

# CHAPTER 7

## Concluding Observations.

### 7.1. INTRODUCTION

“..... আমাদের আর তখন কিছুই আর অপ্ৰকাশিত ছিলো না। লোকে জানতো তারা কি দেখতে যাচ্ছে, কিভাবে নাটকটা শুরু হবে, কিভাবে শেষ হবে, কারা মুখ্য ভূমিকা নেবেন, কেমন আলো হবে, কেমন বাজনা হবে - সবটাই লোকে আন্দাজ করে ফেলতে পারছিলো। গ্রুপ থিয়েটারের নাটক আসলে তখন একটা চেনা ছকে বাঁধা পড়ে গেছিলো। সাকসের রিং'এর ভেতর বাঘের মতো, রিং মাস্টারের হাতে চাবুকের ইশারায় তার আফ্রানন একেবারে **Very much predictable** হয়ে গেছিলো। তাই সমাজ বিপ্লবের সাধনা তো দূরের কথা, তাকে দিয়ে একটা সামাজিক অন্যায়ের প্রতিবাদও তিকমতো করানো সম্ভব ছিলো না! সফদর হাশমীর মৃত্যু'টা যতখানি **romanticize** করা হলো, ততখানি কিন্তু তা কাজটাকে এগিয়ে দেওয়া হলোনা! ... তো এসবের একটা অনিবার্য পরিণাম তো অপেক্ষা করছিলোই আমাদের জন্য! তাই না?”

[‘... Nothing exactly remain hidden of us. The audience could already guess well about what they are going to see, how the act shall begin, how will it end, who shall be playing what kind of role, how would be the lighting and music, this and that - people could frame it prior to their visit to theatre. Group Theatre was by then fitted to familiar compartments. It was like the tiger in the circus who roars on the whims and whips of the ringmaster. Group Theatre had lost its immunity to injustice, it was far distance a possibility to bring about the social revolution. Safdar Hashmi's martyrdom was highly romanticized, yet his efforts are gone fade away... These had to have certain resultant for us, is'nt so ?”] [*Interview with Rudra Prasad Sengupta, Director, Nandikar, by me; 3rd January, 2007 at Dinabandhu Mancha VIP Guest Room*]

One of the primary benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of whichever variety of political theatre is its communicative capacity with the audience – its reception and concurrence by the viewers as a channel for spawning political responsiveness.

The majority of the Group Theatres engaged, since their inception, into cultural activism having in mind an aspiration to become "instruments of protest" for the disadvantaged or browbeaten classes of Bengali society. Group Theatre, as a movement, intended to haul theatre to the underprivileged portion of the Bengali audience, to inspire this viewers at large and to renovate their view. The Group Theatre practitioners desired to produce a theatre form which would be gratifying to a generously proportioned audience outside the city margin.

## **7.2. ON LEFT POLITICAL IDEOLOGICAL ROOT IN GROUP THEATRE MOVEMENT**

Under the auspices of the trend often identifying itself as Group Theatre Movement, sundry theatre troupes, few of which were half-professional and others totally amateur, set the groundwork of leftist dedicated theatre established on an array of ideological principles. In their preference of plays and areas of performance they used to chose approaches which were characteristically anti-establishment. Moreover, their stern loyalty to specific norms of asceticism, sombreness, matt finishing as contrasting to the allure of metropolitan mainstream theatre carried these shows nearer to a group of viewers, who had meagre space in the bourgeois profit-making theatre arrangements. The preliminary tendency of the Group Theatre Movement was en route for a revolutionary trialling stir up by the inheritance of IPTA. The activists of Group Theatre tried to revise the ascendant proscenium-auditorium interface / affairs of the city's profit-making theatre, so that the chemistry of performer-audience relationship could be reformulated to make it more undeviating and elastic and less arbitrated by rules and standards of elitist theatre. Most of the performances of Group Theatres were rejuvenated with counter-cultural communications to a great extent were intended to forbear the influential socio-political stability.

