There lay my joy in serving this medium.

The proscenium theatre was my cradle. The elders and my brothers and sisters in the proscenium theatre had given me both affection and the taste of bitter manipulation. But the children of the jatra mother had offered me love and friendship, and never even a taste of the bitter. Hence I still look for any chance I can snatch from anywhere to come to the aid or support of the jatra. There is a lot that can be offered to them, a lot to do with and for them. The medium is dying a slow death. The jatra is now controlled by a band of new entrepreneurs running after quick money. The jatra actors and actresses have been shunted away to make room for a few incompetent cinema actors. I don't know why the government doesn't see or even you don't see that after all it is not the proscenium theatre, which is limited to a small coterie, that is our real people's theatre, but it is the jatra, with its far larger scope and spread—that is the theatre in which we should take pride. It is this larger territory that we let go to waste. In Maharashtra, they take greater care of it; they enrich their tradition, while we turn up our noses at the jatra and fling it aside, letting it fall prey to a pack of vultures. If we love our theatre, we have to turn to our roots. How can we afford to deny our roots? Why don't our theatre workers turn to our jatra, and take a stand beside it?

I see a lot of groups doing poster plays as part of the election campaign for the CPI(M). Where were they in 1966, when we risked our lives staging poster plays on live issues, and not as a one time luxury? Aren't many of these groups making use of politics for monetary gain? The government in West Bengal can still intervene in a meaningful way to save the jatra, though I'm not quite sure if there is still time.

Whatever I think about theatre now, it centres on possible ways and means to bring the proscenium theatre and the jatra to a point of convergence and interaction. I cannot deny the proscenium theatre, its attractions, its magic . . .

[S. B. And they have not been explored or exploited to the full in our theatre as yet.

Little has been done in that direction. Our proscenium theatre has moved to a point, and then turned the hands of the clock backward. The jatra has undergone the same experience. And the blockage in both our theatre and the jatra can be traced back to the same root—the politics of buying up launched by the political parties. In the early seventies, the jatra had shown the guts to produce plays about Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung, and made roaring business out of these plays, reaching sections of people that the proscenium theatre can never hope to reach. The jatra accomplished in the seventies what a people's theatre should aim at. And we have only sniggered at the jatra, till this tribe of ineffectual bioscopewallahs have taken over. I must have committed terrible sins in my previous incarnation! Otherwise why should I have to wallow in this shit, to feed my stomach—writing scripts for TV serials, and helping in preparing actors and actresses for a shot? On the floor I find actors who cannot articulate a yuktakshar [the compound consonants in Bengali, e.g. ksh, nm, tr, etc.], does not have a feel for scansion with a dialogue, not to speak of pitch or volume. The director, who may have some notion of the technicalities, is in most cases insensitive to the other requirements of cinema. And at
the slightest provocation, he would bawl out: ‘Hey, that’s all wrong, it’s too much like jatra!’ Who gives this dud the right to insult the jatra? He doesn’t realize that he is insulting his father—for the jatra is the father form for whatever performing art has evolved in Bengal. I had dreams of drawing on these traditional forms to enrich our theatre—on the kathakata [recitative-musical rendition, with annotative-interpretative inputs/elaborations, of scriptural texts], or the Shitala gaan [musical rendition of the ballad of the triumph of Shitala, popular deity of diseases], with the pattern in which it weaves acting, singing and narrative together . . . if I could recast it a little for the stage, and put it on with a small cast. It allows for multiple acting, and enough improvisation around the content. But all those dreams of mine remain unfulfilled.

[S. B. The masterly way in which they handled the narrations in the jatra, I remember Bijan Mukherjee’s long narration in Beer Abhimanyu.]

There lies a tragedy, Samik-da, a sign of the utter failure of the modern proscenium theatre in Bengali that has never been able to tackle the classics of our theatre. They have gibed at Ahindra Chowdhury for his Shahjahan, but they don’t have a clue as to how to get to things at its core. Why don’t they try to do Naranarayan? There’s no play of that stature in Bengali—at the verbal level, in terms of characterization, in situation-building—it’s the last word in playmaking. Let someone produce Alamgir. No, you don’t have to emulate Sisir Bhaduri; do it your own way. How can the present theatre identify its locus, if it does not revisit the classics? In England, they are always producing Shakespeare and Marlowe. Why do we shy away from the classics?

[S. B. The only classic done here is Balidan.]

And what a failure it was! In my stint in the jatra I had the good fortune of watching and studying the old masters of the jatra—Chhoto Phani-babu [Phanibhushan Motilal, outstanding jatra actor, 1910–72], Bado Phani-babu [Phanibhushan Vidyavinode, outstanding jatra actor, 1893–1968], and Ponchu-da [Ponchu Sen, outstanding jatra actor, 1914–72]—and through them, and through their insightful briefings, I could envisage something of the acting style that Girishchandra Ghosh had instilled in his actors. There are scenes in Balidan that bring tears to my eyes even in the reading, as I can ‘read’ the tones and gestures and movements that were originally woven into the text.

But when the new producer spent piles of money to set up cinema sets, they went against the grain of the text. It was all so useless. If they could revive the old acting style against plain black curtains, and bring in modern nuances to the text wherever it would take them, the production would have been really effective. That’s what my commonsense tells me. If someone had asked me to put up a production of Balidan in two months, I would have done it with young actors and actresses drawn from the jatra, against a black curtain and it would have proved once and for all how strongly it can still move so many people. But at that level, the Natya Akademi Balidan was an utter failure. I feel quite disconcerted whenever I see something modelled on folk theatre in the proscenium frame, or a folk subject being treated in a folk performance style. Whenever I perform in the proscenium theatre, I am acutely conscious of the demands of the proscenium theatre, of its characteristic charm and magic. As a viewer in/ of the proscenium theatre, I am quite a child, yearning for that touch of magic. The proscenium theatre director must play and improvise with the natural magic of the proscenium, its depth, its illumination, its colours, its horizontal and vertical planes—for devoid of these, a proscenium performance is just as interesting as a street performer playing his tabor and making a monkey dance to it! If I stay in the proscenium theatre, I find no reason why I should hold myself back from making full use of its properties or resources.

Badal-da, the theatre person that I have respected the most—along with Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay in the proscenium theatre (I am leaving out Utpal-da, with whom I have had a different kind of relationship)—for honesty, a terrible honesty, made a daring choice, when he realized that the theatre around him lacked substance. He found that it was no theatre, and he decided to abandon it. He chose to perform on the grass, and the
means that he mastered to perform the new theatre were just extraordinary. Several influences, including Badal-da’s, have come into my work, often even unknown to me; though I have my differences with Badal-da as to the rationale for his choice of the other theatre. I shall not do his kind of theatre. That’s not my theatre, for I have never practised that theatre. If I have to go for theatre in the open, I’d rather choose the jatra. But if I stay with theatre, I’d stick to the proscenium. I have the greatest respect for Badal-da’s theatre. I am particularly attracted by the visual emancipation that his theatre in open space offers from the claustrophobia of most of our ‘drawing room’ plays. And, of course I’d always admire the gritty determination with which he sustained his choice, the ultimate test of his sincerity. Once he had rejected the proscenium theatre, there could be no temptation strong enough to drag him back there.

Ajit-da had the same stubborn determination. But along with that he had a naivete—something of the native innocence of rural Manbhum from where he came—that made him look for the sheer theatricality inherent in a subject, and nothing else! It didn’t matter to him in the least whether the play was by Pirandello or Chekhov or Brecht, as long as it afforded him scope for acting with verve. It’s that passion for the larger-than-life theatricality that brought him at the close of his life to that ultimate feat—Paap-punya [lit. ‘Sin and Virtue,’ Ajitesh Bandopadhyay’s adaptation of Tolstoi’s The Power of Darkness, produced for Nandimukh, premiered 28 August 1978 at Sisir Mancha]. There is no one in our theatre with the guts and grit to reveal sin at that level of horror, addressing an urban audience with that ruthlessly rugged expression—none but Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, who was someone I came to know closely, in my jatra days. I had long conversations with him after that, right up to two days before he
passed away. The last time we spoke, it was the Shasthi day, the first day of the Durga puja. I was leaving for Jamshedpur that day for a jatra performance.

Anybody—just anybody—could approach Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, seeking his support or sympathy or understanding at a point of danger or crisis or sorrow, or with a problem. He never stood on ceremony or formalities. He would walk in any day, without notice, shouting, ‘Put the rice on to boil.’ I would never hesitate to go over to him and seek his advice on any serious problem, particularly any problem relating to my theatre group. His honesty was exemplary. Whatever he earned he would spend either on his family—or on theatre.

Knowing Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay was a learning experience. Earlier in life, I had for a while kept up a revolutionary pose. But basically I belong to the middle class, with values embedded in my blood that I can scarce wish away. I hold on to my ideal as a guideline or a torchlight or a stern pointer, but I remain what I am. That’s the model that Ajit-da set forth. Badal-da too, and maybe that’s why he remains so neglected.

Most of the loud-mouthed leading figures of the theatre today are dishonest. They have attacked our theatre, our participation in the jatra, and have sent us—smaller fry engaged in the theatre—feelers for an entry to the jatra. I had grown up in a theatre ambience—my in-laws were in theatre, with the Anushilan Sampraday—and I came to know my wife through theatre. But the theatre ambience I see around me today is corrupted.

For fourteen years I have travelled extensively through West Bengal, north Bengal, south Bengal, the West Bengal-Bihar Border, Tripura and Assam, as a jatra actor, performing in villages, marketplaces, market towns; and have discovered that there is no essential difference between the jatra and the theatre. If the theatre workers are prepared to put all their mind and labour and love into a production for the open air, I can guarantee that they will not go hungry. For I know that there is this large audience looking eagerly for good work, not looking for big names, but just good work. All that they demand is that they should be able to understand it all at their level. Well, if you start with an experiment, that will not do. To enter a place, you walk through the door, and then climb up the stairs—you do not leap into the drawing room on the third floor!

The one difference that the theatre actors hoping to set out into jatra territory will have to negotiate is that of engagement, for those who perform in the jatra have given everything else up to be in the jatra, while those in our so-called ‘group-theatre’ serve other masters and other pulls for most of the time, and give their spare time to the theatre. A lead actor in one of ‘our’ productions can ask for a cancellation of a scheduled and announced performance if it clashes with a TV shooting schedule fixed long after the announcement of the show!

[S.B. There is no halfway route in the jatra. You have to serve the basic demands of the theatre.]

You have to reach a minimum standard. Theatre demands wholetimers for its survival. If the government can trust me with a loan of Rs 400,000—500,000 to start a jatra company, it can depute someone to sit in my office and monitor the entire financial transactions, as long as he does not intervene in my organizational and artistic work. I can give you a guarantee that the money will be returned to the government with interest added within three years, and I may make a little profit at the end of it all. At the same time I can assure you that just as I have not done anything retrogressive in my commercial jatra career, so also when I return to jatra I shall go for the ultimate potentials of the jatra. I do not ask for grants or subsidies. The grants and subsidies game is quite a dirty one. I can understand when someone has raised three rupees out of the ten required to build a house, and asks the State to give him a grant of seven. But does it not immediately require that the house is completed, and the granter oversees the use of the grants? A matter of mutual obligation. Grants to theatre have been nobody’s business, neither the granter nor the grantee bothering about accountability. Grants earmarked for
a production to be staged within a certain date have been ostensibly spent for a single
show staged for a small invited audience of close friends, a couple of days before the cut
off date.

[S. B. There are more people now than in your time making a living as an actor in TV
and films, and not obliged to be on a job for his daily bread. But do they spend the time
they save on theatre?]

Samik-da, look at our generation. From 1966 to 1971, I had stuck to theatre single-
mindedly, making a precarious living, but not selling out to any easy survival strategy.
Can’t these young people risk it for a year or two, and stand on their dignity? How many
serials do you have to act in? How many roles would you play? I know the economics
quite well, and know what they earn. If a few of them are prepared to take a stand for
theatre, they can transform the situation. It’s a vital time, Samik-da, a time for change—
with the jatra gasping for breath, under the pressure of phoney producers from nowhere
and actors from cinema descending on the jatra. It needs only a few intelligent young
men and women to break out on their own and re-establish a new commercial theatre in
the place of the one that is dying.

After a couple of years or so in the jatra, once I had made it to the top of the
profession, I did not go for the big stars, I preferred younger actors and actresses whom I
mobilized into ensemble acting. All my productions recovered the investment made by
the respective producers, but there was no roaring success. As actor, director and
playwright, I still have an appreciative audience in the jatra.

In the seventies, when I was in the theatre, we received no government grants or
subsidies. For a simple material that we needed for a production, we had to do a lot of
running about, had to shout at people, and get shouted at! It hurts me when I am told by
my younger colleagues when I come back to theatre that they place orders for sets and
other requisitions to be supplied and set up by professionals on the day of the
performance! This is not the kind of theatre that I had done in the past, I would not be
able to adjust with it. I only wonder how one can make this theatre one’s own. When I
come to do a production for the proscenium stage, I expect my company to be with me
on the stage at least two to three hours before a performance, and join with me in
organizing the props, and set the sets up, and at the end of the performance to load the
sets on to the truck, and then leave the site. For unless my theatre bears the personal
touch of the participant/performers, it cannot be their theatre, or my theatre. When
everything is made to order for the theatre, theatre loses its spirit and disintegrates.
Theatre demands deprivation, for the deprivation charges the creative product with an
effect that affluence cannot provide. The need for personal intervention/participation at
every point of the making process brings to the production the warmth of a personal
touch that in its turn lifts the production to a different height. That’s how theatre enters
one’s blood. It’s that sense of a blood-involvement that gave me the guts to scream at
Utpal-da one day. Mrinal Ghosh had been late in bringing the curtain down that evening
at the end of the show of *Tiner Talwar*. I was in the greenroom, taking off my make-up,
when someone rushed in, in a panic, ‘Come to stage at once. Utpal-da’s in a rage. He’s
tearing everything down.’ I rushed to the stage to find Utpal-da in a violently destructive
frenzy; and confronted him, matching my rage with his, screaming at him: ‘What are you
up to? All these things that you are breaking up, did you make any of these with your
hands? A single one of these? What right have you to break up things that I made with
my hands?’ And Utpal-da broke into tears. There lay the charm of his personality.

At one point, I had sworn never to go and see a production by Utpal-da. Then one
day he dragged me from a shooting stint at the studio to see his *Aajker Shahjahan*
[premiered 21 April 1985 at University Institute Hall], that play about the old stage actor
in a shooting setting. I went backstage at the end of the performance. Utpal-da sat before
the mirror to the left in the Rabindra Sadan greenroom, creaming his face to take the
makeup off, with just no one anywhere near him, as if exemplifying that phrase of his in *Tiner Talwar*, ‘as lonely as a curse.’ He was all alone, I stood behind him and pressed on his shoulder with my hands. There was a sense of relief and comfort in his long drawn out ‘ah!’ I knew Utpal-da had a problem with his back, and I had this urge to give this man who had taught me so much, some company and some relief. He was so tired that he had taken the cream but not put it to his face. He just sat there, utterly exhausted, drained out. That image of melancholy, that bent and crumpled body, still haunts me. I massaged his back ever so gently, he let out a series of ‘ahs’, I asked him, ‘You left the stage quite a while ago, why haven’t you taken off your makeup?’ He said, ‘Going slow on everything. It’s age!’ At a distance I could see the rest of the company, guffawing and guzzling. They had finished Utpal-da off, even while alive. The man had unnecessarily overworked to no avail, had not been able to train a single actor or even a good follower. He was to blame, for, Samik-da, one has to know the value of gold when one comes across it, and have the discrimination to prefer it consciously to brass or any cheaper metal. It hurts to think that Utpal-da had to deal with cattle and sheep and asses. At the end of it there was no one close to him who had drawn something from him. All that they had to gloat over was ‘We sit at the feet of the Sahib, we are the PLT . . .’ They were unaware of what they were worth, they did not have a clue to what PLT represented. They did not get to recognize a single aspect of Utpal-da’s genius. They just called him ‘Sahib’, and brought their Sahib to utter disaster. A violently contradictory personality, Utpal-da was a colourful human being; whose charm, taste and sense of humour were wasted on those who kept him company in his last days.

In the way he treated me, I filled several roles—a student, a disciple, a son—he never let me feel the differences between those several roles. He gave me my first lessons in so many things, including drinking. There was something essentially childlike about him, that led him running after a political image for himself, supporting the Naxalites for a while with a vengeance, and then disowning them in an unforgivable manner—the blackest spot in his life. If he had stuck to his theatre, it could have served a political purpose. It was that point of surrender, that period when he flirted with the Naxalites and then made a hasty comeback to the Left Establishment, that brought his creativity to a close. It was with *Thikana*, his Bangladesh play, that he went on the reversal trip, and found acceptance! He needn’t have done it.

Transcribed and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay.
Nilananta SenGupta (b. 31 October 1946), playwright, actor-director, major directorial works include Dansagar and Sadhabar Ekadashi for Theatre Commune, a group he leads; major film appearances have been in Mrinal Sen’s Akaler Sandhaney and Parashuram.
Nilkantha Sengupta. I remember seeing *Brishti Brishti*, which was being performed at Muktangan. This was an adaptation of Nash’s *The Rainmaker* by Asit Dey [b.1938, engineer by profession, closely associated with Nakshatra]. It’s true that this production had caused an emotional upsurge in me. That a play could be so amazingly beautiful, that its stagecraft, its lights, its costumes could be so beautiful, I couldn’t have ever imagined! Even the light green turban on the rainmaker’s head—it was all so . . . I was completely mesmerized. There was this family and Neeta was a painter. Her ambition was to make her family as pretty as a picture. She had a daughter and two sons and they were all living together in a peaceful, uncomplicated atmosphere. There was a drought raging and in the middle of all this a man suddenly makes his entry. His words, his language, his movements, his voice, his love, his reprimands, the way he reasoned in his own favour, his soft approaches—seemed as if no matter how gloomy you felt, if you talked to him, all your physical and psychological fatigue would disappear in a second!

