

CHAPTER 4

Women's Issues Staged : A Critical Survey of the Contemporary Dramatic Productions of the Group Theatres of West Bengal Envisioning the Women Issues.

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Commentators note that, feminist theatre, as a category has emerged in India in recent times with distinctive formal and informal features and there has been a sincere effort on the part of the commentators to built the chronicles of feminist theatre in India while experts of performance studies has made attempts to built theories on feminist theatre with all its local intellectual capacities. Feminist theatre as a conscious enterprise envision the locus or stand of woman as individual or a group in relationship and autonomy, sexuality and rejection to gender stereotype, attainments and depression, inner self and the worldview and many more.

By nature, feminist theatre in India do not always indulge into a unidirectional story-telling that comprises exposition-conflict-resolution, rater it is focused on the recognition of biases of many orientations like social, religious, political, cultural, and injustice thereof. Regards to conclusion, feminist theatre has often led to open-ended inferences. The specialty of the aesthetic treatment of feminist theatre in India is its narration of lived experiences, in contrast to an imagined cases; flexible reach between the past and the present to substantiate the narration, the principal understanding being the position of the women has not changed much since past till date in realm and reality. One major aspect of feminist theatre in India is the assertion through symbolic representation of protagonist ego in varying capacity, women as self or women as community. The marked difference between the Western version of feminist theatre with that of Indian is found here in the core

symbolism. The Indian version has moved from the Western prejudice of 'Women and the others' to have cultivated 'Women amongst the others', from isolate and highlight approach to focus and highlight approach. Furthermore while Western feminist theatre emphasizes that their aesthetic women is made of her free body and free mind, the Indian feminist theatre has hailed the free spirit of womanhood.

Feminist theatre or in a more broader sense theatre on the issues of women in West Bengal in last three decades has been a small but significant part of the feminist discourse in the country that needs documentation and appraisal. The present study across the 19 districts of West Bengal and through 932 Group Theatres producing a huge number of dramatic productions during the rule of Left Front Government in the state since 1977 up to 2007, of which a sizable portion was dedicated to highlight the women's issues affirm the claim that there has been a slow yet steady gender-sensitization amongst the Group Theatres who has played pivotal role in socio-cultural and to a great extent political movements in West Bengal since their origin.

While seen from a holistic point of view, one major ground of lack of pace in the process of gender-sensitization among the Group Theatres was the traditional deprivation towards women to participate in the public performances in theatre. The nineteenth century cultural history of Bengal reveals the deprivation of the women folk as actress in the dramatic productions in the contemporary Bengali theaters. Male actors used to appear in the roles of the heroines in disguise. Noted maestros like Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Amritlal Basu, Amritlal Mukherjee Mahendralal Basu, Tinkori Mukherjee, and Kshetra Mohan Ganguly played the role of the leading lady characters in many 'Pala's (drama productions) like *Sadhabaar Ekaadashi*, *Neel Darpan*, *Jaamaai Baarik* etc. The appointment of the female actress was disregarded by both the petty-bourgeoisie popularly known as the 'Babu's, and the stalwarts of nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance. Many of the native News Papers vehemently opposed a case for women to enter the 'stage'.

Michael Madhusudan Dutta, was the first protagonist to have introduced three women, named as Golaapbala, Elokeshi and Jagattarini, in three characters of his

drama 'Sharmistha' produced on 16th august, 1873 at Bengal Theatre. It would have been hardly any possibility if the owners of the Hall did not care for the 'profit' motive. However, all these actresses were prostitutes of local brothels. And of course, Michael Madhusudan had to face enormous criticisms, social boycott, gossips, and humiliation for that. The history of Bengali theater is as old as 210 years considering *The Disguise* by Gerrassim Stepanovich Lebediyeff at Mallick's residence at Bagbajar in 1795 as the pioneering effort, yet the participation of the women on the stages was as late as 1873.

The notable point is, that although the women education was in vogue in those days, ladies were joining the medical studies, riding horses with their husbands at the Garer Maath field, meeting the Governor at supper on invitation along with the spouse, editing literary magazines, writing in contemporary creative journals, yet they were kept at a strange distance from the proscenium. The reason behind is obviously the age old patriarchy that allows no way for such inception that a girl from a 'Vadralok' (Gentleman) family would join the carrier of a theater actress crossing the limits of the typical nineteenth century Bengali family values. [Banerjee, Sumanta; *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*; Seagull Books; Calcutta; 1989.]

It was Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who acknowledged the contributions of women in Bengali theaters for the first time as he blessed Binodini Dasi, the noted actress of the age, and called her "Choitanyadayini"(donor of the senses). He also encouraged Girish Ghosh to bring more numbers of women to theater for their emancipation. However his wishes took long time to have realized. Due to the initiatives of Girish Chandra Ghosh many women joined the career of actresses in his Great National Theatre by the last few decades of the 19th Century. Many of them had marvelous spirit and talent as well they left noteworthy contributions to modern Bengali theater. The dedications and offerings of these women are great debts to the present Bengali Theater, and should be acknowledged with due respect.

4.2. GROUP THEATRE PRODUCTIONS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES DURING LAST THREE DECADES.

During period under study, i.e. the rule of Left Front Government in the state since 1977 up to 2007, three decades at the most, there has been considerable growth of participation of women in the mainstream Group Theatre, although not as an universal phenomenon all over the state, yet this has broaden the scope and framed a perceived factor behind the number of theatre productions on women's issues to be increased. The study was initiated to understand whether the genuine spirit of feminist theatre has developed in the mean time in the state within the rich tradition of protest theatre or in visualizing the women's issue through theatre the Group Theatres maintained its left political bias to a large extent, and in either cases how far the participation of women in numbers at the decision making body of Group Theatres is a fundamental factor.