What I want to say is that the totality of the theatre enveloped the production. Even before one entered the hall one would see the posters, the show-boards and after buying tickets, an idea would begin to form in one’s minds—about the group, its artistic perceptions, its sophisticated intellectualism and the aesthetic sense which was unique to it. From the very show-boards the audience would get an inkling of what they were to expect after they entered the hall. Afterwards, when the curtains were raised at the appointed hour, they would easily get the passports to another world. I had come to appreciate this elaborate sense of totality which is the hallmark of Shyamal-da’s [Shyamal Ghosh] productions. I hadn’t quite caught on to it at the beginning. I was more of a rustic then—raw and rugged with a lot of emotions and passions in me. But today I feel that there was a large difference between the sense of totality in Shyamal-da’s productions and the other productions of the time. In stagecraft too Shyamal-da’s plays were so different
from the rest. Shyamal-da certainly used wood in his stage-decorations but he also made ample use of cane, tapes, ribbons, balloons, swings, synthetic objects and a variety of other things. And the way these were lighted up—sometimes slowly, part by part—and the effect of distance and the ensuing designs often reminded one of dreams. With only a bit of exertion and planning he could transport the audience to the world of the play, in seconds. Shyamal-babu’s mannerisms—like the way he pronounced words—might sometimes appear stilted to us, for e.g. the way he pronounced conspiracy or ‘sarajantra’—he would pronounce it as sar’jantra with a stress on the ra of sara. I had once asked him why he did that—why didn’t he let out the ‘sara’ more lightly? However, in the Nakshatra school of acting, conspiracy would always be pronounced with a stress. And it wasn’t as if we didn’t make fun of it once in a while behind his back. But we used to work seriously on the other basics of Shyamal-babu’s theatre. Actually the topics on which Shyamal-da liked to work, as in Chandralokey Agnikanda which was an adaptation of Jean Giraudoux’s play Tiger at the Gates done by Mohit-da [Mohit Chattopadhyay] or the partial adaptation of The Playboy of the Western World by John Millington Synge as Mrityusangbad or a variety of other plays like Nabhandu [Sen]’s Nayan Kabirer Pala. He surely worked on and thought more seriously about non-realistic theatre and tried to delve deeper into it and go beyond the boundaries of realism. He had tried to introduce new thoughts into the world of contemporary theatre and he had also tried to change its face.

He had a special liking for verse and verse-plays. He is a lyricist himself. There are many, many records of songs composed by him. Quite a few of those songs, their lyrics are still memorable—even after forty-five years. And I am sure that if cassettes of these songs are brought out, they will cause a hue and cry. Shyamal-da is a remarkable actor in his own right. Yet I have a feeling that he has bothered himself less with the everyday reality, its atmosphere, its problems, how the people live their lives in this world, the acute desire they feel to keep on living and their fruitless struggle—he has tried to work less with these, this real world which seeps into our being every hour of the day, which makes us suffer . . . if we accept that theatre is now and here, we must say that Shyamal-babu was interested more in the third realm of art—a realm which takes you far away from reality, where there isn’t much of our surrounding vibrant life, our lives and deaths, our loves and rejections, our beliefs and doubts, our politics, our gods. There was a lot of technical facility coupled with powerful performance and sound aesthetic sense. The technical details included trained voices, correct and rhythmic pronunciation, perfectly orchestrated body movements—the use of the hand, its fingers, its arteries and veins, even the placing of the chin in relation to the outstretched right hand—the overall beauty of all this had certainly made a difference to his work. These are sure to have a classical stature. A semblance of a classical form is achieved. And when this occurs in a Bengali milieu . . . but the problems they expose, the philosophy from which these have arisen are not born of our own soil. A large part of that philosophy is rooted in European soil. Most of these realities were manifested in Europe after World War II, i.e. in the extremely sophisticated minds of the intellectuals in the land of capitalism and a capitalist bourgeoisie—quite a few of them are brilliant poets and playwrights. But it is obvious that in their works there isn’t much of a reflection of the lives and deaths, the surrounding environment, the daily problems of the people who inhabit the most neglected state of today’s India, a part of the third world.

However, I don’t mean to say that Shyamal-babu was a believer in ‘art for art’s sake’. In a way, in all art forms, the artist’s duty lies with art to a great extent—and this is probably right. But because theatre has no permanence when compared to films, paintings, narrative poetry, novels and short stories, therefore, it has to build and maintain a relationship of indebtedness to the contemporary world. After each performance, after it has been received by an audience, it is either accepted or rejected by them. There is no space for an ‘in-between’ sort of arrangement. A director of this medium can never afford
to say—'So what if they do not appreciate it today; ten years
from now they will be treating it with respect and
discussing it, analysing it'—this never happens in theatre.
Theatre is always now and here. And what's the difference
between theatre and the other major art forms? Theatre is
absolutely irreproducible. Once it has been performed, its
performance cannot be reproduced. But films, paintings,
short stories, poems, novels, recorded songs—once they are
made after a good deal of thinking, writing, rewriting/ or
after a few takes and re-takes, rehearsing, so on and so forth
. . . once it is recorded, once it is exhibited, once it is
published to the public—it's done. But in theatre, every
evening, in every performance there is a change, a variation.
And it's because of this that a connoisseur of theatre is
never satisfied with a single performance.

There was another significant thing about Shyamal-
babu's theatre which I remember—important people from
the allied fields of art, like Buddhadev Bose, Shankha
Ghosh, Purnendu Pattrea were associated with his work.
This means that at that time there was a relationship
between the people from the field of the allied art forms
and the world of the theatre. There was even contact with
people from the film-world—like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen,
Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majumdar—a symbiotic relationship, a
mutual feeling of respect. I have myself acted in twenty-
seven Bangla movies, I have been the hero in eleven of
those but in the sixties there was a far closer relation
between the fields of theatre and the allied arts. If you
consider Europe or France or England and Broadway or off-
Broadway or off-off-Broadway . . . theatre of the French and
its cross-fertilization with Hollywood—ours is a strange
country where our forefathers thought that a theatre-film
relationship was something to look down on. Once a film-
director had approached Sisir Bhaduri with the idea of
making Hamlet into a film. But Sisir Bhaduri had said,
'Hamlet as a screenplay? But who is going to improve upon
Shakespeare?' But when we watch Kozintsev's Hamlet, we
say, yes, Hamlet can be made into a film . . . or when we
watch Bondarchuk's movies, like Othello . . . this way or
that, a healthy relationship between theatre and film has
never quite developed in the domestic context. It is common
in the other parts of the world, in Bombay and even in
Bangladesh—but the practice hasn't quite caught on here.

Is that good or bad . . . it's certainly bad in my opinion.
Why shouldn't a stage-actor act in films as well? This very
moment it is possible to highlight the relationship between
the British stage and the world of British films—most of
their celebrated actors and actresses are from the stage—
beginning with Peggy Ashcroft, Richard Burton, Peter
O’Toole, Sir Laurence [Olivier], John Gielgud, Tony
Richardson; Franco Zefferelli for instance was filming Romeo
and Juliet, and directing an opera version of it on stage. This
is a strange place and I do feel sorry . . . I feel pained as well.

[SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY. Now tell us something about your days at Nakshatra, about your own work.]

I was with the radio, then. Television hadn’t arrived yet, the radio was still very important. After joining Nakshatra, and acting in Captain Hurrah, I acted in the radio play versions of Mrityusanbad and Brishti Brishti. And the first play in which I was cast was Ajitesh-da’s [Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay] Saudagarer Nouka. Unfortunately it wasn’t staged. We heard that Ajitesh-da hadn’t given permission—apparently, he had said that the play was Nandikar’s property. But later, when I had a talk with Rudra-da [Rudraprasad Sengupta], he said, ‘It wasn’t exactly that, Nilkantha. Actually, there was this play by Clemence Dane, called Will Shakespeare: An Invention which I translated and which was published in the periodical Parichay. And it was decided that Nandikar i.e. Ajitesh-da would produce it. Shyamal-babu knew this. But he got Clemence Dane’s play translated by Mohit-da as fast as possible. I am sure there were deviations. And Shyamal-babu began rehearsing it.’ I think this caused a strain in their relationship. Anyway, we heard that Ajitesh-da’s Will Shakespeare: An Invention wasn’t a high-grade production—that’s a fact. However, all this belongs to the past. Things like this keep on happening all over the world. Anyway, despite all this, one has had a reverence for people of Ajitesh-da’s and Shyamal-da’s dimension. That is the least you can expect from people in the theatre.

I had acted in those plays put up by Nakshatra. I wasn’t yet . . . there’s something I should tell you . . . stage movements were easy enough, a natural way of walking and moving about; but if certain things become easily available to one, one naturally takes less interest in and care of it—this was something Shyamal-babu had warned me against. He had said, ‘Certain things come to you with utmost ease. But you should make yourself aware of these easily-acquired things. You should learn to bring them within the purview of your hard-earned skills through exercise.’ This had sounded rather interesting. I have come to appreciate its value with time, though it hadn’t impressed me that much then. When I was with Nakshatra, I directed my adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s The Deadly Game and Mohit Chattopadhyay named it Khanan Kahini. This had only one show during my stint with Nakshatra. The first half wasn’t to my liking and wasn’t well-done either; but the second half was fairly good. We founded Theatre Commune soon after.

[S. B. At Nakshatra, Captain Hurrah was your one and only important piece of ‘stage-acting’?]

Yes, it was Captain Hurrah on the stage and on the radio . . .

[S. B. Let’s talk about the stage . . .]

On stage it was Captain Hurrah—I don’t quite know whether it was this production which had given me strength, but a desire to do a different kind of theatre, to bring new thoughts to the theatre began to grow in me—the reality in which we were immersed twenty-four hours of the day, whose pressures and pains I was experiencing with all my five senses every hour of the day—it was such a reality that I wanted to think about and work with. Nakshatra’s philosophy, its practice, its selection of plays, its style of acting, its stagecraft, costumes, music and other formal ingredients and components didn’t have much space for the reality I was thinking about. As a result, a yearning for reality had begun to develop in me. But the funniest part was that though Theatre Commune had been formed after breaking away from Nakshatra, our first two productions were non-realistic in nature. Perhaps I hadn’t been able to get over my Nakshatra experience.

We did an adaptation of a play by William Saroyan, Tracey’s Tiger, which we put up as Bibhur Bagh in 1972 [premiered 8 October 1972 at Rangana] and Joseph Heller’s We Bombed in New Haven as Parabarti Biman Akraman [premiered June 1973 at Rangana].
Consider the latter play—this one had a play within a play; the actors were all settled in a base camp and it was as if they were rehearsing a war and there was a captain who was supposed to be a director of that orchestrated, well-designed play and when everyone begins to play catch-catch with time-bombs and enact certain portions while doing so—this certainly not indicative of the 'realist' tradition.

As far as Bibhur Bagh is concerned, I think it would lend itself well to a poetic interpretation but wasn’t quite meant for the stage, even though it was very good poetry. I think that I would be able to do quite a passable interpretation in theatre of Edgar Allan Poe’s The Raven. Anyway, Nakshatra’s influence was working within me till Bibhur Bagh in 1972 and Parabarti Biman Akraman in 1973. Swadeshi Naksha [premiered 1974 at Rangana], which came next, was different altogether, a political satire, based on Pramatha Chowdhury’s Ram Shyam. And after that came King King [premiered 1975 at Rangana]—a completely different play.

[S. B. From when did you begin to work directly with Mohit-da?]

We began working from Swadeshi Naksha onwards, a play he wrote for us. It was at this stage that a new group was formed, Patua, which was a creation of Bijan Bhattacharya. We used to have our rehearsals at your place on Hindusthan Park. Bijan-da, Bibhuti Mukherjee [1933–98, actor], Mamata-di [Mamata Chattopadhyay, (1933–93) actress], Subrata Nandi . . .

[S. B. Aaj Basanta . . .]

Aaj Basanta [written by Bijan Bhattacharya 1970 and premiered 10 February 1972 at Academy of Fine Arts under his direction for Patua] with Arun Kar, Mamata-di’s husband, Mohit-da and the rest of us who were young . . . those who used to prompt and so on. Then there was another one and Mohit-da was associated with it, and so was Subrata Nandi, Mamata-di, Sohag [Sen], me, Asit Bose . . . that was Jean Anouilh’s Traveller Without Luggage—Eka Eka—Sita Mukherjee [1918–96, actress] had acted in it and it was put up at Rangana . . . Mohit-da was associated with this as well. And afterwards he wrote Swadeshi Naksha for Theatre Commune and then of course King King . . . but that was true for Bibhur Bagh and Parabarti Biman Akraman as well. Then Debashish Majumdar wrote Dansagar. The original name of the play was Shajyadan. We had even sent the name of the play as Shajyadan to our hosts in Assam, where we were going to perform it.

A few days later we were discussing the play, sitting in front of Manindra Chandra College, where they were planning to have a show, when the names of two books by Ballal Sen suddenly came to my mind—Dansagar and Adbhutsagar. I said, ‘Do you remember the saying: ‘banchtey pelo na bhat kapod, morar por dansagar’[Deprived of a piece of cloth or a little food in his lifetime, elaborate oblations are now being made for his funeral rites]? That would indeed be an appropriate name! I came to know much later that during the ‘sraddh’ ceremony it is the norm to give away sixteen sets of offerings in the dead person’s name, which is called ‘dansagar’.

Why Ballal Sen, Lakshman Sen [rulers of Bengal in 1158–79 and 1179–1206 respectively] came to my thoughts—that play was in 1975—had a history. I had always been looking for an opportunity to do a period-piece. It was in the year 1975 that the chance finally came—the title of a book by Lakshman Sen’s father struck me and I named one of our plays after it. In 1987 we did a play called Mahamash Taila [premiered 1986 at the Academy of Fine Arts], which was based on Mahasweta-di’s short story Romtha—a play set during Lakshman Sen’s reign and it remains the second-most expensive production of Theatre Commune. We had spent one lakh twenty-eight thousand on Mohar [premiered December 1994 at the Academy of Fine Arts] and what we spent eighty-seven thousand on Mahamash Taila. It was the year 1987 and it had cost us eighty-seven thousand. So that was that. Then we did the plays by Mohit-da and I have already spoken of the plays by others. Talking of films, whether it’s Mrinal-da’s Parasuram; the
screenplay was done by Mohit-da again, and in which I had acted as well . . . and then I was on TV. That wasn’t a part of the Nakshatra phase but happened later. Jashomatee by Rajsekhar Basu was given the form of a play by Mohit-da which we produced for the TV. It became very popular and has been aired quite a number of times. This was done by Mohit-da.

[S. B. What I want to ask you is that at one point you were saying that if you hadn’t met Mohit-da, you . . . ]

Yes, probably I wouldn’t have joined theatre . . .

[S. B. Could you explain that? I mean your work hasn’t been that directly related to Mohit, yet you are saying . . . ]

That’s because of Mohit-da—as a human being, his thoughts on theatre . . . he breathes theatre, talks about it . . . the books and periodicals that are there in his house, the house itself, its atmosphere and his thoughts on what a proper study of theatre should involve . . . I mean Mohit-da had been to a great extent, for a long time, my mentor, I should rather say, my friend, philosopher, guide. Later he changed his residence, about fifteen/ sixteen years ago and since then there has been a steady lessening of contact.

Let’s take into account the film we did in 1987—the one in which we took the storyline from Ashok Kumar Kundu and did the film Brishti Brishti, Mohit-da was associated with that as well. You too had seen that film. Though the film wasn’t technically sound, the performances were far better in comparison. Perhaps we didn’t do too many of his works apart from Jashomatee which we did for the T.V. and Swadeshi Naksha, but no matter whichever play we did, most of them were either read out to Mohit-da or discussed with him—something we do quite often with our friends in theatre. That’s still on. For a while he had been sick and then he went off to Baruipur etc . . . there was a certain distancing but Mohit-da will always have a soft spot for us. I think it’s not only me but anyone who has been associated with Nakshatra, or anyone related to theatre for that matter—be it members of the Theatre Workshop or even others from later generations—Pankaj Munshi, Ram [Mukherjee] etc. Once you came to know him, it was difficult to forget him. I feel proud that even our very own and respected Buddhadeb Bhattacharya [the present Chief Minister of West Bengal and CPI(M) leader], when he gets down to writing a play, thinks it necessary to show it to Mohit-da. It’s obvious that Mohit-da has something in him that inspires people. We all were young, too, at that time.

He helped us discover various new things at that age, i.e. at the ages of eighteen or twenty, when we all first met. I quite remember that it was mostly from him that I borrowed and read books by [Jean] Cocteau, [Jean] Giraudoux, Andre Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire and [John Millington] Synge. And in those days people who were associated with the theatre were far more well read than those of today—I don’t think that there is a single library in either central or eastern Calcutta which we hadn’t read through completely and in the Theatre Commune of those days—whether it was Debashish Majumdar or Dwijen [Banerjee] or Debranjan Sengupta, Tapan Sengupta or Chandan Sengupta or anyone else for that matter—all of us had done a considerable amount of reading. That used to be the norm then. Buying books, selling off already-read books at the shops in College Street . . . I think it was then that Sunil Gangopadhyay’s first novel, Atmpamakash, was published in which the protagonist was from a lower middle-class family and he was supposed to meet his girlfriend at the Coffee House. It was expected that he should at least offer coffee and pakoras to the heroine—he was on his way there with two old books hidden inside his panjabi, to sell off to raise the money for the rendezvous, showing the very close relationship we had with books. The book-fairs then were a favourite with us and quite often we would read off entire books, standing at a bookstall—because we never had enough money to buy books. However books, too,
were rather inexpensive, not like what it is like these days. So this direct and indirect influence of Mohit-da had an effect on people associated with the world of the theatre.