The primary investigation carried out through 19 districts (Districts like Alipurduar, Jhargram, Kalimpong was not created and the district of Burdwan was not bifurcated by 2008 as of today) in West Bengal to collect information from 932 numbers of Group Theatre highly active, moderately or occasionally active or now stagnant in their creative endeavor has revealed certain interesting tendencies about their attitude in conceiving the women's issues. I would, then, categories 428 theatrical productions produced by various Group Theatres on women's issues during the last three decades, so far the collected information substantiates, in five broad categories :

A. Reinterpretation of mythology as subverting narratives as in *Nathaboti Anathbot* (1983) a monologue of Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas from Mahabharata, *Madhabi* (2006) whom her husband, Galob sold to many Kings to earn his offerings for his Guru, *Shudrayan* (1999) depicting the story of Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana from Ramayana, *Kotha Amrita Saman* (2005) based on the repentance of wives of non-Ariyan heroes who lost their lives in the battlefield of Kurukshetra in either sides, *Shuk* (2007) the story of the womanizer scholar who have cheated many

Apsaras at Amaravati by his cleverly arguments and finally come to be defeated by a milk woman, *Manasa Mangal* (1987) based on the ominous grandeur of the serpent goddess and her tussle with the elite male supremacy reflected through Chand Saudagar, *Tapasyi O Tarangini* (1981) based on the sideline story of Ramayana where a woman searches her true self, *Shikhandini* (1984) is the story of the eunuch prince of Mahabharata who helped Arjuna to kill Bhishma. All these dramatic productions are the reinterpretation of mythology through subverting narratives. These productions contrasts the women from the mythology with the contemporary modern female sufferings. There the mythological woman are not submissive wife, lover, sister, or mother, but a vocal and questioning woman who vows to rewrite her story the next time around.

B. Narratives of deprivation of women as community as shown in *Rudali* (1992) is the story of age old exploitation over a group of women who uses to professionally mourn at the death of wealthy persons in Rajasthan, *Nachni* (2006) is based on the lives and endless miseries of the poor Jhumur dancer and singers of Purulia in West Bengal, *Biye Gauni Kadnon Chapa* (2007) is based on the pains and sufferings of Muslim women who sing traditional ritual songs during marriages, *Banzara* (1988) depicts the hard struggle for existence of the women from the nomadic community who are often trapped to flesh business, *Haraye Khnuji* (2002) is the story of the ill-fated women who breaks stone into pebbles by riverside for construction business, *Bedeni* (1984) was built up on the depiction of exploitation of multi-national medicine companies over the risky earnings of the women snake-charmers. These production highlights the shared stories of abuse, assault and agency of a group of women focusing on their mass abduction, rape and mutilation that took place during their attempts to earn bread.

C. Women as the victim of social and religious orthodoxy as exposed in *Sati* (1987) is a story based on the continual oppression of a woman in her marital home and the jeopardy of double standards of her so called progressive life partner, *Debi Garjan* (1979) based on a true story of a woman been pronounced to be a goddess with

super natural power whose husband deny to live together with her out of fear and devotion and she was compelled to sacrifice her life in high priest rituals being caged in a closed temple, *Alakanandar Putra Kanya* (1989) story of a middle-aged heroine who goes on adopting orphans bearing the burden of all the mishaps and problems that accost her, *Darpane Sharatshashi* (1992) the story of subjugation of a female performer of 19th century Bengal, *Jogajog* (1990) based on the novel by Rabindranath Tagore where Kumu is harshly treated and mentally tortured by his elite husband to have died at last, *Jara Brishtite Bhijechhilo* (1997) narrative of an oppressive life of a middle aged woman who has been sexually harassed by in-laws within her family, *Je Jon Achhe Majhkhane* (1995) story of a women who has broken the conventional boundaries of society herself yet could not accept the inter-caste marriage by her son, *Chhayabrita* (2000) states the condition of a rape victim after she return to her well educated marital home from hospital, *Merry Farrar* (1981) states the struggle and of a lady advocate against the state power who fights in the court on behalf of the victims of homicide.

D. Bio-Drama of an eminent women exhibiting her struggle within the system as in *Apurba Golap* (1987) based on the life of late 19th century Golap Sundari Dasi, *Kamalekamini* (1978) based on the life and creative journey of actress Ketaki Dutta, *Jaan-E-Kolkatta* (1999) based on the life of Gawaharjaan, the famous Hindusthani classical vocalist, *Noti Binodini* (1995) the bio-drama based on the actress's life, *Kamala* (1989) based on the life and career of freedom fighter Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, *Rani Kadombini* (2007) based on the life of Kadombini Ganguly, the first Bengali lady doctor, *Tumi Daak Diyechho Kon Sakale* (2007) based on the real life and dramatic career of Smt. Keya Chakraborty, one of the foremost actresses of Group Theatre in the 1960s and 70s etc.

E. The victorious women in fiction as shown in *Himmat Mai* (1998) the adaption of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage", *Maa*(1985) based on the novel by Russian writer Maxim Gorkey, *Shanu Roy Chowdhury* (1998) story of a middle class women's venture to liberate herself from family bindings, *Hypatia* (2007) is based on the life

and struggle of ancient Greek lady mathematician who stood against Christian orthodoxy, *Raktakarabi* (1978) a Rabindranath Tagore allegorical drama illustrating a woman's fight against the mechanical system of production, *Bilasibala* (2007), *Karnabati* (1996) based on a Rajasthani folktale of a woman's search for an ideal life partner becomes frustrating unless she decides to remain single mother of the child she conceived, *Madhab Malanchi Kainya* (1988) a folktale based on the Maymonsingha Giteekaa whereby a prince saves the life of her beloved prince.

Group Theatre productions centered around the women's issues has provided a space for femme voices – whether for self-exploration or for criticism.

Span Of years	A. Reinterpretation of mythology as subverting narratives	B. Narratives of deprivation of women as community	C. Women as the victim of social and religious orthodoxy	D. Bio-Drama of an eminent women	E. The victorious women in fiction	Total
1977-1982	14	7	10	1	9	41
1983-1988	21	15	14	6	18	74
1989-1994	28	14	20	7	19	88
1995-2000	29	12	27	9	25	102
2001-2006	24	16	27	12	20	99
2007-2008	8	2	6	3	5	24
1977-2008					428	

Table :: 3 Types of Group Theatre productions based on women's issues

As the distribution in Table :: 3 shows, there has been a steady and considerable growth in number of dramatic performances by Group Theatres over last three decades based on women's issues. It also indicates that Group Theatres has shown a lob-sided balance to show interests in the illustration and counter-interpretations of socio-religious customs as the predicaments of emancipation of women, and of

course the proverbial patriarchy, rather than exhibiting the champion grounds on which real life or fictitious woman characters have overcome the hurdles and burdens while building productions on women's issues. One reason behind such point of view is that "majority of the Group Theatres consider the women issues as a part of the greater question of social inequalities and deprivation of the larger section by a handful. They are reluctant to judge gender inequality being something more than the class inequality. They find it comfortable to draw an inference, that once the social revolution is ensured and completed, all sorts of such issues of inequality or deprivation shall wither away overnight. So it is better to encourage women to fight against the system as a whole, not the patriarchy which is worst, yet only a part of the exploitative system" opines Rudra Prasad Sengupta. [*Interview with Rudra Prasad Sengupta, Director, Nandikar*, by me; 3rd January, 2007 at Dinabandhu Mancha VIP Guest Room]

Another aspect of the study shows variations of conclusions the productions drew to leave a message for the audience. Evidently the Group Theatres remain keen to send messages to the commons through the dramatic productions as they believe theatre as an instrument of propagation. And while concluding the artistic representation of the message they intend to percolate to their audience they expose their stance or takes on the issue. It has been a longstanding debate in the creative arena of Group Theatre whether 'a theatre is the director's game' or it is predominantly a community affair that culminates cross-cutting opinions. There may not be any common position universal to range of Group Theatres in regards to this question, yet the origin and development of the Group Theatres since generations show that they remain persona-centric, one theatre intellectual being at the nucleus and others gathered to form the group to produce theatre, sometimes by split from a large group. What are the influential dynamics of selection of scripts and building the conclusion of Group Theatre productions can be a separate and interesting field of research altogether, but for now I would again categorise the concluding scenario of the 428 dramatic productions based on women's issues under study into four major approaches :

1. The arrogant protagonist or the victim takes her revenge and inspire as shown in productions like *Fera* (1985) based on Freidrich Durrrenmatt's story where a rich women return to her ancestral village instigate the villagers to kill her ex-lover who betrays her when she is pregnant and as a result she is forced into the dark world of prostitution, *Medea* (1983) Medea takes vengeance on Jason, her husband who leaves her for a Greek princess of Corinth, by killing Jason's new wife as well as her own children, after which she escapes to Athens to start a new life, *Muchi Bou Chamatkarini* (1999) a drama by Federico Garcia Lorca is concluded as the shoemaker's loyal wife treats cleverly and punishably the opportunist mayor and young businessman who use to swoop in as soon as the shoemaker leaved his house trying to woo her, *Alibaba Pnachali* (1978) was based on an Arabic folktale where a housemaid trapped a gang of robbers and chastised them who came to loot her master's wealth, *My Story, Our Story* (1992) concludes with a strong protest from the central woman over the domestic violence of whom she remained a victim and she seek the intervention of administration to get the perverts arrested.

2. The protagonist or the victim woman dies to raise sympathy as envisioned in *Shashti* (1987) based on Rabindranath's story where the innocent housewife silently accept the punishment of death for the crime committed by her brother-in-law, *Aguner Pakhi* (1984) where Joan of Arc the French freedom fighter was burnt alive by the English and Burgundian rulers, *Ehudi Stree O Guptachar* (1983) based on Bertolt Brecht's 'Jewish Wife' where the Jewish lady leaves her home out of fear of being lynched by the Storm Police of Hitler and her non-Jewish husband do not stop her out of similar fear and she feels more helpless while escaping, *Tara Tin Bon* (1998) based on Anton Chekhov's drama where full of ambition, the youngest sister wants to have a real purpose – to work, to give back, the middle sister stuck in what has become a loveless marriage, wants to feel the electric rush of passion once more, while the eldest, gives and gives until there is almost nothing left, but all of them meets ill fate to be moved from their ancestral shelter, *Nij Bhumikay* (1998) concludes with the death of an actress in the shooting spot being filmed on her real life.

3. Documentary form of drama concluded like 'and the saga continue'... as shown in *Kamala* (1984) by Vijay Tendulkar where the theme exposes flesh trade of buying and selling of tribal women, it also pinpoints how a male dominated society treats women under patriarchal hegemony, *Nun Cha* (1980) depicted the inhuman treatment and exploitation of tea garden women workers and the hypocrisy of the trade union leaders, *Antardahan* (2002) revealed that the victims of acid attack has no place to go as the administration, neighborhood, family turns their face after few days, *Hate Hate Aday* (2000) based on Rabindranath's 'Dena Paona' where the central woman dies of malnutrition after facing harassment from the in-laws for dowry and the family plans for the re-marriage of their son in spot payment of dowry, *Care Kori Na* (1993) is focused on the continuing problems of an over-protective single mother.

4. She frees herself from all bondages and walk alone as exhibited in *Jatodur Roddur* (2004) where a young maid leaves her marriage with an old village clown and her extra-marital wealthy lover as well and runs away when she felt both of them were egger for physical pleasure and nothing more from her, *Bodnam* (1977) based on Rabindranath Tagore's short story where the wife of a police inspector helps a revolutionary freedom fighter to escape every time from the trap of police to catch him and ultimately confess to her husband that she loved her native land more than her family duties, *Mukti* (2000) story of a aged widow who sets her journey alone crossing all the limits of relationship to hold the hand of the man who once fallen in love with her, *Putul Khela* (1977) and *Guriya Ghar* (1978) both based on Henrik Ibsen's drama where the leading character ultimately leaves her keys and wedding ring leaves the house slamming the door behind freeing herself from the family where she lacked reasonable opportunities for self-fulfillment in a male dominated world, *Ros* (1993) based on Narendranath Mitra's story where a poor village popular jaggery-maker woman ultimately leaves her husband who took the profit of selling the jaggery and married another woman for her looks.

5. She convinces others to reform the system all together as dramatized in *Malo Parar Maa* (1983) based on the true incident of massacre at Malo Para in Malda

district where Fourteen people were butchered in clashes between the Congress and the CPM in 1983 to claim control over the area and the old lady concludes in a political campaign to defeat Congress led hooliganism in the state, *Mrichchhakatik* (1979) where a courtesan of great wealth and reputation intervenes in time to save her lover from execution and his wife from throwing herself onto the funeral pyre and together the three declare themselves a family, *Hajar Churashir Maa* (1985) based on Mahasweta Devi's novel where the story starts with a middle-aged lady on the eve of her son's death anniversary who was brutally killed by the state because of his ideology of advocating the brutal killing of class enemies and the lady meets her son's close accomplice and tries to justify his actions and his revolutionary mentalities, *Beti Aayee* (1996) exposed the genuine social concerns over the birth, life and death of a girl in our country and deliberately raise questions to the audience to move the barriers of women's freedom forever, *Samatal* (1999) concluded by the domestic helps group together to protest a rape of a six years old daughter of one of their colleague and demanded for their security at the place of their job.