I remember the time when Arun Mukherjee of Chetana had done the *Good Woman of Schezuan*, we were at Mamata-di’s house at Belgachia . . . me, Subrata Nandi, Mamata-di, Mohit-da—Arun-babu read the play out and also sang the songs to the accompaniment of the harmonium. Then there were the plays of Theatre Workshop being performed, some of which were not even written by Mohit-da—I am referring to that period in North Calcutta’s history which saw a joint-family-like atmosphere in the world of theatre—quite like the joint families that come to mind the moment you think of this northern part of the city. That doesn’t mean that there was no scope for a bit of leg-pulling or that occasional snide remark, but those involved had sold their souls to the theatre. It was within the parameters of this world that the actors, the audience . . . the world of the theatre was a different sort of place and those who were in the opposition then are in power now and so it was a completely different reality. It was still later that Prabir Datta was murdered at Curzon Park . . . we had a different government here and Emergency was declared soon after. Anyway it was this theatre which held us in its grip . . . and it was because I had fallen in love with theatre that I could not bring myself to take up a steady job, otherwise I would have become quite a well-placed bureaucrat at the Writers’ Buildings by now.

It wasn’t just us—we had great examples right before us. There was Utpal-da [Utpal Dutt]—who was a ‘wholetimer’ as far as theatre was concerned. Then there was Ajitesh-da, Sombhu-da [Sombhu Mitra], Shyamal-babu—these were people of great stature. As a result it wasn’t just us but hundreds of others who had given no thought towards acquiring a means of livelihood for the future. We spared no thought for the basic needs of existence. Theatre was our world, our consciousness. Perhaps it is the same nowadays, but I do see a tendency to do theatre while looking after the other ends. Also, in those days, at least for the first fifteen years, there was hardly any scope for grants. And we didn’t know about them, either. You may perhaps recall that around 1980/82 when we were running short of funds and had come to you for advice—about how and to whom to apply (I think you were a member of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi at that point), somehow we hadn’t received the grant but the next year you had asked us to apply, saying that should we apply, we would have a fair chance of getting it because of our qualifications. But I had replied that we wouldn’t apply because we had enough funds. By then *Caesar* had been produced and already Rs 76,000 had been deposited in our account. That was years ago in 1983. Expenses were a lot less in those days—advertisements in Anandabazar Patrika used to cost a lot less, the rent at the Academy of Fine Arts was not this high—it’s now around Rs 2300 but then it wasn’t more than Rs 1050, or even less, Rs 950. So that’s how things were, but the changes came . . .

[S. B. Now, if you could tell us something about your important productions, starting with *Dansagar*—why you chose to do them and secondly, what did you achieve as far as your reading of the production was concerned . . . I mean, when did you feel that you couldn’t achieve this here and that there?]

Let me start with *Dansagar*. In this play I have tried to preach and establish the philosophy of inaction. I think that in Premchand’s narrative . . . I am sure that we were the first to introduce Premchand to the Bangla stage (Anamika Kala Sangam had of course done *Godan* just prior to our production). National Book Trust had by then published Premchand in translation. And then exploration of Premchand started en masse.

What we had tried to express consciously through *Dansagar*, was the philosophy of inaction. Perhaps it is possible to think of it as a going back to times past—when his father or his grandfather or his great grandfather had had a small piece of land, perhaps
they had had a roof of their own above their heads, perhaps these had gone into the landlord’s clutches or someone else’s and they had nothing more than the bare essentials now. So, how does it matter whether he did something fruitful or not—all that mattered was assuaging hunger. And to do that—snatching, thieving was sufficient. This is one aspect. Now consider this—a young woman was in labour. Meanwhile, another character is sitting outside, with an earthen bowl with some food in it, under a tree that stood nearby. It’s past dusk. Crickets are chirping. And we have his words, words, non-stop words. You have suffering, screams of labour pain on one hand and nothing but words, words, infinite gabbing and philosophizing on the other—all at once. Unnecessary, sometimes idiotic, sometimes even a shade of brilliance in the arguments. There’s a certain philosophy to it. It’s the result of their experience of exploitation and deprivation for generations—this is the philosophy of their inaction—that they won’t do any work because their fruits of labour never stay with them. When they work and earn, they are never allowed to save anything for themselves. Others take it away and enjoy it—sometimes with the help of power and sometimes through socio-economic status, etc. And they have acutely realized that there exists a system of so-called law and order which protects the exploiters. This was one thing which had been our prime and conscious concern—we had tried to establish this and we had succeeded.

When they are so preoccupied in greed, in swindling, in insignificant daily exchanges on assets and liabilities—even then, mythology is a continuous presence in their lives. Even when its time to terrorize someone, myths are used—I don’t think that this is some sort of a conscious attempt on their part—it is in the very air they breathe. There’s a use of myth at that point . . . yes . . . where he plans to make a living by feigning the death of his wife. Someone says, ‘Do you think that the babus will have a free-for-all because your wife has died?’ He says—‘No, nobody leaves his wife all by herself. This body of ours harbours death within it—all these rivers and canals, fields and farmhouses are dead inside. Remember Krishna’s viswaroop during the battle between the brothers? He opened his mouth to show them the universe—just have a look (just wait and see)’. With this he opened his mouth. This attempt at terrorization is supported with a myth. Again, when they accumulate some money by begging so as to perform the woman’s last rights, they can not control their deprived selves and go and buy some food and cheap liquor. The subject of the dead woman keeps cropping up and a question rears its head amidst all the serious thinking and bothers Medho—‘So everyone goes to heaven after death?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘But when I die and reach heaven, what if my wife comes

Dansagar: an even harsher cruelty—born of utter destitution—than in the original story by Premchand. Photograph © Nemai Ghosh.
and asks, “Why didn’t you spend on my last rites?” What will I tell her? She won’t come after you.’ Here he is talking to his own father. ‘It was I who had applied sindur on her brow. If she bears a grudge, it will be against me.’ This is swindling and he is using a myth even now. Then the father says, ‘You needn’t reply. I’ll speak up instead’. ‘Your death has turned my son dumb with shock.’ His cunning doesn’t leave him even once. At another point, an alcoholic fit gets him down and he says—‘The corpse is lying untended on the ground. Could this go on? Since we are already on our way, there’s nothing to worry about, your wife will be lighting up the world.’ The son asks, ‘But how?’ The father replies, ‘This isn’t death, this is giving up the mortal body of one’s own free will. Sati has been insulted; come, let’s carry her on our shoulders. If anyone tries to stop us, strike out your trident at the heavens. Fifty two body-parts, fifty two holy places’ [reference to the mythical Uma (wife of Shiva), who committed suicide when her husband was slandered at her father’s court, and Shiva in a rage carried her body on his shoulders and danced the cosmic dance of destruction till Vishnu, the preserver, intervened and cut up Uma’s body into fifty-two parts with his sudarshan chakra. These parts are said to have fallen on fifty-two spots on the earth, each of them coming to be considered as holy places or pithasthanas] and with these words they carry off the woman.

In the play a so-called class-anger and class-feeling has been shown, which, in my opinion, was a bit imposed and artificial. In my opinion, it would have been a better ending if instead of doing what they did, they decided to leave the corpse where it was for the villagers to cremate and had said, ‘Come, let’s sell this bed and this new cloth belonging to the Sati’. A decision like that would have been more in keeping with their character and the black humour, its punch would have been more effective. I hadn’t thought of this at that time and once it was accepted—actually, unless a play isn’t publicly accepted, it cannot be forcefully imposed upon the public and once it is accepted, it cannot be recalled. This is a part of the game. But if I produce it again, I’ll try to change the end. It isn’t to my liking. The other thing which I like about Dansagar is the fact that it was written by Debashis Majumdar and Debu had done a competent job of it. What’s special about Theatre Commune is that though we have a text when we begin work on a play, it is only after it has begun
to be rehearsed, that it begins to take its final shape and the production tries to cope with the changes. By the time of the first performance, the text is completed. When we first begin work, fifty to sixty per cent of the text is ready. This is our normal practice. Two or three of us keep ready with pen and paper and while rehearsing we decide, ‘No this won’t do, scratch it’ and so on. Sometimes rehearsal is stopped mid-way and I dictate the lines.

[S. B. While doing Dansagar, was Debashis (Mazumdar) with you? I mean, when you had your breaks and did your bits of reworking?]

Yes, all along. And this was so with King King, Parabarti Biman Akraman, and Swadeshi Naksha—all of them. This was so even with our latest production, Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata? The play by Michael [Madhusudan Dutt] which we put up at Madhusudan Mancha . . . I feel that Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata? and Dinabandhu Mitra’s Sadhabar Ekadashi [premiered 31 March 1988 at Academy of Fine Arts] were greatly indebted to Kulin Kulasarbaswa. This was the first original play—as far as the content is concerned—in Bangla. Most of the topics it has dealt with has found their way into Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata? and Sadhabar Ekadashi. As a result we had amalgamated a little of Ramnarayan Tarkaratna [1822–86, Sanskrit scholar, teacher] with a little of Michael [Madhusudan Dutt]. We did this in the text itself. And we had talked about it as well. The times have changed, and so has the audience. Perhaps the issue remains equally significant but the end isn’t exactly satisfactory to the audience and this requires a little bit of editing (with due respect to the forefathers of theatre).

It is sometimes necessary in the older plays to cut down on the repetitions and the longer speeches, even though I am a great fan of soliloquies myself. In Sadhabar Ekadashi I spoke a one hundred and twenty-three-lines long soliloquy. In the tenth scene of Julius Caesar-er Shesh Sat Din, I spoke non-stop for thirteen minutes on the stage all by myself. That should prove that I regard soliloquy as an extremely vital ingredient in the language of the stage. And if a soliloquy is psychologically motivated, there is no limit to its efficacy and beauty. I feel that a soliloquy is particularly suited to the portrayal of our contemporary world. For, with the breakdown in communication, more people will be suffering from suppressed grief and will be talking to themselves. I think there is a great need of soliloquies, though I don’t see much of its use in the modern plays. Nowadays, it is rejected outright as a theatrical component. This is wrong, in my opinion. I have immense respect for those theatre-greats, our forefathers, who could carry off such soliloquies with great elan, without imposing unnecessary theatrics. After Dansagar, I began work on Prastuti [premiered 1978 at Academy of Fine Arts] and produced it in the year 1978. In this context, I should mention that Dansagar has already been performed for 529 shows; Julius Caesar-er Shesh Sat Din [adapted from a short story by Bertolt Brecht Caesar and his Legionaries, a collection of poems and short stories compiled by the author. Premiered 1983 at Academy of Fine Arts] had been performed for more than 500 shows and Sadhabar Ekadashi had 378 shows. Other plays in our repertoire had 40, 45, 51, 71 shows.

Prastuti is a realistic play from beginning to end. This play had a skeletal set in which you had everything a household has, but the walls were see-through i.e. the audience could see the characters walking beyond the walls while the characters themselves remained unaware—we had achieved this effect. But this was nothing new—a variation of this was popular in the times of Shakespeare—when we had women characters in men’s guise. The audience knew that this was a woman in a man’s clothing, but the other characters she encountered, didn’t. This game of disguise is an age-old game in theatre. In our play we had the scope to use this by means of stagecraft. And there was a sailor in this play. In our plays, we don’t have many sailors or seamen as characters—an uneducated man who has seen a lot of the world, and has ample money in his pockets—how does the world appear to him? His knowledge is superficial and the point is how he uses this knowledge—he hasn’t much sense and so it becomes important how he uses his
superficial knowledge, how he leads his life with the help of his superficial knowledge, here. I have nothing more to say as far as Prastuti is concerned.

In between we had done a lot of plays for the various democratic movements, including street-plays and election-plays. We had started in 1974/75. In fact, at one point, they had measured our throats—mine and Indranath’s (Bandyopadhyay)—at College Street. They had threatened us. They had also carried me off from the lane where Nakshatra had its workshop. Once it was the Congress and the other time, it was the Naxalites. In 1980 we did Galileo with Sombhu-da for Calcutta Repertory Theatre [CRT] or Kolikata Natyakendra.

[S. B. What’s your assessment of CRT now?]

We had started off CRT with noble ideals—though ‘noble’ has become the wrong word—and we had tried to live up to this ideal. Even after twenty years, I feel that ‘high’ signified the production of good plays, good theatre, an interest in the construction of good theatre-halls etc. We had our doubts because the Bangla Natyamancha [Pratistha] Samiti had failed in a similar endeavour. But there was this East-German director—Fritz Bennewitz—he came from the land of Brecht and he would be doing Brecht’s theatre. Sombhu-da would be acting and Rudra-da, Bibhash-da, Arun-babu [Arun Mukherjee], Dwijen [Bandyopadhyay], Mohit [Chattopadhyay], Jochhan-da [Jochhan Dastidar] and myself came together in CRT. The central government had given us some money—at least two lakhs. It was here that we learnt about ‘total theatre’. For example, till 1975, (till the making of King King), I would reach the site of rehearsal with a somewhat preoccupied mind—these sections are to be rehearsed, this is how the movements should be, the properties should be placed here, etc. Some sort of a graph or structure would be in my mind. After King King, I stopped bothering.

I got to witness a very scientific application of the method by Bennewitz, while doing Galileo fibon. He didn’t know Bangla too well but he had the English text with him. So, he could make out the patterns of speech from the length of the English text, the inflections, even though he wasn’t familiar with the Bangla one . . . anyone with some experience would be able to make out whether the actor or actress was speaking what he or she was supposed to. But I remember my character in Galileo i.e. Federzoni . . . I had enjoyed doing it. Obviously there was the attraction of performing with Sombhu-da and thankfully, we had hit it off well almost from the very beginning. In the world of Bangla theatre, almost everyone was in awe of Sombhu-da. And this was equally true for the rest of India. I have seen that even Girish Karnad or Amol Palekar wouldn’t sit when Sombhu-da was present. And that’s how it should be. I feel that the longer these attitudes persist, the better.

We have a similar tradition of gurukul in the world of classical music. However, it is no longer found in the other fields of art. I don’t know whether theatre will be able retain this tradition. Anyway, my experience with Bennewitz at the CRT . . . how a director encountered certain events . . . there was this scene in which Galileo is waiting outside while there’s a discussion going on inside, concerning him. Someone comes out and tells Galileo, ‘After hearing what I did, I don’t think it’s safe for you to wait here anymore’ . . . the total set was like this—a door at the centre . . . like a compartment . . . and there were the necessary props arranged all around . . . and it would all shift to the central area—that is, there was a lot of mobility—as much as could be expected of a production like this. I am speaking of this now because immediately afterwards we did Caesar [Julius Caesar-er Shesh Sat Din]. The massive canvas we dealt with, the concept of bringing greater vistas and spaces to a play . . . yes, and in such times of cross-fertilization, theatre can borrow anything from any part of the world, from any medium, from anything. We had known about this before but it was only after working with Bennewitz that we got
round to crystallizing our ideas—this is something which I have to admit and I have
written about it as well. Of course it was a two-way process for us—Bennewitz had
said that though he had worked with people all over the world, he had never had such
receptive actors and actresses.

What I liked most about Bennewitz's style was that he didn’t have any fixed,
preconceived ideas, nor did he impose himself upon others or make someone come
around to his point of view. There were these mutual discussions. Once I had asked,
‘When Galileo is taken inside for the Inquisition and I am waiting outside for the worst
to happen and am looking at the clock and holding my breath, in which direction
should I look for the clock?’ Bennewitz answered, ‘I don’t know. It would be better if
you decided it yourself. Other actors will take the cue from you.’ This can apparently
be a quite insignificant to a layman, but when you are working together in a play it is
little things like these that make all the difference. We should learn about the handling
of details from the likes of Bennewitz.

[S. B. You did Caesar next?]

Yes, next we did Julius Caesarer Shesh Sat Din. This was based on a short story by
Brecht. I hadn’t decided on the play at the beginning. That year I wrote an essay in the
festival issue of Kalantar. It was called Ekti Natakio Khasra [‘A Dramatic Draft’]. I was
greatly inspired by Brecht’s story—the things Caesar had done, how his generals who
were also his friends, had plotted against him and there was that ever-fertile genius of
that lady, Cleopatra—how her intrigues had added to the whole thing. I had
superimposed all this on the world of group-theatre—there was this group which was
at least forty to forty-eight years old and it was revered not only in India or Asia but in
various parts of Europe as well. The group had also been honoured with the most
coveted of all international prizes. The director was around fifty-seven or fifty-eight
years old. All that had happened to Caesar; happens to the group as well. Caesar had
thought of a new constitution in order to find out more about the needs and wishes of
the plebeians and the masses were ready to support him through thick and thin, for
the memory of his republican days were bright in their minds. And it was like Caesar
that the director thinks of a plan to do a play with all those errand-boys who worked
for the group and were satisfied because they were allowed to be a part of the group—
while the actors he had created over time, spending his energy on them—most of them
had gone away and joined other groups. I had dealt with issues like this in my essay.
However, I was unable to locate it later on.

[S. B. Which year’s Kalantar are you talking about?]

The festival issue of 1983. When the members of my group read it, they liked it a
lot. They said, ‘Write a play on this.’ I began to read Dante’s Divine Comedy and
Shakespeare’s others plays. I was even inspired by the Olympic logo on the head-band of Bjorn Borg—I had tried to make the play into a curious amalgamation. But no matter how hard I tried to bring in the element of historical distanciation in Caesar’s character, no matter how I de-glamorized him, made him wear contemporary clothes and make him out to be a derelict hero—I had tried to maintain the historical distance in his character. I knew that ‘distance’ would add grandeur. The play was also wrought with a martial overtone—within minutes of the play’s starting, a respectful fear would begin to work over the audience. I used to have a sort of telepathic connection with the audience and could feel this fear. There wasn’t a magazine, newspaper or periodical left which hadn’t written about Caesar. Even Illustrated Weekly came out with an article—Pritish [Nandy] had seen the play and had written a huge article on it. And there was this German playwright Kroetz, whose ideas were rather strange. He had said, ‘The man who had done Caesar is an extraordinary actor and the production has a boy scout flavour.’ I remembered that [Eugene] Ionesco used to call Brecht’s productions ‘scout plays’. Anyway, if he regarded it so, I don’t see anything wrong in it.

I did a lot of reading for Caesar, a lot of reading. I not only went into the details of his personal life, but also into the times, into its history. I have read a lot on him, about the time when he went with his seven generals to annex Egypt, how he entered Alexandria. And the incessant plotting—they are at par with today’s political intrigues. The cunning! The intelligence! What political insights! I don’t think there has ever lived a leader who could surpass Caesar in wit, bravery, cunning, intelligence and political acumen. He always had about eighteen or nineteen secretaries with him—one for Latin grammar, one for political advice and so on. He would give instructions to all of them, one after the other, even while the war was on. In the midst all this a man called Tapeo appears—he has no arms and kneeling down before Caesar he said, ‘Master I have lost my shield but we have won the war.’ Once Caesar had been caught and his captors had asked for forty talents as ransom. They hadn’t recognized him. Caesar was furious and slapping one of them, he screamed, ‘Idiots! Don’t you even know whom you have captured? You think I am worth merely forty talents? I’ll give you four hundred talents just like that, even before you ask for it!’ Saying this, he divulged his identity. I like this sort of thing, even now. While doing Caesar I was so inspired that I began to dream of conquest—I’d wonder whether there was still some unknown land on this earth which I could discover. I feel a deep reverence for him, his personality. Look at today’s plays—‘Hi! How are you?’ ‘Wasn’t it the day before that I gave you a ring?’, ‘Ah, could you look up what’s happening with the Congress party?’—these mundane conversations of
daily life, which you get to hear in the streets, in market-places... the language of theatre can hardly ever rise above this nowadays. We don’t get to encounter more serious words or speech—there’s hardly a topic which allows a different use of language, a different use of the prose form. We were to lucky to get a subject like Caesar. [pause]

[S. B. Shall we stop here? We will have another session soon.]

[Interview continued on 8 December 1998]

It’s time to move on to the next topic. Where should I begin?

[S. B. It’s up to you. Carry on.]

We did Caesar in 1983. After Caesar we did a number of productions for the TV. Of these, two were very important to me. One of these was Jashomotee, based on a story by Parasuram [pseudonym of Rajshekhar Bose (1880–1960), scientist, scholar, essayist, lexicographer, famed for his humorous stories; one of the leading figures in Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works]. The story is quite well-known—it’s about an old man and an old woman. They had been in love with each other during their youth but marriage wasn’t possible because of the differences in castes. Years later they meet in Dehra Doon. The old woman now has grandchildren and the man is an ex-serviceman. Strangely enough the feelings from their youth have remained. And the woman’s grandson and his wife not only accept the old man but also say, ‘We had come to know about you and your past relationship from grandma. Why don’t you two live together?’

The man is more than eighty years old while the woman is around seventy-five years old. What they said then, about a hundred years back, is still relevant and important today. This is a natural phenomenon in the West, but here, in our society... perhaps a day will come when things like these will be possible. What happened next... Pramatha Chaudhury was introduced to the TV through the short story—Farmayeshi Galpa. These were the two productions which we had done specifically for TV. However there were also those productions which we merely repeated on TV i.e. the ones which Theatre Commune had already done. In 1988 we did Sadhabar Ekadashi. While selecting this play... I did a bit of editing as well... I feel that other than the two short plays by Michael [Madhusudan Dutt], this was the one play of great importance belonging to the period between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning (at least the first two decades) of the twentieth century. To me the play was very important—not only because of the character of Nimchand which I had wanted to play but for other reasons as well—the play was written in 1865. Three years later in 1868 Girish-babu [Girish Ghosh] acted in it and the Bengali audience first saw the performance of the play on the saptami [seventh day of the lunar fortnight during the autumnal festival of Durga Puja] night at Prankrishna Haldar’s residence in Bagbazar. When the play was performed, the audience got to witness the performance of a towering personality who would be ruling the Bengali stage for decades afterwards. The seeds of the Renaissance’s failure are also present in this play. I had come to realize this much later—after the production had been done. We—Utpal-da and myself—had gone to Shimultala for a shooting of a film directed by Tarun Majumder and it was there that we discussed this. That was an important point. We had done quite a bit of editing to ensure a successful performance. We had tried to bring that time alive and that is why we had used painted backdrops, props going as near to that period as possible and costumes to match. Apart from that we had also prepared a subtext from the point of view of production. On the one hand there was the tale of the moneyed intellectuals, who never practised what they preached; to this I had added the contemporary social scene and a chronicle of the important events. There was an attempt at a comparative study i.e. I tried to tell the audience that this too was happening at the same time, along parallel lines. This was done mainly through the narrator. When the play ends, and a woman is carried off from another household and it is discovered that she is the great-aunt-in-law of the man himself, his father comes and
wallops him and Nimchand with his shoes. There is another side to this—the play
doesn’t even try to go near any wish-fulfillment. The characters undergo no progression.
After all this happens, Atal says, ‘I have been given such a beating with the shoe that
unless I go and have a drink in the garden, my body-aches will persist.’ The other replies,
‘Say once more, dear fellow, what you said just now/ I feel life flowing back into this
lifeless body of mine./ You are the pride of drunkards, the haven of whores/ And cursed
her luck, who is your wife, she should perform widow’s rites.’ Soon after, the narrator
says, ‘A meeting was held at the Town Hall, the day before, to protest against the
educational policy of the British. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar [(1820–91) scholar,
educationist, social reformer, pioneered female education in Bengal, instrumental in
getting the Widow-remarriage Act passed (1856)], Surendranath Banerjea [(1848–1925)
educationist, orator, politician] and Anandamohan Bose [(1847–1906) educationist and
social reformer, actively involved in the Brahmo Samaj movement] were present and
were instrumental in the establishing the Metropolitan Institution, the Ripon College and
the City College, respectively. The voice for higher education was raised in the heart of
Bengal.’ So this was what we had done as a productional and directorial necessity. And
Sadhabar Ekadashi has been extremely popular, we have already completed 391 shows. We
are still going strong. In a sense you could say that before this happened, there hasn’t
ever been such a large-scale but non-gorgeous production of a classic.

[S. B. Talking about acting styles, for example Sadhabar Ekadashi, or the tradition of
acting it falls in, has been a continuous tradition of a particular kind of acting style on
our stage. Sisir Bhaduri had made some changes, but hadn’t attempted to break away
from it. All he had done was to rationalize and discipline the style, but it was part of the
same tradition, nevertheless. And somewhere our Nabanatya or Anyanatya is a sort of a
challenge or reaction to, or a rejection of this tradition—in acting, treatment, in
production values. Keeping this in mind, what was your stance vis à vis the older
tradition, when you decided to do Sadhabar Ekadashi?]

Yes. In my acting there was a sharp departure from the tradition, from the point of
view of production... I had never had the chance to see a play of that period, not even
Sisir-babu’s productions. I had begun doing theatre from my eleventh class, that would
be 1964 and Sisir-babu had died in 1959. So I hadn’t had the chance to watch the old
school of theatre at work. However, by the time I did Sadhabar Ekadashi, I had already
acquired some knowledge about the styles of acting, the nuances, the introspections, the
reflections of that period. By that time I had already spent about twenty-two or twenty-
four years in the world of theatre—there’s one thing about this which I must admit and
that is a play like this with its characters like Nimchand, its problems, is far more familiar
to us than it was to its contemporary audience. And it was a desire on my part to find out
whether a production like this, put up by Theatre Commune, would appeal to the public
or not—otherwise my doing it wasn’t really justified because Utpal-da’s Buro Shaliker
Ghare Ron ['The Silvered Rake'] was still performing well and Tin Paisar Pala [The
Threepenny Opera]—Brecht being transmitted to us through the diluting agent of
Nandikar—had taken Bangla theatre to new heights. Before that we have had Byapika
Biday and Chalachitta Chanchari. At that point, I had done Sadhabar Ekadashi with a
different aim in mind. I had wanted to find out whether a play, performed first in 1868,
still had relevance today—that is if the socio-economic dynamics are the same. Even
today, you will find non-Bengali youngsters with fat pockets and Hero Hondas or Maruti
Suzukis being followed around by Bengali youngsters who are quite well-educated, and
they are painting the town red at Park Street. It’s quite similar to what happens in
Antonioni’s film La Notte [The Night (1960) by Michelangelo Antonioni (b. 1912), major
filmmaker of the Italian nouvelle vague]—the industrialists and business tycoons need
the intellectuals... as he said at that party at night. I have a feeling that a similar
situation will soon repeat itself here. However, all this was merely in my thoughts and I
don’t know how far I had succeeded in transmitting these thoughts to the play... it’s 1998 now, though the play is still in production.

[S. B. But you still feel that the issue and process of buying up of intellect was working within you when you did *Sadhabar Ekadashi*?]

Yes. And you’ll notice that even in the structure of the play... you hardly have plays like that anymore... soliloquies are more or less extinct but I feel that if soliloquies are psychologically motivated, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t be present in modern-day plays. You can only be condescending to someone who says that Shakespeare’s’ plays are out-dated. Actually, contemporary theatre has come to a strange crossroad. It is full of a ‘daily-ness’, a ‘mundane-ness’ which, to me, doesn’t seem to signify theatre in any way and I have come to hate it—I find it difficult to decipher even a semblance of intelligence or creativity in these plays. After some practice, it is easy for anyone to speak unselfconsciously on stage and move one’s limbs and feel even the nerves in one’s body without any reservations—that’s expected of an actor or actress even in the first stages of development. Unfortunately, some people are still idiotic enough to boast of such minor achievements throughout their lives. It’s not important how well you can carry off period-costumes—the dhotis and the banyans—and look unaffected on stage. What matters is whether you can replicate the diction and use the contemporary idiom with the same elan. The body structures of people used to be a lot different then—each and every house would have a raised terrace in front and when two or three men sat down, there wouldn’t be much space left. But over the years Bengalis have been steadily losing their physical stature—so much so that we have hardly anything but our voices left—in a situation like this, if a character has to live up to expectations and move about and occupy the huge space of the stage and be fluent in that diction, all those idiomatic expressions in conversation with Atalbehari, and at one point, with Kenaram in a drunken-party, or with Rammanikya, or while discussing *Meghnadbadh Kabya*—to me it seemed to be a mammoth task, this attempt at recreating a character from that era. Unless one acquired proficiency in histrionics, it would be very difficult to survive on stage acting in this play. So, *Sadhabar Ekadashi* was quite an experience for me. And I had expected it to be so.

There’s another text which I’ll do, no matter what happens—*Bisadsindhu* [lit. ‘The Sea of Grief’, a prose narrative by Meer Mosharraf Hossain (1847–1912) on the Battle of Karbala, the central episode in the Islamic myth]—because I feel that Meer Mosharraf’s Bangla prose was far more realistic, lively and dramatic than Bankim’s [Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94), first major Bengali novelist and thinker, social critic, author of *Bandey Mataram*, India’s national anthem]. At certain places Bankim’s prose falters because of its contrived quality. In comparison, Meer Mosharraf, though using similar methods, seems far more lucid as far as language is concerned. I have been thinking about *Bisadsindhu* for a long time, just as I have had Mahasweta-di’s *Kabi Bandaghati Ganyeer Jiban O Mrityu* ['The Life and Death of the Poet Bandaghati Ganyee'] on my mind for the last sixteen years. I have had it turned into a play and I have made changes as well.

I feel that it’s through plays that one’s mother-tongue is best practised and given new horizons. However, when I take a look at today’s plays, I hardly find them doing anything of that sort. My acting career spans approximately thirty to thirty-four years—beginning with my days at Nakshatra and then Theatre Commune—had I spent these years working in the Calcutta Corporation as a clerk, and had someone come to me asking for a file, I would certainly have asked for twenty or twenty-five rupees for doing the favour, but I would have been able to bring out the file pretty fast. So, there’s no reason why anyone should wonder at my theatrical skills—it is part of my profession—I am expected to be good at it. And I am proud of this fact. Let’s go back to what we were discussing—so it is evident that though I have never personally seen any of the plays...
falling within the older tradition, I had quite an adequate idea about them—and I knew of Bijan-da’s ‘protest’ theatre and there was a more or less over-all awareness about the path contemporary acting should take as opposed to this traditional theatre—beginning with Sombhu-da and moving down to our contemporaries—about the concept of and approaches to total theatre, the concept of a sub-plot which is established through a ‘narrator’ and so on. Next, we went through another period—though we haven’t done many shows of this production, merely thirty-two or thirty-three—a play based on the life and times of Muzaffar Ahmed [(1889–1973), politician, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India], called *Abhijan* [premiered 5 August (Muzaffar Ahmed’s birthday) 1989 at Rabindra Sadan]. This play involved multi-media presentation. The cast numbered fifty-six. I had done *Sadhabar Ekadashi* in twelve to fourteen days, *Julius Caeser Shesh Sat Din* in seventeen days, *Dansagar* in nineteen days—all between 7 o’clock in the morning and 7 o’clock in the evening. This too was done in sixteen days flat.

We had been allowed a little more space than usual. The Gaganendra Pradarshanshala (the Gaganendra Exhibition Hall) hadn’t opened yet. I had to shoot quite a few reels for this production. I also collected some rare material from the archives. We used a number of slides and a lot of painted material—posters or banners and so on. Muzaffar Ahmed’s life wasn’t as eventful as that of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara or Julius Fuchik. Their lives were full of political events, killings and violent encounters. In comparison, Muzaffar Ahmed’s life was colourless—it wasn’t torn between the rise and fall of events. I don’t think that we have had a play based on the comparatively uneventful life, of a low profile activist in our country, prior to this. I had wanted to do this because I’d have an opportunity to do some shooting, acquire rare shots from the archives and be given a chance to add sound-effects on-stage to silent reels. I had always been attracted to a mixing of and experimenting with media and this play gave me a chance to move from one medium to another. And we had been able to pull it off pretty well. Another reason why that play was such a favourite with me is because I did massive changes on it about three to four days from the date of production. Indranath [Bandyopadhyay, b. 1942, painter and illustrator, leading figure in the official cultural front of the CPI(M)] had written the play. It comprised a hundred and thirteen pages and needed a cast of around a hundred and fifty [Laughs]. It’s obvious that the playwright was bringing in characters at the drop of a hat. However, what he was forgetting was that even if a character acted as little more than a filler or was a mere figment of the playwright’s imagination, he or she came on stage with a right to a complete, rounded portrayal. The playwright lacked this awareness. The characters kept coming in—one would appear in the thirteenth page and disappear till the seventy-eighth. What happened to him in-between? If I ever asked this, the playwright would have been caught unawares. So, near the end, we had . . . anyway, there was this character named Maqbul who was a worker at the port. Muzaffar had once made a visit to that port’s shipyard and Maqbul had met this plain and simple man and they had had quite a discussion. They hadn’t met for years afterwards and Maqbul had gone in search of Muzaffar. In the process he meets an artist and he feels that if he keeps pursuing him, he might have a chance of meeting Muzaffar. At one point, the worker speaks to himself, ‘Why are so many after him? I have never seen him hurling a bomb at anyone or anything! All he ever does is fiddle with a pen and ink and yet . . . ’ etc etc. And the painter says to him, ‘Why don’t you wait a bit? I’ll do your portrait. Sit here.’ He begins to draw and as he keeps on making the strokes, the entire scene dissolves into darkness and at the back, in another part of the stage, his work is shown on screen and the portrait of Maqbul changes—through the use of brush and paint—into a portrait of Muzaffar Ahmed. This had given me the scope to do away with twenty-seven to twenty-eight pages. The scene that replaced those pages hadn’t taken up more than one to one and half minutes. But the effect was outstanding. And it was now that the ‘International’
would begin to play. I remember that after the show, everyone—from Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to Jyoti-babu [Jyoti Basu], Saroj Mukherjee—had appreciated this particular scene. I had enjoyed myself immensely. However, I mustn't forget that the idea wasn't completely my own.

I had seen something like this once in an Italian film, though it wasn't exactly the same. There was this huge house... its doors wide open... leaves were falling from the trees... the old man who inhabited the house had a car and he and some other people were travelling in it. There was this other man—old, too, with white hair—he was bringing out the photographs from the house—photographs of the family over the years, somewhat like the family-albums we have. He was arranging the photographs, one generation after the other. And the film ended with his becoming a photograph himself and joining the line of family photographs. Though I had seen this film ages ago and there wasn't any affinity between the two works as far as subject-matter was concerned, it struck me that I could make very good use of the technique in my play. And it clicked! I felt so relieved when I was freed from the clutches of those twenty-seven or eight pages. Oof! There was far too much talking—words, words and words. It was the same in Dansagar.

In the first half, just before the interval, there's a scene in which the husband goes dumb. On the day of the first show, I said, ‘Dwijen, don’t speak here anymore. The wife is dead—that’s enough action. The white cloth, fire, earthen vessels have been taken away—that’s when you go dumb.’ Our first bell for the show had already been sounded—I gave him a rough idea—‘Oooo, ooo. Aa, aa.’ Dwijen immediately replied, ‘Yes!’ I am not sure whether you had seen, Bijoyer Apekshay [premiered 1996 at Sisir Mancha], did you? No? I did something similar in Bijoyer Apekshay, I had changed the end-part and that too, on the date of the show. It had been planned otherwise—later, I said, ‘No. It will take us seconds to throw down some leaflets but they will keep falling for at least five long minutes.’ I arranged for five people to be on the cat-way. And when the leaflets were dropped, they kept and kept falling—it seemed an infinity before they touched ground. That was a brilliant effect. So I have noticed that... The main attraction for me as far as Abhijan was concerned was the challenge of making a film on an apparently tame and uninteresting personality—but there was one point which had pained me a lot and that was the fact that even in his own writings or in those written about him, there is no mention of his wife. I mean, he had been married, he did have a wife but... this seemed unnecessarily cruel to me and I had tried to look up the facts and details. We had developed a character as his wife. And that lady had been portrayed as someone who was very compassionate. All her life she spent waiting. I wanted to bring in the far-flung village of Sandip in Noakhali where this lady waits for her husband. I wanted Ahmed’s wife to be given some lines to speak. The wife’s presence was needed there. Certain things needed to be explained: what was it that had given her strength to live? Would she be able to understand the things that would be said to her? The Communist Party’s ideals? This woman had lived a life of her own on this earth and spent her days on it. And to a woman of our country, be she Hindu, Muslim or Christian, a husband meant the world. How had she managed?