The conclusions the theatrical productions on women's issues draw to communicate with the audience is crucial as they have different political approach towards the agenda. While the first kind of conclusions, as suggested, is radical in character it propagates a face to face confrontation of womanhood with the patriarchy or to that extent the society as a whole. The second set of conclusion is rather submissive and realist at the same time as they exhibit the actual helplessness of women before the age-old exploitation over them, the third kind of suggested conclusion is comparatively politically neutral and descriptive in nature, the fourth type of conclusion is individualistic and sometimes ambiguous as they resort to no definite position regarding the future of such conclusions, the fifth trend of conclusion as observed is reformist in attitude and seeks a thorough and qualitative change in the condition that may require mass awareness and participation irrespective of gender.

There is no doubt in the fact that there can be an debate of authority over the conclusions of a theatrical production between the playwrights and the directors, in

case they are not the same person, that whose outlook may become predominant in molding the conclusion on the desired track. While the playwrights claim the authority of originality, directors may take the liberty of improvisations that make the narrative communicable to contemporary realities. This has happened much in cases of adapted, translated, and edited scripts where the directors have imposed certain interpretations beyond the actual intention of the authors being otherwise motivated. One may recollect the fate of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House", much acclaimed a production in West Bengal too, where Ibsen was mandated to develop an alternative ending for the German premiere. In the changed conclusion, the leading character is led to her children after having argued with her husband. Seeing them, she crumples, and the curtain is brought down. Ibsen later described this finale a tarnish to the original play and submitted it as a "barbaric outrage".

Span Of years	1. The arrogant protagonist or the victim takes her revenge and inspire	2. The protagonist or the victim woman dies to raise sympathy	3. Documentary form of drama concluded like 'and the saga continue'...	4. She frees herself from all bondages and walk alone	5. She convinces others to reform the system all together	Total
1977-1982	13	9	5	2	12	41
1983-1988	20	15	13	12	24	74
1989-1994	21	11	15	18	23	88
1995-2000	19	8	11	31	33	102
2001-2006	21	9	14	29	26	99
2007-2008	3	4	5	6	6	24
1977-2008					428	

Table :: 4 Variations of conclusions of the Group Theatre productions on women's issues.

The study shows an interesting development over the years in sensitizing the women's issues by Group Theater through their dramatic productions. There has been a gradual inclined shift towards both radical and individualistic conclusions of the production, while the reformist approach to conclusions are moderately

fluctuating as a trend over the period of study. On the contrast, the realist conclusions are decreasing in appearance. These, perhaps, marks the influence of certain political bias or could have been due to increasing participation of women in theatre who want to speak of their own and they affirm either of these two conclusions as best message to be communicated by their creative efforts. As a matter of fact, during half of the study period, i.e., last one and half decades to be specific between 1995 and 2007, growing numbers of women's theatre groups where the director, actors, managers are female other than the technical hands, has increased in number and they have regularly contributed to the mainstream of Group Theatre productions to a sizable extent.

Another prominent trend that comes to surface is the enhancement of unbiased descriptive conclusions whereby the audience is set free to react and are not channelized towards certain definite end. This type of conclusion often resort in raising social questions, sometimes bold enough to accuse the audience itself for their silence. This trend of conclusion has significantly increased as shown in the Table : 4. Although such tendencies in drawing conclusions marks no distinct polarity in regards to gender inequality, crime against women, or emancipation of the women as such and rather leads to some confused state of answer either vague or hasty, this may relate to the overall shortfall of the academic discourses on feminism in India which is yet to built any genuine alternative proposition as against patriarchy they criticize.

Theatre as a premise of intellectual activity has been advanced by the literary works and socio-political cross-currents, yet the way a playwright design a plot on women's issue or the way it is concluded vis-a-vis the way a director improvise the same is a crucial input. Most of the produced dramatic presentations surveyed and studied herein, detailed in **APPENDIX - 2**, are developed by male playwrights and directors who has a non-participatory observation of the entire issue, and thus resorts to such conclusions often molded by ego, bias, poor sightedness etc. What is then required is broader opportunities for women of heterogeneous origin and

assorted capacities to join theatre as activists to speak of their own, perform of their own, and conclude of their own.

A further distribution of the literary sources of the dramatic productions under review indicates the intention of the Group Theatre to acquire or develop views to dramatize and perform on women's issue.

Span Of years	1. Original Manuscripts, developed on demand (Unpublished)	2. Adaptation of published foreign literary sources	3. Published Play / Scripts developed on published stories of Indian authors / reports of news media	4. Group Specific Manuscripts, developed by a member within group	Total
1977-1982	7	18	9	7	41
1983-1988	17	23	24	10	74
1989-1994	26	20	29	13	88
1995-2000	16	28	37	21	102
2001-2006	11	26	47	15	99
2007-2008	9	4	6	5	24
1977-2008				428	

Table :: 5 Variations of sources of the Group Theatre productions on women's issues.

While unpublished manuscripts are lucid and easily editable to administer while bringing them from page to stage, by means of adaptation of published foreign scripts, the director has the moderately flexible possibilities to improvise and mould the conclusion to make it more relevant to contemporary realities therefore such scripts are chosen keeping the point in mind that 'what is to be shown and how is to be shown'. Any script that has been developed after a story from an author or a news from the news medium opens minimum opportunity for the playwright and the director to delve into as either the audience is aware of the incident or has gone through the story earlier and has developed an impression of his own regarding the content and neither the playwright nor the director would advent a much unfamiliar turn in the story, where as Group specific scripts are rigid in nature and close-ended.

This kind of scripts are by and large motivated towards a definite conclusion based on definite stance on social issues.