I had said to Indranath, ‘No matter what you write, it’s here that the play has its heart. Let him be as grand as he chooses to be in the world outside but in here is where his roots lie—the soil of his native village, his wife, his home and family. This entire episode cannot be abandoned. I can’t bring myself to imagine a work without reference to these.

We did Mohar in 1994. Speaking in the context of Mohar, I must point out that it was the first time ever that a novel by Balzac was adapted in a Bengali play. The play was based on his novel, The Fatal Skin. Raphael, the protagonist, belonged to the world of science. Unable to bear the pangs of poverty, he had decided to throw himself into the
Seine. A few of his friends recognized him and took him to a leather merchant. You had seen Mohar, so you would know. We had translated the entire sequence to the world of theatre. I knew this world to its bones. I had introduced quite a few of my experiences in this play. It’s autobiographical in a way. At a number of places. But it hadn’t been the same with me—what had transpired between Meera and the protagonist. I had never had a romantic liaison during my youth. I used to regard those things as a waste of time. I continued to regard love as a mere waste of time till the age of forty-two. Theatre was everything to me, it was my life. And I had given my life working at it. My friends used to say that I was denying Nature. But that wasn’t the case. My marriage, though late, proved that I hadn’t avoided Nature. I regard Mohar as Theatre Commune’s best production. I do not regard Dansagar as a great success, even though some of my well-wishers are angry at me over this issue. In Dansagar, the curtains are raised, I talk and talk for a while and there’s the interval. The curtains are raised again, the lights are on, there’s more talking and the curtains come down again and it’s time to go home—I don’t really feel comfortable with this sort of a play. This is not theatre at all. Everything seems so artificial and pre-arranged. And everyone is preoccupied with the ‘acting’ part of it—as if the things are happening right there on stage . . . [pause] . . .

From that point of view, Mohar was very dear to me . . . its subject-matter was so interesting and lofty with lots of sudden and quick turns to it. The topic itself was so interesting—it had so many reverberations and this endeared it to me . . . I really could never understand why Mohar didn’t get much favourable response.

[S. B. Mohar hasn’t had that many shows as your other successful productions?]

No, far less than the others. About only thirty-three or thirty-four. Yet Mohar is a phenomenon, at least I feel that way. Its subject-matter, its histrionics, its presentation, its location—not just physical but ideological as well—its dramatic moments . . . it was a different experience altogether. The real, the fantastic, the luxuries, the excesses and there’s this bloody death, the lust, the perverted sexuality—there’s everything. I like living and breathing inside a subject like this. Lifeless, washed-out topics—no matter how high they range in the world of art and aesthetics, don’t really touch me. I can’t feel any life flowing within it. Mohar had it all. Though it was a different subject, I felt the same way with Caesar. There
was this adventurous attitude—it had floored me completely. For example, in *Jibika*,
though the protagonist is a petty thief, his life is full of crises, soft moments and idiocies,
which rise to a dramatic height. It was things like these which had made *Mohar* one of
my . . . especially at certain places like the scene in which there’s a pilot who is sozzled
and is feeling sick, sits down for a cup of coffee and tells a billionaire, ‘Why are you
trying to insult me? I haven’t done you any harm.’ At another point, the protagonist tries
to keep himself from getting involved but never really succeeds in doing so. And when
the pilot is shot dead, the skin wrinkles and shrinks around the bullet-hole—that’s what
is important . . . it is because of these reasons that *Mohar* seems so interesting and it is the
costliest play yet to be produced by Theatre Commune. We had spent about one lakh and
twenty-eight thousand rupees on it. The cost isn’t important . . . I have a feeling that I can
be alive in this play for years to come.

[S. B. Have you ever felt that your *Mohar* was so ahead of the times that the audience
wasn’t ready to accept and appreciate it? I mean you have come to *Mohar* after doing
many other productions and you have been able to observe the theatre-scene all
around—there’s hardly any ‘visionary’ (and I am using the word consciously), plays
being made, i. e. plays which treat the theme in an allegorical/philosophical level,
transcending the mere level of realism, yet talking about reality. You know that these
plays are rarely ‘hits’ at the box-office. A number of contemporary plays have been hits,
the type of plays which you have yourself done, yet *Mohar* fails at the box-office. Why?]

That’s true. But where’s the problem? What exactly makes *Mohar* difficult? It’s true
that as a realistic play it moves slightly away from the ‘real’ but nowhere does it
approach the opaque world of the unreal and there’s certainly no place in which it suffers
a sharp departure from reality. If it is looked at with a bit of, only a bit of sensitivity, it
yields itself to a variety of levels and interpretations. Why the audience didn’t quite get
it, isn’t clear to me. There was a time when I used to work with ‘reality’ a lot. Over the
years I have realized that working with ‘reality’ is an initial stage of theatre-production.
It’s o.k. to practice it at the beginning. But as you go deeper into reality, you’ll discover so
many levels in it which indirectly gives strength to and supplements the reality we are
familiar with. But that is not the reality of Giraudoux’s *Tiger at the Gates*. What surprises
me is the fact that it was this very audience which had once appreciated *Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhati Charitra*; it was here that Badal-babu’s [Badal Sircar], *Baki Itihas* and
*Ebong Indrajit* had once been so well accepted. The times were different, then. That’s how
I try to justify . . . perhaps the time wasn’t ripe for a production like this . . . I am not sure.
When I had first seen Satyajit-babu’s *Kanchenjungha* . . . and when I saw it a couple of
months back, I felt that it was one of his best films. But in the world of theatre, no
director can ever dare to claim that even if the contemporary audience doesn’t appreciate
his work now, they’ll do so ten years from now on—because there won’t be anything
surviving till that date. In a way, theatre does and doesn’t have permanence.

[S. B. Have you done anything after *Mohar*?]

After *Mohar* we did two or three short plays . . . and then it was time for Odets’ play
*Waiting for Lefty* or *Bijoyer Apekshay*. The play was written in the forties—socialism was
already a reality, the Communist Party was in power, the revolution had been a success
in Soviet Russia, socialism had held sway for at least twenty to twenty-two years and
there were a lot of expectations, people were getting re-aligned and the World War II was
about to end, the whole of Europe was . . . so at that time the socialist block . . . it’s now
equally so, though at this very moment about fifteen to sixteen countries of Europe—
perhaps some of them are not so red, some are light red and some are deep red. The
Eastern Democrats and the social democrats and the socialists and the communists found
it hard to arrive at a common minimum programme. I am proud that Jose Saramago,
who got the Nobel Prize for Literature said that he shares Amartya Sen’s views on
economics—that opens doors for my mind. I realize that it is the order of the day—I
needed to think about this while dealing with Odets. Perhaps, the socio-political
ambivalence will be far less than it was in the seventies. Certain things will be changed
for sure—we used to regard everything in the sixties and seventies, in the light of
Moscow. But even today, after everything, the hunger, the lack of medication,
unemployment, lack of food and shelter—these have persisted. As long as these persist,
as long as man’s needs persist, as long as there is inadequate food, shelter, clothing,
education, employment and love—most of all, as long as there’s a desire for love—
socialism will live on. But Bijoyer Apekshay hadn’t been well accepted even though I was
satisfied with the production. That’s because it was about a factory in which the two
unions were undecided over whether they should have a strike or not. The leaders of the
management-union were speaking against the strike while the leader of the workers’
union—Lefty Costello—who had been named Bijoy in our production, was absent.
Everyone else is present on stage. The labour union on the left, the management’s union
to the right. And the condition of the workers are being acted out in fragments, in front
of everyone. The actors are watching the enactment of a particular episode. The audience
is watching the actors who are again watching a particular scene being enacted on stage
by other actors from their own group. This interaction . . . the stage props and the
requisitions are strewn about on the stage but when Radha, a labourer’s wife, picks up
and throws around the implements that should belong to a household, it never even
enters the audience’s mind that she will be picking up the props that have been used in
the meeting—the posters and banners. By then it has become obvious to the audience
that she will be throwing only the kadai, the school-bag and the children’s shoes. These
are the things which I found so interesting. We had worked with a similar form of
production way back in 1975, called King King. It was a formal extension of this play
which we did in Bijoyer Apekshay—a more compact, consistent treatment of the subject-
matter. I am proud of the fact that when we did King King in 1975, (Tapas-da had done
the lights) I hadn’t yet read Clifford Odets. So, while working in 1996, I saw that there
was a decided formal similarity between Brecht’s tenets and my production—in fact King
King was, at that time, slightly influenced by Marat Sade in its formal approaches. I had
quite enjoyed the play—especially the over-all technical and histrionic finesse. But
strangely enough, there isn’t much demand for this play among the progressive students’
unions, the youth and the teachers’ organizations. It seems so strange! But Sadhabar
Ekadashi and Dansagar have been received so well. Possibly the reason behind the success
of Julius Caesrer Shesh Sat Din was its neo-classical ambience. But we hadn’t done it only
for its classical qualities—so much of contemporary interpretations had worked itself
into Julius Caesrer Shesh Sat Din. But it was the same in Bijoyer Apekshay.

[S. B. Your repertoire consists of those four plays.]

Yes, four—Dansagar, Sadhabar Ekadashi, Julius Caesarer Shesh Sat Din, and Bijoyer
Apekshay. And between these I have done many, many . . . I think I have done more than
most theatre-groups. But those had mostly belonged to the movement—short, medium-
length and long plays—all. And their audience had ranged from two or four hundred to
sixteen thousand, twelve thousand, five thousand, three thousand—there was this show
in Dum Dum’s Clive House Maidan which we had performed in front of an audience of
sixty-two thousand strong.

[S. B. Since when have you been doing ‘election plays’?]

Ever since 1976/’77.

[S. B. Ever since then? Every year?]

Every year. And specifically for the elections.

[S. B. And apart from the elections?]

Well, you could think of the peace movement. We also did plays on Hiroshima-
Nagasaki. And then there’s the literacy programme. I remember you initiated and
discussed a programme with us at a workshop at the Great Eastern [Hotel]. I had done the plays after that. And out of the eight training camps for the literacy campaign in the district of Bardhaman, I had worked in five—right from the teachers, the camp-directors up to the level of blocks. Later they were presented at the district headquarters and I had done all of them. There’s something I want to say here—I have seen people doing election plays without putting in their utmost effort. The effort that goes into a production for the stage—only a fraction of it is put in while preparing plays for election campaigns, for various democratic movements—and they are done hurriedly. I have never done anything of that sort. The way I do a play in Calcutta—I try to do it the same way in the farthest of the far villages. I have heard others saying that it doesn’t really matter, for the audience won’t miss a thing. I would never think like that. This has been one of my biggest achievements. I take on the job and there’s no scope for any excuses or hesitations on my part for why something wasn’t up to the mark or something isn’t complete. I do not allow myself any excuses. This has made me slightly unsocial and I am not afraid to admit that. I have never really circulated in society and am quite ignorant in that respect.

[S. B. Let me ask you a last question—actually I’ll ask you two. One about your last play at the very end. When you had been building your Theatre Commune and moving away from the group you had belonged to—what was the experience like? What has your relationship with the group been like? What have been your expectations? Has the group given you anything in return? And there was a time when we had thought that a theatre movement is strengthened through the presence of groups. That a group’s character, its essence feeds an individual—that a politics, in the positive sense, develops between the individual and the group—and we had welcomed it. How do you assess this after all these years?]

Of the people who had founded Theatre Commune, except for me, there’s no one involved after these twenty-six or seven years have passed. A number of members have moved away and formed units of their own, of which quite a few are performing quite competently. That’s one side of the coin. Another side is that though we have been able to provide financial assistance to those who have been associated with our successful productions—be they unemployed or recipients of regular salaries—for the unsuccessful ones, it wasn’t possible to do so. Because, in those cases, the production becomes a liability—not in terms of the subject-matter, for a topic is never chosen on the basis of its marketability. During the twenty-seven years that Theatre Commune has been in existence, many young boys and girls have joined and many have left—some for jobs. Because, in spite of everything, the one thing that theatre can never assure is a steady income. I have come to terms with all this by rationalizing or philosophizing. I had founded this group because there was a number of like-minded young people about.

But times have changed. Things have changed with time. People are coming in every day—actors and actresses are being trained. That means that even today there’s not much of a difference from the first days of Theatre Commune, except that I have become slightly more experienced. We had all learned together in those days—perhaps I had learned a bit more and have become a bit more competent than the others. It feels the same way when I am dealing with the members of the group—it’s as if I have gone way back to the July of ’72. I still have to train them the same way—I have to tell them to move in a particular way or walk in a different manner or speak differently or handle something a little more differently—how to move to a spot and be in the light. That means that like what happened on the very first day, they demand that I teach them how to do things. It would have been better if they had stayed on—those who knew how to do these things and didn’t need to be told. But no group is blessed with such a situation. What has happened to other groups, has happened to mine as well. In those days, the person who earned fifty rupees by giving tuition, would donate twenty out of it while he
who was earning a thousand per month would donate a part of his earnings. I had acted in films and earned a bit of money but I had never stashed away anything in my name—everything that I had and have belongs to the theatre. When they left, they had felt bad and it had hurt me as well. Later I had rationalized with myself that these were the first steps. All successful groups have to go through certain phases. It’s up to it how it deals with these things.

Our groups show a strange dependence on the director. It would have been easier if those who were with us at the beginning, had stayed on. And since then, the orientation of the actors and actresses have changed—they stay with a group for three to five or at the most six years. The vague ideas that I have had about what theatre should be like and how theatre should be done—the desire to do good theatre well, to take theatre to the masses, i.e. to take theatre to those people who are unable to come to us and watch the plays because of various constraints, the desire to take our theatre to them without in any way compromising the quality or the effects—that had been our aim. But, with the passage of time, theatre changes as well. Recently we have been hearing that Calcutta’s theatre is far too performance-oriented, far too production-oriented. A theatre group’s job is to do new plays but it should also be involved in discussions about theatre, take part in seminars, participate in exchanges with the various corners of the world, exchange information, experiences. Unfortunately, there are instances when bureaucratic elements have entered the fray and changed the scene. At times they have appreciated good theatre, praised it, i.e. just good direction or production or good performances at various places, in front of a large and varied audience. That’s one part of it. But there’s another side to it as well. To be successful, one needn’t be a good director or producer or actor or a connoisseur—you just need a special kind of organizing capacity to achieve recognition. And it then becomes easy to hold oneself up to the media’s attention till slowly, you become the centre of discussions and a cult begins to develop. There’s been a change in the orientation. And one really cannot deny it.

Does TV pose a threat to theatre? It’s possible. But the point is, in Europe or America, theatre exists as an organized industry. But theatre is not an industry here. Exactly how many people make a living out of theatre? At the most those who provide the costumes, the music-boxes and those who do the make-up and the lights. But their numbers can be counted on the fingers of a hand. They don’t have any trade unions. They don’t even fall in the category of ‘sick industry’. But we shouldn’t forget that theatre is present as an industry in those countries which have had a long theatrical tradition. For example, England has had theatre for at least six hundred to six hundred and fifty years. Even though our theatre spans merely two hundred years, it has come a long way. Beginning with Girish Ghosh in 1872, coming down to 1998—it’s a tradition of a hundred and twenty six years. But our achievements have been of mammoth proportions. Gigantic. For a new convert, our achievement is almost heretical in its magnitude! Right from Girish-babu to today’s Indrashish Lahiri [playwright-director, b. 1962], towering personalities have been born in the fields of acting—actors and actresses—music, background music, stagecraft, lighting. It’s unfortunate that later generations know so little of their achievements. But efforts like Sayak’s Meghnad [Meghnad Bhattacharya, b. 1952, actor-director] is commendable. He made a presentation on seventy theatre-personalities, right from Manoranjan Bhattacharya [(1889–1954), actor, one of the founders of Bohurupee] to Indrashish Lahiri. There have been a few gaps but possibly they are already aware of it and will try to fill them up in the future. This ability to look at things with a sense of history—this is, unfortunately, absent in our theatre. There’s hardly any awareness. And without awareness, how do you expect any progress? Once in a while theatre does suffer from certain setbacks and it’s quite evident that the domestic consciousness is largely devoted to films. There’s no use denying the fact that films do have the capacity to reach a large section of society. But when someone says that
cinema represents a higher form of art, I feel that he or she is not a very sound person intellectually. It’s obvious that there’s a lack of sophistication, a lack of cultural sensitivity somewhere. This has never really bothered me. I feel that good theatre, be it—I won’t draw parallels with the theatre of England or America or even that of Italy. If we don’t come up with our own brand of subsidies and grants, it will be difficult to make our theatre survive. The directors who have led their groups through twenty-five, thirty thirty-five, forty, forty-five years of theatre making—Bohurupee has completed fifty years—they are falling apart like a dilapidated house. What’s our duty towards these? Shouldn’t we be doing something about them? Who should be doing the protective work? And how should that be done? I have heard that an industrial house has bought the Mohan Bagan club. Probably a similar fate awaits theatre. Perhaps we will be having sponsors. God alone knows the rules of that game—I have no clear idea about its various procedures. It would have been a blessing if the state governments could take responsibility with monetary assistance from the centre. Otherwise, I have grave doubts about our theatre’s survival. There’s another important point. The British had come and completely destroyed the independence of the village economies, separated them completely from the cities and made them dependent on the cities. As a result, the educated and cultured few of the cities began to lose touch with rural culture and rural art-forms. This has resulted in, according to me, a barrenness. If we had had the opportunity to bring together the formal freshness of ‘jhumur’ or ‘gambhira’ with the sophisticated and acquired intellects of the cities, it would have yielded excellent results—there would have been a rare combination of emotions and intellectual excellence in theatre. This would certainly have appealed to a lot more people. Dario Fo had once said, ‘The bourgeois in our country had been rather stupid. They hadn’t snapped their ties with the folk-culture of the villages.’ With our bourgeoisie acting differently, we seem to have dearth of fun, wit and jokes in our plays. But our older tradition had a lot of it. Be it in Girish-babu or in Dinabandhu Mitra. And there’s another thing which we must take into account and that is the influence of the Brahma cult and Brahma Samaj over the masses—their self-conscious practices, sophisticated thinking and their conscious attempts at recasting their daily vernacular into stilted and sophisticated moulds, their clothing and conduct—all had greatly influenced the culture of the times. This is a fact. I have had these thoughts on Bangla theatre.

If a million people live in Greater Calcutta, not even one per cent of them watch our plays. One per cent of the number means one lakh. If every theatre-hall has a thousand seats, one lakh people would be occupying a hundred shows with full houses. That doesn’t happen. That means that even one per cent of Calcutta’s population don’t come to watch our plays. What’s been happening to the entertainment of the middle class. . . theatre, it’s our pride, it’s our everything. . . not only in our times but for years before that, many have sacrificed themselves at the altar of theatre—and it’s time to assess our theatre’s achievements and its future. Does something like this await it in the near future? In the morning, someone like me would have to go to office to do a nine-to-five job and then go somewhere else, at 6 o’clock, to be part of a theatrical production. That means that one would have to earn his living somewhere and look for his entertainment elsewhere. This would split up their minds—but Utpal-da had devoted all his time and energy to this theatre and to films. Then there was Ajitesh-da, all the members of Nandikar, Sombhu-da—they were all ‘whole-timers’. But there were quite a few other members of Bohurupee who didn’t give their undivided attention to theatre. And nowadays, things are coming to such a pass. I am around fifty-fifty-one years of age—I have spent the greater part of my life in the world of theatre. I am hoping to work for another twenty years. But those who will be starting their careers in theatre at the age of twenty. . . I will be forced to tell them, in Manik Bandyopadhyay’s style—you have to earn your daily bread from a different quarter and then do theatre with us. I’ll have to warn them at the very beginning—‘don’t try to do one without the other.’
Let’s talk about your new production.

I have already read it out to you. It is an actor’s play—completely dependent on the actor’s or actress’s acting skills. It hasn’t got any particular theme except that of telling a story. While telling a story, one of the characters becomes part of the story. There is a constant shift between various topics. This parade of topics, brought to the audience with a façade of a story-telling session—of course the end is slightly different. I did it myself. It’s like this—we go out on an expedition to a particular house and there’s a spot on the ceiling of this house. Gradually, the spot grows in size till it seems as if someone is half-kneeling, half lying down in a bloody mess and only his shadow is visible to us. The bleeding shadow belongs to Professor Pandey and when he comes down from the ceiling, it seems as if he is surrounded by unseen creatures. Then the professor joins them. There’s a river flowing nearby and Suddha Dutt had taken them there. All of a sudden they realize that after the prolonged hours of music, dancing, incessant talking and giving speeches and consuming so much of champagne and cognac, they are all feeling incredibly thirsty—it wouldn’t be a bad idea to go to the river. They are all strange, ghostly creatures. The stage is emptied and left so for three or four minutes. Professor Pandey comes back as one of those unseen creatures—the sound of knocking pervades the stage. Professor Pandey says, ‘Banerjee, Banerjee, Banerjee! What’s wrong with you all? It’s almost dawn! But where are you? Have you been frightened? But what could possibly frighten you? There’s nothing here to frighten anyone—at least I can’t see it! Banerjee, Banerjee! Can you hear me? Come on, let’s go outside.’ With this, Pandey leaves the stage and the curtains come down. I have added this bit. ‘Nothing has ever really happened to this house. I have looked up gazettes and chronicles and found out that the house was made around the time Vidyasagar joined the Fort William College as the head teacher in the year 1839. We have been able to trace its history. Quite a number of people have died, quite a number have committed suicide. Some have seen singing at the top of their voices as they race around and beckon to others who seem to be following them around—but no one was around.’ That’s what had happened. I have tried to make the play into an irrepressibly and irresponsibly comic one. And I also feel that the way language has been used in this play, will certainly lead to an expansion of language used on the Bangla stage. How those possibilities are explored are yet to be seen. But the concept of a single actor acting on stage . . . I have tried to concentrate on that. Another point of interest is the fact that all my plays have involved large castes—twenty, twenty-five, twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-two—except King King. Even Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata needed thirty-seven people. I had wanted to cut down on numbers and size. Why not work with four or five people?—the lights and make-up should count to four or five people at the most. Also, I am interested in making theatre as mobile as possible. However, all this is an offshoot of the play itself. I hadn’t theorized initially and then turned it to action—everything took shape and then, things set me thinking. And I haven’t decided on the name yet. That’s a tough job. That’s that!

Niakantha Sengpta interviewed for STQ by Samik Bandyopadhyay on 15 September and 8 December 1998.

Transcribed and translated by Kurchi Dasgupta.
During the years it took to bring this special Bangla Group Theatre issue from conception to production, an STQ team consisting of Paramita Banerjee and Sumita Banerjee taped hours of conversation with practitioners in the field. Reproduced below are some thought-provoking comments reflecting what the men and women of group theatre today are thinking and feeling about important aspects of the theatre they practise.

MEGHNAD BHATTACHARYA
Director, Sayak, Calcutta, founded 1973

On communication and the audience:

There was a time when group theatre couldn’t communicate because of certain reasons. It was something like our notions/perceptions of the political scene—the whole world changed, but we remained unchanged, clung to our old values and beliefs. We have done plays galore where the audience knows right from the start what’s going to happen in the end, even what lines the characters in the play are going to speak: we know them all because they are all so familiar. Even in political plays, we know what the characters will turn out to be—the bad man, the victim, and all the other ‘type’ characters who constitute such plays. There’s another point I want to draw attention to: whether you are doing an experimental play or any other play, you cannot deny that the people in the audience out there watch the performance in great awe and wonderment. Isn’t it our duty to sensitize the audience, make them aware, teach them how to view a performance? But how? That’s my question. The kind of statement I make through my theatre is as important as the way I do it.

The most important function of theatre is communication. If someone has a different view on this, I would beg to disagree. I don’t believe in the concept of a ‘target’ audience; the audience is always mixed for me. How can you point to the audience at the Academy and say this is my ‘target audience’? So many kinds of people come to my play. When I take the same play to the suburbs, say, to Naihati or to places further beyond, can I say there is a selective audience? I can’t. If it isn’t right to use theatre in reaching out to the audience, it is even more harmful not to make an effort to reach them at all. We look upon the effort to reach out with a lot of suspicion. Surprisingly, we are not critical of the lack of effort. We don’t even have the courage to point out to some people: you are doing a kind of theatre that your audience doesn’t understand. Why are you doing plays which you yourself can’t understand?

On commercial theatre’s contribution to group theatre:

I sincerely believe that the commercial theatre has contributed a lot. The credit for all the good work done in theatre goes both to the commercial theatre and the
group theatre alike. Some of the masterpieces of acting... Satya Bandopadhyay [1925-97] for example, who passed away... tell me, can you show me a more competent actor of the parallel theatre in any of the groups, apart from Sombhuda or Ajitesh? I remember seeing Satya Bandopadhyay in a 35-minute role in Kothay Pabo Tarey: I saw a man go from being perfectly normal to dead drunk in 35 minutes. It left me spellbound. I remember it even now. Where will you see such acting today? Show me a virtuoso comedian like Jahar Roy [1919-7] in theatre today, or the stupendous lighting in Setu! All this thanks to our professional stage. I’ve seen performances on the commercial/ professional circuit from the time I was 15. I am a fan of the commercial stage, I’ve learnt a lot from it. But we are great snobs, aren’t we? We don’t see plays on the commercial circuit. I have memories of watching Ketaki Dutta and Sabitabrata Dutta [1924-95] in Antony Kabiyal. Who can forget Jahar Ganguly [1903-69] as Bhola Moira in that play? I’ve seen Tarun Roy [1927-88] in a double role in Agantuk—one with a mask on. I was intrigued by the way he did it and I saw the play 5 times just to understand how he managed to do it. This eagerness to learn, to know more, I’ve learnt from the commercial theatre circuit. I’ve learnt so much from it, and I’ve learnt by seeing many, many plays. We learnt acting hands on. There were no training institutes for us. Whatever I do now, I’ve learnt from people directly or indirectly.

Dwijen Banerjee
Director, Sangstab, Calcutta, founded 1982

On the economic crisis:
An economic crisis is the main problem group theatres are facing today. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get a group going these days. Several have already closed down, and this will be the trend as days go by, because it is becoming increasingly difficult to work out the logistics—the number of shows we have to put up, the advertisement costs for each of the shows... Funds have always been a problem with group theatres, but it wasn’t as bad as it is now. Groups could exist just doing good theatre, even if their plays didn’t turn out to be hits, because production costs always used to remain within a certain limit in those days. Nowadays costs have escalated beyond the reach of the middle class, become very exorbitant. It is really difficult to raise funds for a production if your previous production hasn’t been a ‘hit’.

On the impact of Feminism:
In my opinion Feminism has not been a major influence in our country—in theatre, or in any other sphere. It has not assumed a distinct character. Besides, I feel that Feminism has become just an excuse, a game for some people to show off in underdeveloped and developing countries. In most cases it is only those women who want to show off, who are in the fore. Medha Patkar is an exception, and so are a few like her who try to do something genuine for the cause. For most of the others, it is only a way to seek recognition, to establish themselves somehow. But there is a positive aspect of this. Previously I had to be extra careful while choosing my plays and I got worried if there were 5 female characters in the play. Now I don’t have to bother about that, because we have more women, more sincere workers in theatre today than ever before. Women are definitely more sincere and much more competent than men in Bengali theatre today.

Partho Chatterjee
On changes influenced by audience expectations:

No, I don't think we can claim that we are organizing a movement for group theatre, not any longer. We have to perform for an audience and unless people come to our plays, group theatre won't survive. It just can't survive. Earlier, we could somehow manage with funds from the government, but the situation now has become rather difficult. You can hardly do anything with 10-15,000 rupees anyway. Most theatre groups work on very low budgets and they can put up very few shows. It often happens that a production continues for only ten shows and no further. What happens then? It has happened in our group too. After two successful plays *Akraman* and *Ajer Ha Ja Ba Ra La* our expectations have gone up. We'll never be able to do a strange experimental piece for a limited audience any more. We'll never be able to do a production that closes after 5 shows, for example. We are being compelled to think of the audience taste and response because we simply can't function without them.

Once there used to be scope for experimental plays in the group theatre circuit, though obviously the audience for it was limited. I would say that group theatre has now reached the status of mainstream theatre both in content and and style of presentation. The scope for serious avant garde theatre/expertmation has steadily decreased over the years and has become practically non-existent.

Yes, the audience has definitely changed, but the change hasn't been expedited because of the group theatre movement as such. It has happened because of several other reasons. The audience has definitely changed—why would the professional/commercial theatres, which were flourishing in the 50s, be reduced to such a state today? Obviously, a part of the audience who used to go to the theatres in Shyambazar no longer go to see plays there. The playhouses in Shyambazar must have some audience for their plays, surely. I really have no idea how they run. I don't think they do very well. People in the audience come from various backgrounds, they are exposed to certain kinds of plays. It is no use denying that the sheer variety of plays in the group theatre circuit in the 60s and the 70s, the experiments that were done, had a tremendous influence on the audience—at least a whole generation of theatregoers were brought up on this. There is still a large section of the educated middle class audience who had developed a particular kind of taste for such plays in the 60s and 70s and this is the audience that comes to see plays regularly at the Academy. Then there is another section of the audience which goes to plays on reading a review, perhaps, or even on the basis of a recommendation. I reiterate that the group theatre has to function with limited resources and with the kind of resources at its disposal, it cannot create the audience for its kind of theatre. Other media like the television, for example, is much more powerful and the way it is determining audience taste is something that concerns all of us. The group theatre can put up only a very feeble resistance against the onslaught of the media.

**Runu Chowdhury**
Director, Kushilab

On changes in the group theatre scene:

The demarcation between group theatre and commercial theatre is getting blurred. The group theatre movement was started partly on an ideological and partly on an organizational level. If you read through the history of the theatre movement in the 60s and the history of IPTA, you will find that most of the
theatre groups which were formed after they broke away from IPTA retained its ideology; but things have changed with time, the political situation has changed and that has definitely had some sort of an impact on the group theatre movement. The seniors in the group theatre movement had all come from IPTA and they are still trying to hold on to the discipline and the ideology. What’ll happen after 15 years? Who can tell? It will depend on the circumstances at that point of time. Earlier, the group theatre movement in Calcutta would 15-20 groups and interaction was so much easier. I’ll give you an example. It was a time when I was an actor in the Little Theatre Group. Shyamal Ghosh’s *Brishti* was quite a hit in those days. All of us from our group went to see the production and we also passed the word around, so that more people from the theatre world would watch the play. This is no longer possible today, because there are more than 300 groups [operating in and around Calcutta]. It just isn’t possible to establish the same kind of interaction with the groups now. Only a few groups—very few—are emerging as the leading ones because of their productions. A different sort of hierarchy is emerging. When 10-15 groups used to operate, there was a certain kind of discipline in group theatre. Each group used to have its own distinct ideology and philosophy. Now, many groups have attached the ‘group theatre’ tag to themselves, but certain values like discipline, commitment and involvement which used to prevail in the group theatre movement of the 50s and 60s have gone now, just as audience taste has changed over the years.

**CHANDAN SEN**
Playwright and director, Natya Anan, Calcutta, founded 1989

**On the city/districts dynamic:**

Even 15 years ago there used to be quite a distinction between the theatre groups of Calcutta and those of the suburbs. For those of us who used to live in the suburbs, performing in Calcutta would be a grand occasion. It is heartening to note that this demarcation between the city and its hinterland is gradually disappearing. There are numerous theatre groups in Calcutta churning out bad plays, and numerous groups doing good plays as well. The situation is the same in the suburbs. As a result, the pride that Calcutta used to take in its theatrical tradition is gradually vanishing.

A lot of important, significant work is being done in the suburbs—something that the groups in Calcutta cannot do any longer. I’ll give you an example: my friend in Balurghat, Harimadhab [Mukhopadhyay] is doing stupendous work with his group, Triteertha—the kind of work that can put many Calcutta groups to shame. I’ve seen some productions by theatre groups in Baharampur, like Pradip [Bhattacharya]’s Repertory Theatre, or Chhandik and Prantik, doing the kind of theatre that the leading groups in Calcutta wouldn’t even aspire to. A group called Damama is doing very good work in north Bengal; a group called Koushik is working in Shantipur. I’ve just seen their productions and I can tell you, it is a very competent production, definitely better than many productions in Calcutta. The groups in the suburbs constantly feel that their productions have to be at par with Calcutta and so there is this continuous process of improvement. Theatre is getting enriched this way.

**On writing for one’s audience:**

I am accused of being a playwright who churns out cheap plays and this is because I’m popular. I feel this is nothing but incompetent people complaining about something they can never do. There was once a concept that plays should
preferably be cerebral. These plays couldn’t draw an audience to sustain them and there was consequently a sharp decline in the number of people watching theatre. The situation changed with productions like *Madhub Malanchi Kainya* and then *Daybaddha* about two years later. I consciously believe that theatre is for the audience, the people. I don’t believe in theoretical ramblings in seminars or even in the Coffee House about how ‘significant’ or how ‘existentialist’ a play is, or for that matter how realistically the contemporary situation been reflected in the play. I care two hoots for such theories. I exist as a playwright only because of my audience; I write plays for my audience and I have to lead my audience up to a certain point—that is a theory I believe in.

**Ambar Roy**  
Director, Samakaleen Shilpidal, Calcutta, founded 1976

**On respecting one’s audience:**

I have always had the highest respect for my audience. I believe that the audience is intelligent. When I see that a good play is getting a good crowd, while another play isn’t getting enough of an audience, what am I supposed to conclude? That the same audience has suddenly become sensitive? This is not it at all: we aren’t mature enough to gauge audience response. Audience response is extremely difficult to predict.

**Sangramjit Sengupta**  
Playwright-director, Krishtisangsad, Sonarpur, founded 1958

**From district to metropolis:**

There are certain basic organizational differences between theatre groups in Calcutta and the districts. To begin with, there is no system of tickets being sold across the counter. For our first production *Durbeen*, the first 3 or 4 consecutive shows turned out to be full houses—and this was without any across-the-counter sale. Our members went around selling tickets for the 2 initial shows; for the next show too they covered extensive areas moving from one house to another, selling tickets. I once make the mistake of trying to sell tickets across a counter I had opened specially for the purpose. The result was, our regular viewers didn’t come to our show. They told me later, ‘You have become very smart, haven’t you, now that you perform in the cities! You’ve become famous now. You announce your shows in the papers. How can you claim to do theatre when you are alienated from the people? Couldn’t you come to us and sell tickets?’ In other words, they want us to go to them, speak to them about our play and only if they like us will they come to see our play. You see, public relations is very important in the districts. There is another problem we have to face as far as the organizational framework is concerned. In the districts, whatever you do gets a lot of unwanted publicity, for example, any complaint about a member of my group reaches me in no time, whereas, for another lad from Gobardanga commuting to Ballygunge (every day by train) and acting in a group there, the situation is different. Nothing about him reaches the director of that group in Calcutta. Another interesting fact I’d like to share with you is that a majority of the actors in the group theatres in Calcutta come from the suburbs. There are very few young people living in Calcutta who act in theatre groups here; there are far more boys and girls from suburban areas and from the hinterland of Calcutta who come here by the local trains and return to the suburbs after the rehearsals/performances.

**Indrasis Lahiri**
Playwright–director, Chenamukh, Calcutta, founded 1981

On audience expectations:

Theatre has gone through a process of simplification and this is why the audience is expecting a different fare these days. Hence the struggle has to be on a different scale altogether: it will now be a test of how you can make people swallow the bitter pill with the appropriate sugar-coating. This coating is very important: remember that; bitter pills have to be dished out, and that is quite unavoidable. When Shaw understood that he needed to modify the stance he had adopted in *Plays Unpleasant*, he wrote *Plays Pleasant*. The issues George Bernard Shaw had raised in his *Plays Pleasant* were no less critical; but his presentation was jocular. The issues raised in *Arms and the Man* or *Candida* are equally serious. It is all a question of how well you can dish out your subject.