Table :: 5 exposes a assorted picture of sources of scripts based on women's issues that has been produced on stage by Group Theatres during the period of study. Since the inception of modern Bengali drama at some point of the colonial rule, adaptation of foreign scripts or their trans-creation was in fashion, and the legacy continued until recent years although the motive has changed from mere entertainment to socio-political commitments. Therefore adaptation of published foreign script of Sophocles, Henrik Ibsen, Albert Camus, Bertolt Brecht, Dario Fo, Federico Garcia Lorca, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Anton Chekov and many others are in vogue. Down the line, this tradition has also influenced the selection of scripts on women's issues to those groups who considered that the experiences of women are universal in modern times. Dramatic productions based on the literary creations of Rabindranath Tagore, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar and alike or scripted over the short stories and news reports by local playwrights has grown during the period both in potentials and size. This ensures that the groups were looking forward to sensitize the women's issues through such a metaphor which is indigenous and could connect and communicate with the audience easily. However, the most fascinating was the fact that a band of eminent playwrights, although male in most cases, has contributed immensely towards building group specific or original scripts to highlight women's issues through theatre. This has paved the way to raise a strong independent outlook in modern Bengali theatre to visualize the gender questions, which was much required.

4.3. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AS ACTIVISTS IN THE GROUP THEATRES DURING LAST THREE DECADES.

There can be hardly any denial of the fact that the participation of women in Group Theatres in West Bengal has remarkably grown in quality and quantity during this period and the involvement of educated, open minded female actresses of different

age group, conscious of their rights and position, came to join the course of Group Theatre, initially from the families of male theatre enthusiasts or their neighborhood.

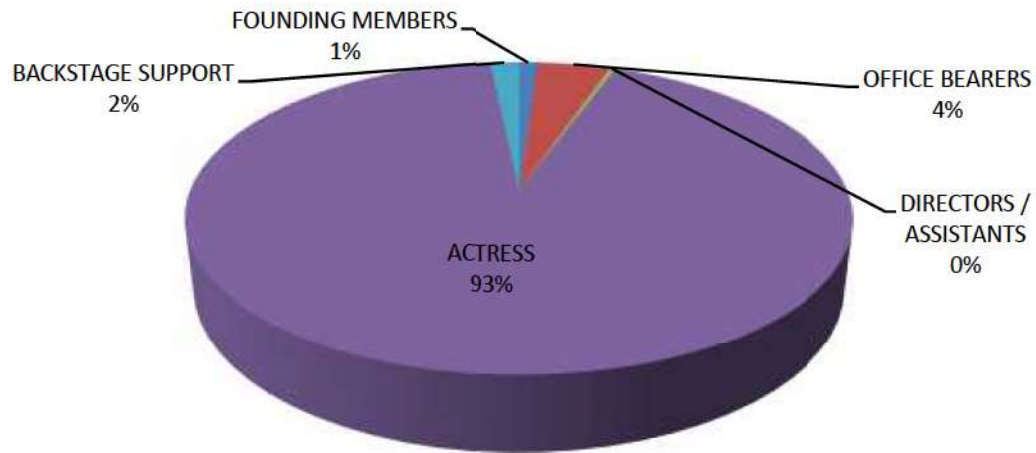
While willing to act upon stage they had to surpass three major interfaces, firstly, the social stigma that the show business is filthy and not suitable for the women of 'vadrlok' (elite) families, secondly, the rehearsal schedule of the Group Theatres were generally during the evening hours when the majority of the male members could manage after their usual office hours and was considered unsafe for the women to stay outside home after sunset, and thirdly, perhaps most importantly, the workload of the theatrical productions for the women besides their normal public and private work burdens. Yet they have shown the marvel of their spirit to have take part in numerous theatrical performances across the nation and abroad representing many Group Theaters during the period.

The present study conducted over 932 Group Theatres across 19 districts of the state reveals some interesting scenario regarding the participation of women in Group Theatres. Of the total population of 10542 female activists and performers associated to various Group Theatres in various capacities, the organizational distribution depicting their position in their respective Group Theatre is also crucial in regards to the decision making, such as selection of scripts, assuring basic facilities to female members in the group, management of day to day affairs within Group, creative support like managing the backstage businesses etc.

Founding Member of the Group	Office bearer in the Group	Director or Assistant Director of the Group	Associated only as Actress / Learner Actress	Associated only as Creative Support (Backstage)	Total
116	439	32	9780	175	10542

Table :: 6 *Position of women in the organizational structure of Group Theatres.*

The distribution reflects that the majority of women in Group Theatres are associated as actresses in regular basis or on hire. Only a small section of them become the part and mover of the organizational decision or selection of scripts to be produced. Thus they do not have the prerogatives to chose 'what is to be shown, how is to be shown' even if the theme of the production is based on women's issues.



DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE MEMBERS IN 932 GROUP THEATRES IN ORGANISATIONAL / CREATIVE POSITIONS

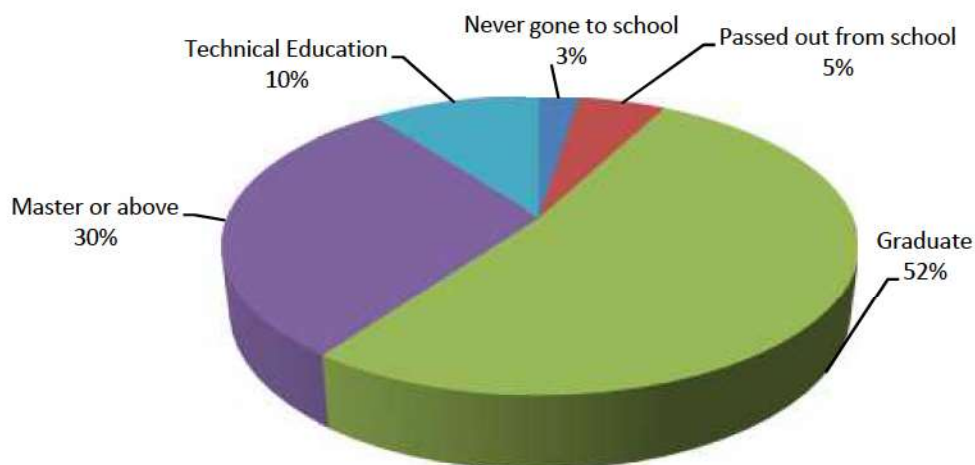
However, in those Group Theatres that are run by women exclusively, the reality is otherwise, yet they remain dependent on male playwrights to speak for them in most cases.