If a Chenamukh play does not manage to get the kind of publicity that a Nandikar play *Meghnadbadh Kabya* gets, the former won’t be able to survive at all; and if my play fails at the box office, there is no way I can write another play, because my group won’t be able to support another production, and this is because my group won’t exist anymore after a production has flopped. Most groups like ours survive on call shows [a common term of reference for ‘invited shows’]. If, as a playwright, I can’t assure the success of a play, the group will simply chuck me out one day. And how can you blame them? Why should they spend a lot of money on their productions just to glorify Indrasis Lahiri? They have to survive on call shows which can provide them with the financial backup when they plan their subsequent production. I don’t know if there is a solution to this problem. I really don’t.

Koushik Sen
Director, Swapnasandhanee, Calcutta, founded 1992

On audience sensitivity:

The director Salil Bandyopadhyay came to see our production of *Pratham Partha* the other day and shared with me his experience: Karna is asking Krishna—Aren’t you ashamed of being a liar and a betrayer? To this Krishna replies—I was merely being anticipatory. At this, the audience breaks into a low suppressed laughter. Salil babu told me he found it extremely heartening to note that the audience hadn’t forgotten how to react. He was, in fact, quite startled to find that the audience had noted every subtlety in the play and had reacted to each appropriately.

Suman Mukherjee
Director, Chetana, Calcutta, founded 1972

On a theatre of relevance:

I make no false claims about my theatre being a socially committed theatre, or that through my theatre I’m going to usher in some fantastic social change. I like performing, I like doing theatre; and I want to do theatre with my political philosophy—that is what I can do. I claim to do nothing more. This is what I can do the best of my ability and that’s why I do theatre in the first place, and there is no ‘social commitment’ involved.

If I feel that a particular foreign play can voice the concerns of the present times, I’ll surely go ahead and do it—not just once, but repeatedly, if that can convey what I want to. I don’t believe that it is absolutely mandatory for you to have to
do an original Indian play written by a contemporary Indian playwright. All I am concerned with is, whether these modern contradictions manage to impress upon my sensibility as a playwright/director. Everything depends on whether I’m able to say things that are relevant for the present times in my own way. As long as what I want to say gets conveyed, I don’t bother about whether it is realistic or naturalistic, Indian or foreign.

Bratyabrata Basu  
Playwright–director, Ganakrishti, Calcutta, founded 1981

On a language for communication:
I feel there is absolutely no sense in trying to explore the meaning of modernity. Why should I search for modernity? If I feel a certain thing can be interpreted in a modernist perspective, I’ll do it accordingly. At the same time, I have nothing against being traditional. Both have their own merits in a certain perspective. Personally I have absolutely no faith in terms like ‘progressive’ etc. If I can, if I have the power to, I’ll take Bengali theatre on a retrogressive journey.
Communication was a problematic area right from childhood. I couldn’t understand how I should communicate and to overcome this difficulty, I started reading a lot. I read about the ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ in language. I felt that the problematics of communication had as much to do with external influences on the language, as with my own negotiations with presenting language in a way that I wanted to. I had, unconsciously, built up an invisible model in my mind and I followed this.
My personal responsibility while using the language and the inhibition/fear inherent in any use of language—this dichotomy between the user of the language and the language itself (as an independent entity), has compelled me to write a play like Ashaleen.

Seema Mukhopadhyay  
Playwright and director, Rangroop, Calcutta, founded 1971

On children and theatre:
I’ve noticed certain things about kids acting on stage. My son and other kids of his age, some of whom are his friends, act in my group. I’ve noticed that these kids have definitely become more responsible and matured a lot both in terms of theatre and also in terms of their own thoughts. I really feel good watching these enthusiastic youngsters, who are the first to come in to help when a set is being brought in; the first to volunteer. They question a lot: why was this done? Why this and why not that? Couldn’t it have been done a little differently? Then, they are the first ones to come to the rehearsal and listen with such attention, that they know the play by heart in no time. Even during rehearsals, they are the ones who point out even the smallest of slips. I can tell you this: my son has definitely become a better and a much more intellectually mature person. But this also has its pitfalls. These little boys start thinking they know a lot and become quite irreverent at times, leading to very embarrassing situations. So you see it is a mixture of both good and bad.

Bijoylakshmi Burman  
Actress, Gandhar, Calcutta, founded 1962

On the representation of women:
The kind of women that you come across in fiction these days—progressive women, women with minds of their own—are not to be found in theatre.
Perhaps this is because the director has to keep in mind the extent to which the audience will accept liberal/progressive women. Women have to face a lot of taboos when it comes to the performing arts. Proximity to a man even while acting is not taken in very good spirit. It hurts the middle class morality! But even after all this, how can you deny that the position of women in the present world has changed and with it their representation on stage, for example, in Tripti Mitra in *Aparajita* showed how a woman, pushed to the very brink of existence, is ultimately forced to sell her body. She has to stand before Metro cinema-hall for a client. The same play, done in a Marathi translation/adaptation by Rohini Hattangadi recently, hasn’t portrayed the same predicament for the woman. Several new areas of employment have opened up and hence a woman is no more doomed to become a streetwalker.

**Jayoti Basu**  
Director, Sutrapat, Calcutta, founded 1990

**On performing for children:**

From the time that I started acting, I noticed that the thoughts and concerns of children were not being represented adequately in theatre. Later, when I directed *Care Kori Na* as part of the Grips Theatre project, I tried in my own way, to bring up issues that children are concerned with, and also those which affect them directly or indirectly. Have we really given any thought about conditioning children so that they can respond to theatre with ease? We haven’t. What we have done on the other hand is, in our theatres we have restricted the entry of children who are less than 8 years old. We have chosen to ignore the existence of vibrant young thinking minds and decided to shut out their responses. Most tickets and cards for theatre shows carry an announcement: ‘Children below 8 years not allowed in the auditorium.’ This has been the tradition for years. It is true we have done several shows of *Care Kori Na*; but I’ve felt that we haven’t been able to come closer to the children. We have failed to write original plays for children. Secondly, working as we are within the rigid structure of the group theatre, I have very serious doubts about reaching out to children. You see, we don’t perform in the regular theatre halls and neither can we afford to spend a lot on advertisements. As far as the kids’ coming to the shows is concerned, they are mostly accompanied by their parents and it is the parents who decide what they should watch and what they shouldn’t. So the awareness must reach the parents first. Only when we perform in schools do we get children to watch our plays; but when we do the same play in an auditorium, I find adults coming to the play in much larger numbers than children. If we could perform extensively over a long period of time, we could reach more children. But we can’t because of financial constraints. What’s bothering me is that we are not being able to generate the habit and the discipline of watching theatre among young boys and girls. This is bound to effect the group theatre as well. Either the future audience for group theatre performances will not be there at all, or they will be an indifferent lot.

**On playing safe:**

Of course people have thought about women in Bengali theatre. Do you know when? When your group has a very powerful and competent actress and you know that a play with a strong female character will succeed on account of her performance. Competent actresses have been used no doubt, but that is the end of it. This is one side of the story. The other aspect, which is often unexplored, is how these female characters in a play are mere ‘types’ as envisioned by the male...
playwright/author. Here the woman becomes formulated in a particular role, coloured by a man’s perception. The same thing is repeated in the plots of plays, or even in the character of men in plays—all are mere permutations and combinations of familiar types. Where is the desire to experiment with roles that aren’t mere types? Bengali theatre isn’t being able to move out of the confines of the known and the seen and the heard; it is always so afraid of doing something new. With this general trend of events in theatre, the one or two exceptional endeavours are getting lost in the mire.
Achalayatan (1912). Play by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) about an educational institution with all its windows closed and everything controlled by rigid laws and codes till the founder-master arrives to tear all the conventions down and liberate it. Produced by several directors including Utpal Dutt (1929–93) and Sabitabrata Dutta (1924–93).

Alamgir (1921). Play by Kshirodeprasad Bidyabinode (1863–1927) of strong and often contorted human passions, around the career of Emperor Aurangzeb—turning the history of the conflict between the Mughals and the Rajputs into a grand melodramatic panorama of palace intrigues, patriotic demonstrations and heroism.

Bisarjan (1890). Play by Rabindranath Tagore set in Tripura, where a little child shocked by the bloodshed of animals sacrificed to the goddess Kali, appeals to the King who bans animal sacrifice in his kingdom, only to come up against opposition from the Queen and the royal priest; leading to the self sacrifice of the young devotee of the priest, whose death ultimately converts the priest. Produced by several directors including Tagore himself (who played the roles of the priest Raghupati and his young acolyte Jaisingha in two different productions), as well as Utpal Dutt, Sombhu Mitra and Bibhash Chakraborty.

Chand Baniker Pala (1978). Play by Sombhu Mitra (1915–97). Drawing on the myth of Chand Sadagar, a merchant who in his absolute commitment to the god Shiva, refuses to worship the popular goddess of the snakes, Manasa, and her persecution of the merchant, it builds its protagonist up as the uncompromising man of principle.

Malancha (1934). Novel by Rabindranath Tagore. Dramatized by Tagore himself, undated, published for the first time in 1968 (Rabinrajajnasa, vol. II, November 1968) from his manuscript. Niraja, bedridden with a terminal wasting disease, cannot bear the presence of Sarala, a childhood friend of her husband Aditya, gradually assuming charge of the garden and the flower business that she had nurtured and tended for years with her husband, struggles with herself to be generous, but collapses to death under the strain of a final effort to reconcile with Sarala.
Naranarayan (1926). Play by Kshirodeprasad Bidyabinode. Unlike most dramatic treatments of the story of Karna in the Mahabharata, the emphasis here is on Karna’s submission to the divine scheme of Krishna. The play leads on inevitably to Karna’s adoration of Krishna and the Pandavas’ acknowledgement of Karna, who is thus ultimately relieved of the stigma of being the son of a low caste pretending to be a Kshatriya.

Nildarpan (1860). Play by Dinabandhu Mitra (1830–73) documenting in a highly melodramatic style the oppression by British indigo planters who compelled farmers producing food crops to give up their lands to the cultivation of indigo, and the collapse of families under their onslaught. Its impact is comparable to that of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. A translation of the text published by the Rev. James Long (who was found guilty and fined for the act) serving to create a strong public opinion against the planters in homeland Britain. Produced by several directors, including Girishchandra Ghose (1844–1912) and Bijan Bhattacharya (1915–78).

Sadhabar Ekadashi (1866). Play by Dinabandhu Mitra, taking a comic-satiric view of the lifestyle of the first generation of western-educated Bengali intelligentsia, with the contradictions that haunt them and alienate them from contemporary society.

Tapati (1929). Play by Rabindranath Tagore which tells the story of Sumitra, princess of Kashmir, forced to marry Vikram, the invader from Jalandhar, to save her own kingdom from devastation. She resents the presence and power of the treacherous Kashmiri lords, who had handed Kashmir over to Vikram, in Vikram’s court, and the persecution of the common people at the hands of a corrupt and unprincipled nobility, and stands by the people in their revolt against the king. She leaves for Kashmir, followed by Vikram, who is determined to bring her back and punish her. But when Vikram reaches the place, he finds the pyre burning over Sumitra, who has immolated herself in an ultimate gesture of protest and defiance.
Appendix I

Notes on Major Bengali Productions 1944–2000


A young Communist’s disappointment with a Party slowly degenerating into compromises on ideological issues, and a sense of betrayal in his marital relationship, combine to lead to a psychological crisis.


Beginning with an American General, briefing a mission to Vietnam, the play moves straight into a bombing raid over a Vietnam village, spectacularly recreated with newsreel footage, music, and dramatic documentation of a battlefield first aid camp, opening out to a moving account of American aggression and Vietnamese resistance.

Alokanandar Putrakanya. PROD. Sundaram. PLAY and DIR. Manoj Mitra. PREM. Academy of Fine Arts, 3 November 1989.

Alokananda, the middle-aged heroine of the play, goes on adopting orphans, bearing the burden of all the mishaps and problems that come their way with minimal support from her elder brother and her son, and a husband who has brain damage as a result of attempting to save an adopted daughter from drowning. It is the husband, wavering between insensitive demands and softer lucid moments, who remains at the centre of Alokananda’s sensibilities.

Amitakshar. PROD. Sudrak. PLAY and DIR. Debasis Majumdar. PREM. Kalamandir basement (Kalakunj), 2 May 1978.

The searing drama of a middle-class character driven by sheer poverty to forge papers to claim a freedom fighter’s pension, struggling with his conscience till he eventually surrenders and confesses.

Antony Kabiyal. PROD. Nandik. PLAY and DIR. Bidhayak Bhattacharya. PREM. Kashi Biswanath Mancha, 26 October 1966.

A fictionalized biographical musical centring on a Eurasian singer in nineteenth
century Calcutta, who learnt the songs of Kali, the dark goddess, in Bengali and rose to triumph over the contemporary Hindu masters in the field, particularly in the public musical debates on religion and theology; with his romantic love for the young Bengali woman who taught him the language and took him through the sentiments of both romance and faith.

**Ballabhpurer Rupkatha.** PROD. Satabdi. PLAY and DIR. Badal Sircar. PREM. Academy of Fine Arts, 28 November 1970.

A witty comedy around a man trying to sell his house with an ancestral ghost trying to seduce a young woman who is part of the family interested in buying the property. The young owner of the house and his ghostly ancestor, played by the same person, and therefore creating comic confusion, do not deter the prospective buyer, who is only too happy to buy a ghost as part of the property.

**Barricade.** PROD. Peoples Little Theatre (PLT). PLAY and DIR. Utpal Dutt. PREM. Kalamandir, 24 September 1972.

Set in Germany in 1933, and based on Jan Petersen’s almost documentary account, the play chronicles the rise of Fascism and its attempt to stifle all opposition which only drives the liberal, non-partisan intelligentsia to take a stand for democracy at the barricades, where the workers have already gathered. The parallels with the circumstances leading to the declaration of Emergency in India are clear.


A fairly close translation of August Wilson’s Pulitzer Prize winning play, set in the mid-fifties in a small town in the USA, where a Black family struggles through the aspirations and frustrations of its members. These are Troy, a baseball player denied success by racial discrimination, and now employed in the local garbage disposal squad; Lyons, his son from an earlier marriage who would love to be a guitarist; Corrie, his son from his present wife Rose, who plans to be a footballer; and Troy’s brother Gabriel, with a brain injury from World War II. Their struggles get further complicated when Troy hands over to Rose his child from his mistress who has died at childbirth.


Wesker’s *Chicken Soup with Barley* adapted to the changing political scenario of Calcutta, set in a Communist family; its three acts set in 1953, 1967–68 and 1972.

**Bishey June.** PROD. Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). ADPT. Biru Mukhopadhyay (from a Hungarian play *Loyalty*) DIR. Jnanesh Mukherjee. PREM. n.k.

Centring on the last few hours of the lives of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a young American couple charged with handing over American nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union and sentenced to death, it highlights the integrity and courage of the young couple who triumph over the tempting offers of a false confession and consequent release.

**Captain Hurrah.** PROD. Nakshatra. PLAY. Mohit Chattopadhyay. DIR. Shyamal Ghosh. PREM. Muktangan, 4 December 1970.

A husband and a wife find themselves stranded in a strange hotel as they await their friend, a revolutionary who has been arrested. The manager, the staff and guests at the hotel actually believe they are on a ship. The couple are even more intrigued as pressure mounts on them to give up a map of a utopia that was
supposedly with their friend, but is now with them. The shadow of doubt clears as they explain how their friend would poetically evoke an utopia. The manager/captain now assures the guests/passengers that they would sail into infinity and perhaps some day chance upon the utopia envisaged.

**Care Kori Na!!** PROD. Sutrapat. PLAY. Volker Ludwig’s *Max and Milli*. ADPT. and DIR. Jayoti Bose. PREM. Max Müller Bhavan, 27 February 1989.

The story of Tata and his little sister, who with their single mother, confront the realities of growing up and living in an urban world, a typical Grips play.


A community of marginal people, who handle snakes and snake venom for a living, comes into confrontation with a ruthlessly exploitative landlord that they would like to kill in sheer desperation, but the young pregnant wife of the family would not allow it; till the landlord’s predatory spirit makes even the young woman turn against him.

**Chandralokey Agnikanda.** PROD. Nakshatra. PLAY. Mohit Chattopadhyay. DIR. Shyamal Ghosh. PREM. Muktangan, 26 July 1967.

The rigid, codified and apparently placid state of affairs in an imaginary land suffers a jolt with the appearance of a *preta* [ghost], who inspires people to speak and act in an anti-establishment idiom, and is befriended by a young school teacher who tries to bring him back to the world of the living, only to be shot dead by the establishment.

**Chhayar Prasad.** PROD. Sundaram. PLAY and DIR. Manoj Mitra. PREM. Academy of Fine Arts, 23 June 1998.

Set in the reign of Bindusara, a historical character contemporaneous with Chanakya and the rise of Buddhism, it brings into play the clash between an indifferent royalty and a persecuted population, with a brahman of a lesser order upholding in his strange, androgynous character, a morality that shelters and nurtures all those who are turned out by society.

**Chhenra Tar.** PROD. Bohurupee. PLAY. Tulsi Lahiri. DIR. Sombhu Mitra. PREM. New Empire, 17 December 1950.

The Muslim peasant hero, a sensitive singer, is driven by the Second World War and the Bengal Famine of 1943-44, and the operators who take advantage of the times to exploit their victims, to lose everything including his loving and naive wife and little child, and the community life in which Hindus and Muslims were part of one unbroken human drama.


The extenuating circumstances in a court martial are not considered adequate to grant a reprieve to the accused, who is duly sentenced to death. But what is revealed in the course of the trial is the harrowing tale of an excellent soldier and sportsman, born a member of a low caste, driven by continuous humiliation and deprivation to take the desperate step of attacking a superior officer. The play critiques the façade of faceless discipline that characterizes the military order, which nurtures the crudest kind of patriarchy, rank egotism, caste prejudice and vulgar sexism.