If educational qualification remains any standard yardstick of social consciousness amongst the women members of the Group Theatres following is the distribution of 10542 female performers of 932 Group Theatres throughout West Bengal. As it is often found that the Group Theatres cultivate an alternative methodology of imparting social perceptions through the dramatic productions, the understandings from a background of institutional education of an individual is incessantly challenged and restructured.

Never gone to school.	Passed out school.	Graduate	Master or above	Technical Education	Total
285	606	6031	2430	1190	10542

Table :: 7 Educational qualification of female members in the Group Theatres.

Female members of Group Theatres with higher academic qualification tends to be argumentative and wish to adhere to their personal or sub-group opinions in particular discussions on topics like selection of script on women's issues and drawing conclusion to them. On the other hand those who has not achieved higher academic qualifications mostly remain silent over such issues in discussions or in the



DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE MEMBERS IN 932 GROUP THEATRES AS PER ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

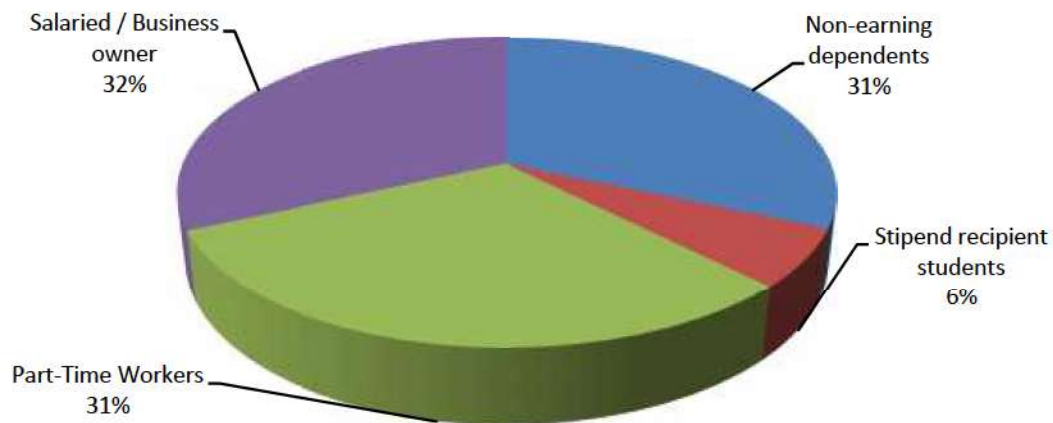
most cases their opinion hardly matters. However, it is hopeful to have found that more than half of the population of female activists in Group Theatres are at least graduates eligible enough to articulate their interest, bring any issue to surface and most importantly they are informed and can argue for their own.

In respect of the economic stability or earnings the female members of the Group Theatres in the state can be distributed in four major categories of non-earning dependents, earning (salaried/business owner), stipend recipient student and part-time earners. The last category is concentrated in big cities and developed urban areas where variety of services are available on term basis.

Non-earning dependents	Students receiving stipends	Part-Time workers	Salaried/Business owner	Total
3321	639	3230	3352	10542

Table :: 8 Educational qualification of female members in the Group Theatres.

Table :: 8 shows almost an equal share of economically independent women, partially independent and totally dependent women activists in Group Theatres with a small chunk of students earning from scholarships and stipends. A lady with stable earning feels free to speak of her own and often assumes her role in the arena



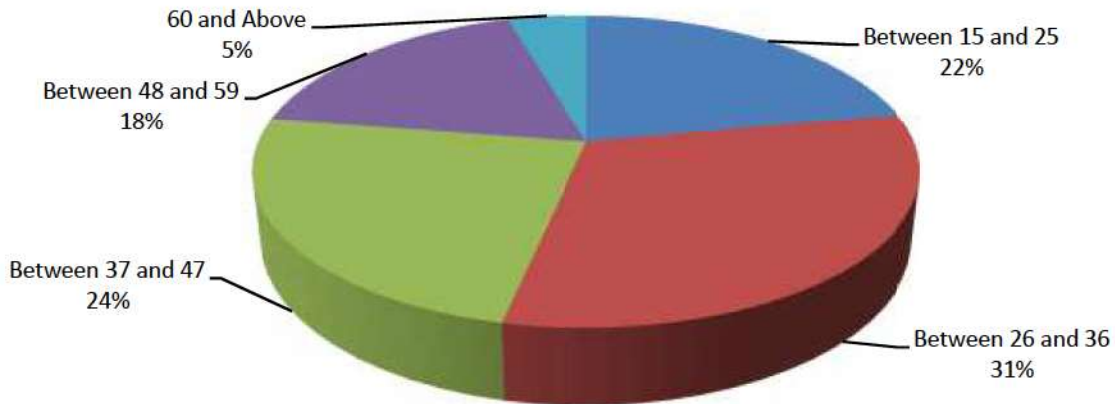
DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE MEMBERS IN 932 GROUP THEATRES IN INCOME GROUPS

of performing art to actualize and celebrate her 'self'. Theatre, then, becomes their part of identity that they cherish, or a step to future journey to the glamour world, if not an arena to raise her own voice through artistic activism in the realm of various social hindrances to her liberty. Therefore, she becomes vocal to bargain within the Group Theatre regarding what themes on women's issues would be genuine and what ultimate is to be projected amongst the audience. On the other hand, with few exceptions, an economically dependent women remains a passive worker in the Group Theatre as they find their appearance on stage through dramatic productions was beyond possibility, and considers her association with the Group was the best possible opportunity that unlimited her from her traditional family role. Therefore, she, herself, put a limit to her role while expressing views in the Group, whom she consider the emancipator of her women self, filled with great philanthropists and intellectuals male in various posts to give opinion on any issue, even on the women's issues. The better side of the picture is the majority of the female members in the Group Theatres are earning independents, whatever may be the earning, and are, therefore, subscribers of distinct values to vocalize.

In regards to age-group of the female members of Group Theatres following distribution has been developed based on the collected information -

Between 15 and 25	Between 26 and 36	Between 37 and 47	Between 48 and 59	60 and Above	Total
2319	3309	2540	1891	483	10542

Table :: 9 Age group of female members in the Group Theatres.



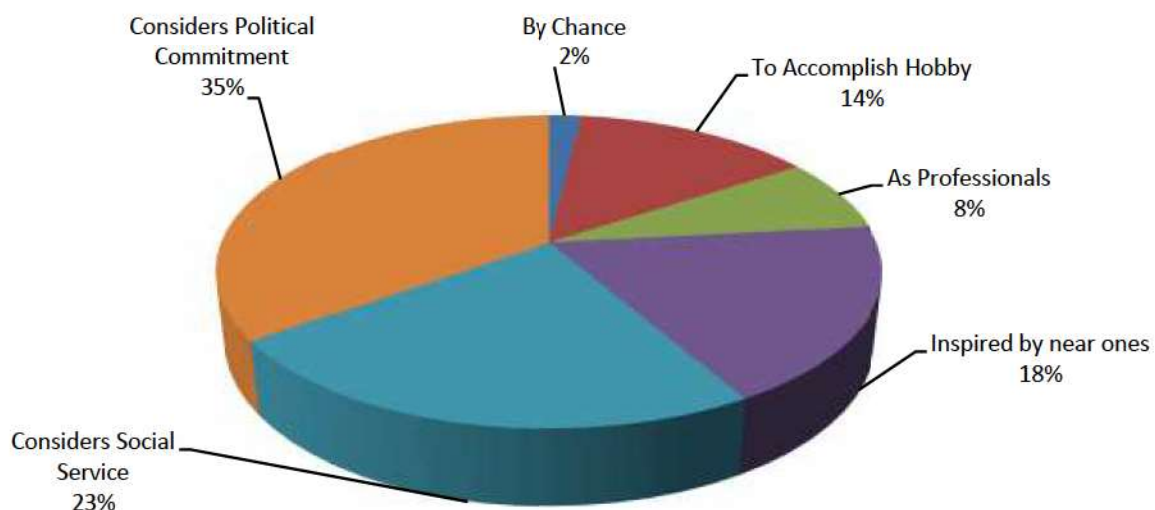
DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE MEMBERS IN 932 GROUP THEATRES IN AGE GROUPS

The age distribution of the **10542** female members in **932** Group Theatre shows the dominance of youthful women in theatrical activities. Certainly the young and unmarried girls and ladies, who has less family burdens, contribute a lot in the management of theatre business like costume designing and maintenance, properties preparation and preservation, publicity and official communications etc. To a great extent they manage the in house affairs of Group Theatres while performing as actresses as well. However, it has been noted that young boys and girls appear to a Group Theatres as floaters, as the hop between Groups if an attractive scope is offered. Although, amateurish, Group Theatre seeks commitment from their members in the name of progressive theatre, and history of Group Theatre has probed the fact that a split in the Group over an issue has been initiated by the young aspirants who remain argumentative. Therefore concentration of young male and female members in Group Theatre is both beneficiary and challenging to Group Theatres.

The study also focused on the backgrounds of the female members of Group Theatres and has found six major reasons behind their joining to theatrical activities.

By Chance	To accomplish Hobby	As Professional	Was Inspired by near ones	Considers Social Service	Considers Political Commitment	Total
195	1459	803	1939	2462	3684	10542

Table :: 10 Backgrounds and reasons of female members joining the Group Theatres.



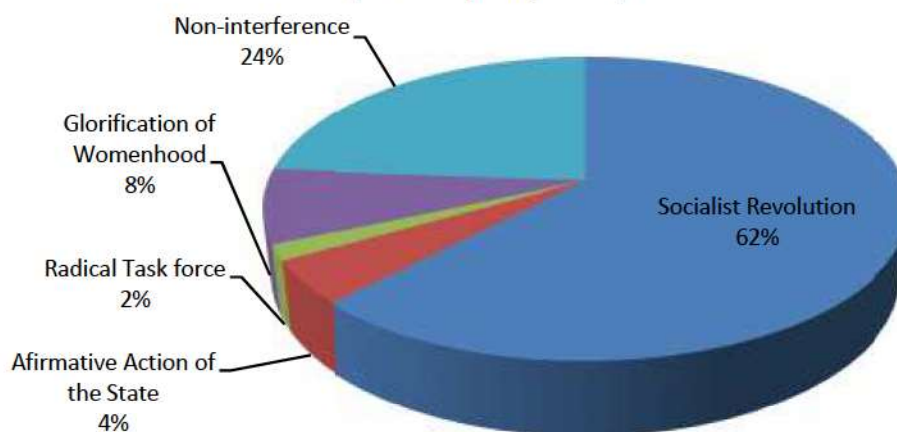
DISTRIBUTION OF BACKGROUNDS OF FEMALE MEMBERS JOINING GROUP THEATRES

Interesting to observe is the fact that majority of the women joining Group Theatre consider theatre activities either service to society or as commitment to certain political ideology, the later being the most popular ground. This reveals the majority of the women members of Group Theatre are socially and politically conscious and are in a position to express their take on the women's issues being dramatized. This attribute, nevertheless, is exclusive to this section of women. Others, who join the theatre on varied grounds may also hold strong socio-political consciousness too.

Such high being the level of socio-political consciousness, when the female members were asked to respond over five proposed alternatives to eradicate the gender discrimination, exploitation ensuing liberation of women as shown in Table :: 11 below, the response was much lopsided and revealed the bias towards Left political ideology.