A father and a son in a state of utter destitution, seek to scrounge a full meal by
drawing on the pity of the neighbours who come forward to provide them with the wherewithal that is required for the last rites of the young daughter-in-law whom they have allowed to die without any care.


Two actresses, one older, the other younger, hired from the city to act the female roles in a production in a village, come into a complex situation where a clash between generations, a whole set of prejudices, and nineteenth century social history come into play, and almost abort the final performance where a distinguished actor from the city—a historical character—is expected to be the chief guest, but does not turn up.

**Dashachakra.** PROD. Bohurupee. PLAY. Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People.* ADPT. Shanti Bose. DIR. Sombhu Mitra. PREM. Srirangam, 1 June 1952.

An idealistic doctor discovers that the city’s water supply is polluted by the effluents from a leather factory run by his own brother. A rationalist, he thinks that the disclosure will only lead to a few practical measures to save the situation. But his brother refuses to do the needful, exercises his influence and power to turn the press, the people, even the owner of the house where the doctor stays, against the doctor, who refuses to compromise and is forced out of the community.

**Debi Sarpamasta.** [There has been no production of this play till date after an aborted production for Paschimbanga Natya Akademi] PLAY. Manoj Mitra (wrt. 1995).

A princely kingdom, in the period when the East India Company was seizing such states one by one under various pretexts, comes to an understanding with a tribal community who swear to come to its defence, through a complicated encounter in which a young woman from the state becomes a living goddess—the snake-headed deity—for the community, and is torn all along between her human desires and her ‘divine’ obligations.

**Debigarjan.** PROD. Calcutta Theatre. PLAY and DIR. Bijan Bhattacharya. PREM. Wellington Square, 21 February 1966.

A story of exploitation and resistance in a Bengal village, where the landholder in collusion with his political operator henchman grabs the meagre plots still held by the farmers, forcing them to go back to their pre-agricultural craft ways of life and to send their women to work in his granary, where they are systematically raped, till the young hero mobilizes the entire village to rise in revolt over the death of his young wife driven to suicide by the landholder’s advances.

**Dukhimukhi Joddda.** PROD. Chetana. PLAY. The Man of La Mancha. ADPT. and DIR. Arun Mukherjee. PREM. Gorky Sadan, 4 August 1994.

The Don Quixote story, in its *Man of La Mancha* incarnation.


Indrajit, a typical Bengali middle-class idealist of the fifties, realizes his difference from the average mass of Amals-Bimals-Kamals, those who unquestioningly allow themselves to be driven by society. There is both pride and frustration in the realization, for he is not able to achieve any of the goals that he had set himself. Even as he falls into the rut, the sense of distinction endures.

**Galpo Hekim Saheb.** PROD. Sundaram. PLAY. and DIR. Manoj Mitra. PREM. Academy of

Set in a time coinciding with the beginning of British rule in rural Bengal, the story of a Hekim, a dedicated healer of men, seeking a herbal cure for leprosy, with a beggar and a woman driven to murder her cruel bandit husband as his only two assistants, even as the two neighbouring rival feudal chieftains fight over him to ensure that he keep their people healthy enough to work and pay their taxes, and frustrate his quest for the right formula!

**Gantabya.** PROD. Chetana. PLAY. Rod Langley’s *Bethune*. TRANS. and DIR. Suman Mukherjee. PREM. Academy of Fine Arts, 10 February 1997.

The play tells the story of Dr Norman Bethune, of *The Scalpel and the Sword* fame, in his Spanish Civil War phase, where his humanist vision brings him into confrontation again and again with both the political and the military leadership.


In a marginal village community, a young woman dies of snakebite. An elaborate ritual to revive her, conducted by a witch-doctor ends in futility, awakening the community to a realization of deception in the name of traditional religion.

**Jagannath.** PROD. Chetana. STORY. Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q*. ADPT. and DIR. Arun Mukherjee. PREM. Academy of Fine Arts, 8 February 1977.

*Jagannath* ostensibly tells the story of a simple peasant, but in the process examines and exposes the ways in which centuries of hierarchical oppression subtly moulds the psyche of the oppressed.


A young woman waits in her suburban home with her entire family, for a visit by her Communist boyfriend from the city, who ultimately does not turn up; but even as she tries to explain to her family her emotional and political choices, she suddenly discovers with a thrill that she is no longer repeating what her boyfriend has drilled into her, but speaking an entirely original text.

**Kamalkamini.** PROD. Ushneek. PLAY and DIR. Ishita Mukherjee. PREM. Sisir Mancha, 5 November 1993.

Ketaki Dutta plays an ageing actress in a realistic real life situation, showcasing performances from her great appearances in the past, rich with singing, dancing and acting alike.

**Kalol.** PROD. PLT. PLAY and DIR. Utpal Dutt. PREM. Minerva, 29 March 1965.

An account of the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy in 1946, it departs from history at certain points, to valorize the tradition of armed struggle in the Indian freedom movement that has commonly been undervalued. Moving between the barracks of the ratings on the shore and one of the ships in revolt, it also plays on the contradictions in a revolutionary, who risks his life for the cause of human dignity, but is not prepared to concede freedom to his wife.


The play revolves around the disappearance of an old man, the father, and his family who comes to terms with his absence, primarily busying themselves in various intrigues aimed at appropriating the lion’s share of his property. Ultimately he returns and confesses that he actually has no savings whatsoever and merely pretended to possess a lot of wealth to ensure that his selfish and negligent children look after him in his old age.


The story of a young man who opts out of the profession of his forefathers to take up acting in the theatre. A play replete with the warmth of rustic goodness.

**Kolkata Hamlet.** PROD. Calcutta People’s Art Theatre (CPAT) PLAY and DIR. Asit Bose. PREM. Kalamandir, 16 August 1973.

Set in the seventies, against the violence of protest and state repression that characterize the period, a theatre group rehearsing the new play conjures up and encounters a Naxalite fugitive and Shakespeare’s Hamlet.


Transplanted to Calcutta, the Sartre play is replayed with a Muslim fugitive from communal violence being sheltered by a Hindu prostitute, who uses her connections with her ‘respectable’ customers to try to save the man.


A fairytale play about a young princess who dons the garb of a man to kill the ogre and claim her lover.

**Manjari Aamer Manjari.** PROD. Nandikar. PLAY. Anton Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard. ADPT. and DIR. Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay. PREM. November 1964.

An adaptation of Chekhov’s celebrated play, with the cherry orchard changed to a mango orchard, and Lopakhin a strong, determined Bengali rustic.

**Mara Chand.** PROD. Calcutta Theatre. PLAY and DIR. Bijan Bhattacharya. PREM. New Empire, 31 March 1961.

A blind folk singer loses his young wife to the more glamorous Vaishnava singer visiting the village, both the men played by playwright-actor Bijan Bhattacharya. Shattered by the experience, he regains his spirit once he is able to compose a new song for the Communist rally a few days ahead, a song of commitment to ‘build a new Bengal with dead and dried up bones.’


A cleverly structured play, *Mareech Sambad* looks at the changing forms of exploitation through space and time, starting with the legend of Mareech from the Ramayana, up to USA’s Vietnam intervention and even beyond.

**Mrityusangbad.** PROD. Nakshatra. PLAY. Mohit Chattopadhyay. DIR. Shyamal Ghosh. PREM. Rangmahal, 25 September 1965.

A young man who has fled home and claims to have killed his father, lives in a wild hallucinatory world of his own, finds love and understanding from the daughter of a family until his father coaxes him to return with him to start work on a school that was their dream project.

**Nabanna.** PROD. Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). PLAY. and DIR. Bijan Bhattacharya. PREM. Srirangam 24 October 1944.

*Nabanna* (wrt. 1944), centres on the futile migration of the famine-stricken rural
Night's Sunlight
Ketaki Kushari Dyson’s play Night’s Sunlight was performed extensively in and across Great Britain during the last months of 2000. Originally Rater Rode, the Bengali play was translated by the author herself (under the sponsorship of the British Centre for Literary Translation) so as to bring such issues to a wider audience. The original was first performed by Sangbarta, Calcutta, and directed by Sunil Das in the Manchester City of Drama 1994, with a simultaneous English interpretation. It was subsequently performed in Birmingham, Oxford, and London. In 1997 it was presented in Calcutta and Santiniketan.

The current production of Night’s Sunlight by Tidal Wave Theatre under the directorship of Gail Rossier premiered on 21 September 2000 as part of the Writing Diasporas Conference hosted by the University of Wales, Swansea. This was followed by a performance and workshop tour through various university and college venues at London, Norwich, Cambridge, Reading, Bristol, and Oxford where it was well received.

Described as a ‘play which raises key issues about the diaspora experience, in a way that has direct relevance for other cultural traditions’ by the poet Rosaleen Croghan, Night’s Sunlight is a play specifically about expatriate Bengalis. Set in a London living room on a December afternoon against the backdrop of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, the play features five characters—Obhi, a Calcutta professor on his way to America to read a paper; his hostess for the evening, Deya; Bibi, a family friend; Deya’s daughter, Shikha and her half-German boyfriend, Rudy. The interaction of this group of people generates passionate discourses on a diversity of issues—from gender and the environment to language, politics, identity, diaspora, and the cosmos. One small living-room becomes a miniature of the human world.

[The play, published by Virgilio Libro in 2000 is now available at Seagull Bookstore, 31 A S. P. Mukherjee Road, Calcutta 700 025]

25 years of Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal
It was almost like watching the best in contrapuntal compositions being played out under the baton of a maestro. Ratan Thiyam, the leading spirit behind Chorus Repertory Theatre and his team of committed theatre workers organized a number of programmes at the Chorus Prefecture, Shamsang Uku, Imphal, to mark their silver jubilee. The main focus of the celebrations was the inauguration of a new playhouse ‘The Shrine’, designed by Thiyam and literally built brick by brick by all the CRT members and apprentices who did extensive workshops with architects, masons, carpenters, using indigenous building materials. It is only natural that the theatre group takes immense pride in their new ‘home’.

On 11 April 2001, the new playhouse was inaugurated by the Governor of Manipur, Shri Ved Marwah, with Dr. R. V. Vaidyanatha Ayyar, Secretary, Tourism and Culture, Government of India presiding over the function. Ram Gopal Bajaj and Vijaya Mehta were guests of honour. A performance of Uttarpriyadarshi followed the inauguration.

The National Colloquium on Theatre Economics was held under the auspices of
Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal on 12 April 2001, focused on problems in three different areas: i) survival and continuity of active/achiever theatre groups; ii) theatre training; iii) support for individual theatre workers. The first problem discussed was how government funding, though often the main source of sustenance for achiever/active theatre groups in the country, never proves adequate to sustain their basic requirements. What was needed more urgently was a certain economic support for theatre workers that would allow them to concentrate on theatre. The participants at the colloquium felt that a more critically discriminatory and rational support system would be able to monitor and ensure that really serious and artistically worthwhile initiatives are supported. The participants also discussed the importance of setting up theatre complexes with performance and rehearsal spaces in all theatre cities of India. Concern was expressed over the plight of theatre workers who were past their creative life and the possibility of starting insurance schemes with government inputs in the form of premiums, was discussed.

Kalashray anniversary

As part of Kalashray’s anniversary celebrations, a number of programmes were held in Mumbai and Pune between 24 and 30 May 2001. A performance of *Wada Bhavani Aaicha* (Manasi Kanekar’s Marathi adaptation of Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*), directed by Jayadev Hattangady at Bharat Natya Mandir, Pune, on 24 May 2001, started off the week-long celebrations. The renowned folklorist and singer Shahir Vithal Umap presented a ‘Bahubhashi’ Guldasta at the Vishveshvarayya Auditorium, Karnatak Sangh, Mahim, Mumbai on 28 May 2001. Kalashray also presented their acclaimed production of *Aparajita* in Hindi and Marathi (both designed and directed by Jayadev Hattangady), with Rohini Hattangady performing solo. This one-actor in Bengali had been written by Nitish Sen, and immortalized by Tripti Mitra in the early seventies. Performances were also held at the Prithvi Theatre and the NCPA Experimental Theatre, Mumbai.

Sahityakee

Rangakarmee has drawn up a unique programme of introducing playwrights to theatre lovers and theatre scholars. Playwrights will be invited to read a play of their choice before a select audience, who will join in a question-answer session after the reading.

On 16 July 2001, the programme, ‘Sahityakee’ commenced with Swadesh Deepak, reading from his new play *Sabse Udas Kavita*, a play written after a long hiatus. An academic, and a writer of fiction and plays, teaching English at the post graduate level for over twenty two years in Ambala, Swadesh Deepak is best known for his *Court Martial*, a play critiquing the façade of faceless discipline that characterizes the military order—a discipline that nurtures the crudest kind of patriarchy, egotism, caste prejudice and vulgar sexism. The playwright was felicitated after a performance of the play on 15 July 2001.

The second session of Sahityakee had Shanta Gokhale, the noted art and theatre critic, reading from the English translation of her play *Avinash*. The play had been directed by Satyadev Dubey in Marathi in 1988, and subsequently in Hindi by Sunil Shanbag in 1990. Revolving around the central character, a depressive alcoholic, who never appears, the play unfolds the small tensions and conflicts in a middle class family who grapple with the pain of existence in the effort of coming to terms with life, with the severely taut structure of the play heightening the emotional and physical claustrophobia.

In an interesting exchange with the audience after the reading, the playwright shared some of her real life experiences that went into the making of *Avinash*, (and how those experiences haunt her still), the problematics of dealing with such a situation, the overwhelming frustration and pain that the family members suffer in the process. In her introduction to her English translation of the play [Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1994] she
wrote, ‘Avinash . . . has been with me for several years in various forms. I cannot say precisely who or what inspired the theme. But I do know that innumerable experiences have found their voices in it . . .’

When Mohit Chattopadhyay—poet, playwright, adaptor, translator—came on the theatre scene in the sixties with plays written in a highly original dramatic idiom, theatre in Calcutta experienced a new kind of challenge. Here was a playwright whose creative insight and mastery of language broke through and beyond realism to create a universe that was tangible, yet defamiliarized with situations hitherto unexplored in theatre. It was this new theatre language that captivated Shyamal Ghosh, actor-director and a friend of the playwright who had just formed a new theatre group, Nakshatra. He found a new play his friend had written—Mrityusangbad. It was the first Mohit Chattopadhyay play to be staged in September 1965.

Rangakarmee invited Mohit Chattopadhyay to read from his new unpublished play Moner Katha in the third session of Sahityakee on 11 September 2001. The play explores the tortured psyche of a man who has accidentally run over and killed his friend and comes to realize that he is unable to control his right hand which behaves in a terrifying way, making it impossible for him to lead a normal life. From the opening scene of the play to the denouement, the incidents follow rapidly, one after another, building up to a tense emotional crisis. The sheer power of the dramatist’s art came across with such unpretentious ease that one could easily identify ‘the new theatre language’ of his masterpieces like Mrityusangbad, Chandralokey Agnikanda, Mahakalir Bachcha and Rajrakta.

Rang Roop’s new project

Rang Roop, a theatre group that began in 1969, and produced several significant plays over the years, has now taken on a project of theatre by young people. Seema Mukhopadhyay, actress-playwright-director, Rang Roop, has been working with children from a creche for domestic helpers. She is also working with students of Lady Brabourne College. In a ‘meet the press’ session with representatives of the media, on 21 September 2001, Seema Mukhopadhyay outlined the rationale behind this project: ‘In doing the kind of theatre that has become the staple of proscenium theatre over these years, I was becoming painfully aware of a stale familiarity creeping into my work. I was losing the child in myself—the child who would break away, question, even play truant. I wanted to do something totally fresh, new, full of the vibrancy of childhood and youth. I consider myself fortunate in being able to work with these immensely talented little children and young boys and girls, who are growing in up in not too conducive environs. I am grateful to them for having gifted me my lost childhood.’

The children, ranging from four-year-olds to teenagers, sang, danced and acted out with rare felicity the tale of ‘The Happy Prince’ by Oscar Wilde, adapted by the director as Sukhi Rajputtur. Bholanather Darbar, another play written and directed by Seema Mukhopadhyay, is the story of an allegorical trial at the court of Shiva, revealing the pressures that drive a young girl to suicide and critiques the state of education and general loss of values in the contemporary world. This play is being performed by the students of Lady Brabourne College.

The group is presenting the two plays from their ‘theatre for young people’ project, and another play Shunya Pat, which premieres on that day, for their thirty-third anniversary celebrations on 2 October 2001.
New Releases from Seagull Books

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Chitrita Banerji grew up in Calcutta and now lives in Cambridge, Mass. She is the author of Life and Food in Bengal (London, 1991) and Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals (London, 1997). She contributes regularly to a number of periodicals worldwide, and has presented papers and received awards at the prestigious Oxford Food Symposium.

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Jael Silliman
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A cultural document shaped through personal exploration from the lives of four generations of Baghdadi Jewish women in Calcutta, India. The author discovers through the lives of her fore-mothers, how they ‘dwelled in travelling’, creating a moving geography of Baghdadi Jewish culture, negotiating multiple identities, including that of emergent Indian nationalism, and how they perceive and shape their identity and gender in response to changing cultural political contexts. This book also traces the trajectory of Jewish presence in one of the most hospitable cities of the diaspora. These rich family portraits convey a sense of the singular roles that women played in building and sustaining a complex diaspora in what Silliman calls ‘Jewish Asia’.

Jael Silliman, born into the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta. Graduating from the Harvard University, she went on to receive her doctoral degree in International Education at Columbia University. She is currently Assistant Professor in the Women’s Studies department at the University of Iowa.
The celebrated Tamil play *Thaneer Thaneer* (1979) which was made into an award-winning film of the same name, explores contemporary issues like the growing disillusionment of the people with the country’s development policies, showing how they serve the interests of an urban elite.

Komal Swaminathan was an eminent Tamil playwright who was also a filmmaker and an editor.

S. Shankar teaches English at Rutgers University, New York.