Classless society established through Socialist Revolution would ensure end to all exploitations with one on the women.	5416
Political and Economic Empowerment of Women shall put a check on the injustice against women, which in turn requires affirmative action of the State	614
Special Women Task Force should be formed to ruthlessly retreat any inhuman treatment against women.	219
Glorification of women's role in family, society, religion, culture and history through agencies of socialization would change the picture.	1065
Women, themselves can change the situation provided all sorts of interference and restrictions over their choices are dismantled.	3228
Total	10542

Table :: 11 *Opinion of female members of the Group Theatres regarding alternatives to eradicate gender inequality and exploitation.*



RESPONSES OF WOMEN MEMBERS OF 1185 GROUP THEATRES ON ALTERNATIVES TO REMOVAL OF GENDER INEQUALITY

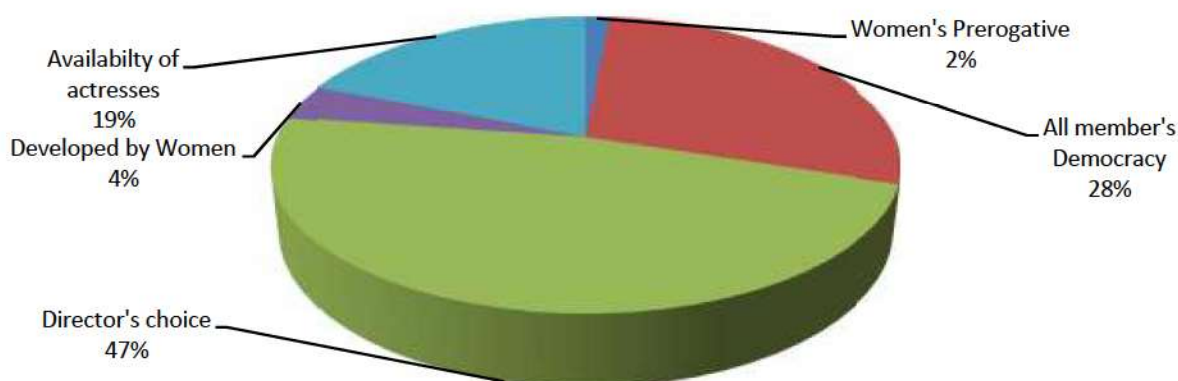
Such a large proportion agreeing to resort revolutionary reconstruction of the society through class struggle as the best way out for extermination of gender exploitation and inequality definitely marks the mainstream of the female activists in Group Theatres to be politically Left. Interestingly, almost the similar proportion of the female members of Group Theatre considers their joining to theatre activism as their social and political commitment as shown in Table :: 8. Thus, it could be safely concluded that those who consider Group Theatre as a platform of social or political activism for women is strongly motivated by Left political ideas and ideology.

Having said that it would be nothing hard to understand the underlying adjustment between the views of women members of the Group Theatres as a part with the whole of the organization that traditionally subscribes to Left political bias while

selecting scripts to be produced on women's issues. The women members, as a part, do not complain of 'male domination' in this respect and seeks such selection as opportunity to act upon. Following options in Table :: 12 shows the 'marginalization of women by consent' (for the sake of progressive cultural activism) in deciding the scripts for production on women's issues.

It is a prerogative of only the women members to decide what script may be staged on women's issues.	14
All members take part in discussion to select scripts for production and the same formality is maintained while considering scripts on women's issues.	265
The director's choice is the final in usual practice, however suggestions are welcomed from any member in case to case.	441
Women members are trained and encouraged to develop scripts on women's issues.	36
Availability of strong actresses stimulates the Group to make theatre on women's issues.	176
Total No. of Group Theatres	932

Table :: 12 *Process of selection of scripts on women's issues by the Group Theatres.*



SELECTION OF SCRIPTS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES BY GROUP THEATRES

4.4. VINDICATION OF RIGHTS OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN GROUP THEATRES

However lopsided may be the scenario in regards to political inclination, there are always other realities that can be hardly ignored. In a edifying dialogue with Anjum Katyal from Seagull Theatre Quarterly, actor, director, playwright Jayoti Bose illustrated the bigoted mind-set by which female performers are dealt with in Group

Theatres saying " 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" [Basu, Jayoti; *On playing safe*; Anjum Katyal (ed); Nine Lives - Special issue of Seagull Theater Quarterly; 29/30 June 2001].

Since the inception of the Group Theatre till it has been considered as a movement, women have been regarded in an unfair way. It seems absolutely paradoxical that a fundamentally committed theatre convention, which brought into view many dramatic pieces where the core argument gyrated around feminist issues and interests, failed to impart equal opportunities to its lady performers in terms of partaking and "...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" [Basu, Jayoti; *On playing safe*; Anjum Katyal (ed); Nine Lives - Special issue of Seagull Theater Quarterly; 29/30 June 2001.

During the initial stage of the Group Theatre movement the male artists of Group Theatres typically kept on induced by "a passion for theatre" and extremely trivial financial requirements. [Bandyopadhyay, Samik; *After Professionalism; The Drama Review*; Vol. 15 No.2; 1971] Generally the Group Theatres did not disburse any amount to the male performers except the travelling expenditures, whereas female artists were regularly 'hired' on specific sums per show as many of them were depended on theatre for victuals. However, many woman performers have broached complaints of being handled in a disgraceful way because of the naive self-forfeits by their male counterparts. They were hardly ever recommended for full membership of the groups with rights to hold offices and attend organizational meetings with which they acted for decades. [Ganguly, Usha; *Colloquium Two: Women in Group Theatre*; Anjum Katyal (ed); Translated by Sudeshna Banerjee; Bangla Group Theatre Special issue of Sagull Theatre Quarterly 27/28 Dec. 2000]

Therefore these female artists of Group Theatre had least little scope to play significant role in affairs of formulation of strategy and guiding principle and the ideological orientation of the Groups they were associated for long. To bypass such unfairness and inequity by male colleagues of the Group Theatre, a sizeable number of lady artists chose to serve the group free while supporting their earning through part time consignments like performing in office club theatre, recreational groups, radio and TV. [Bandyopadhyay, Samik; *Gananatya Theke Group Theatre*; Natyachinta Vol. 9 No.10; 1982]

Whilst passion for acting and longing for self- manifestation were commonly the prime intention for several of these female artistes to join organisations of Group Theatre which was characteristically presided over by patriarchal standards, for few others of them, theatre became a dais for acquiring a required livelihood, although time and again irregular. [Gupta, Khetra (ed); *Banglar Ranga Mancha (Suchanaparba)*; Sahitya Sangi; Kolkata; 2008] Behind the increased participation of female performers in Group Theatre during early 1980s and 1990s, ideological commitment played major role. Although they lacked proper training and experience, it was the ideological zeal that played havoc as a dynamic in the participation of women in Group Theatres in notable numbers. However, it is only during the early couple of years of twenty first century that only some woman practitioners have appeared impressively enough at the vanguard position of the Group Theatre movement.

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