However, as the time passed, aggressive anti-establishment posture of the Group Theatres quieten down to a momentous point and it resorted to a modest attitude in ideological theme. Very few Group Theatres based in the rural areas, could create

genuine impacts through performances. Although a leading segment of Group Theatre artists supported the requirement of dissemination of the ideology of left progressive theatre but in spirit and in the core of their practices Group Theatre continued to be an 'avant gardist' cultural performance, and an urban minority theatre. The deteriorating prominence of the Group Theatre Movement from early 1980s is the most apposite marker of its malfunction to persist as an important dais for 'ideological arbitrations' of class interests. Neither it could endorse any wide-ranging artistic viewpoint which could amalgamate the eccentricities of urban middle-class theatre audience with proletarian viewers. Samik Bandyopadhyay, one of the most insightful critics of modern Bengali theatre has aptly pointed - "Bengali [alternative] theatre is...the theatre of middle class. Our peasants and workers are far away from this bourgeois derivative theatre. However much we talk about workers and peasants they haven't yet arrived in it...limitations of leave and leisure in the life of a worker and its general spending pattern provides very little room for theatre." [Bandyopadhyay, Samik. *"Aro Darshak? Na Minority Theatre?"* in Bahurupee ; 7 March 1967]

The moral decline of Group Theatre Movement heightened in the most significant way ever since the onset of the Left Front regime in West Bengal. The advancement of Bengali political theatre, more precisely to say, the leftist variation of political theatre in Bengal, had been rigorously cramped since lefts came to power in West Bengal. It was evident that the leftist political theatre that accolade the party ideology of the leftist parties, except some superficial (so called "constructive") criticism, remained largely unsuspecting towards the policies of Left Front Government. Many Group Theatre activists started propagating that a 'friendly and supportive Left Front government' would patronise and nurture the glorious tradition of Group Theatre Movement, which evicted to be totally mistake. Rather, in reality, the highly regimented left politics tamed the Group Theatre Movement to earn its election benefits in exchange of extending some infrastructural facilities, awards and complements. As the Group Theatres became more and more reliant on

state sponsorship and subsidy, the sponsoring agency set up a superior domination on the ideological direction of the movement and diminished its oppositional propel.

Many drama activists have laid emphasis on the requirement of some political stir and a return journey to the theatre of the mass as an urgent prerequisite for Group Theatre to revive its relevance. But the prevalent and pervasive disenchantment with leftist party politics in West Bengal during contemporary times trim down and demote the likelihood of its restoration to its past laurels.

Group Theatre Movement had created the scope of a model avant-garde experiment amidst a counter cultural phenomenon and inflamed strategies of resistance by means of performance. However, examined from the standpoint of ideological development, the afterwards progressions of the movement appears to be extremely convoluted and inconsistent at some points. Its optimistic journey since the initial phase of experimentation during 1950s to 1960s, its abundance and consolidation during 1970s, gradual but sure deterioration and disintegration during 1980s, to a near extermination in 1990s had been a testimony that Group Theatre Movement was an cultural litmus so far the acid test of changing socio-political-historical milieu of West Bengal was concerned [Kershaw, Baz; *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*; Routledge; Abingdon; 1992].

Thus, I conclude the answer to the research question that the way the typical Group Theatre Movement epistemologically inherited the Leftist ideological aphorism faced a serious decline since 1980s and was in the verge of termination by 1990s as it failed to sustain any self-reliant contingent or approach as a whole and its well-knit connection with the audience.

### **7.3. ON LEFT POLITICAL IDEOLOGICAL ROOT IN GROUP THEATRE PRODUCTION ON WOMEN'S ISSUES.**

Conventional Marxist analysis about power and its resistance power always uphold a stance that the concept of power has concrete class element embodied. As Poulantzas observe "power should be understood as the capacity of one or several classes to realize their specific interests" [Poulantzas, Nicos; *State, Power, Socialism*; New Left Books; London; 1978] But for Foucault, power relations are themselves the foundations of the social sphere and has diminutive connection to someone's class status. According to him it is through the formation of "subjectivity, of a self-consciousness perpetually alert to its own weaknesses, to its own temptations..." that an independent individual may affirm his or her authority in the society [Foucault, Michel; *Religion and Culture*; Routledge, New York; 1999]. Relations of might lead to antagonism or hostility and therefore resistance exists all through the arrangements of power relations. In the core of Foucault's point is the claim that resistance must be comprehended as an unbalanced array of relations amongst which a character continuously come across numerous intersecting points or relations together which necessitate the chance of resistance. Therefore, the intrinsic potentials of resistance are generally situated in the "tactical reversal" and not in class-struggle [Hartmann, John; "*Power and Resistance in the Later Foucault* "; 3rd Foucault Circle; Cleaveland; 2003]. Foucault was very much aware of 'local struggles' or 'specific examples of resistance' against state power and domination but he strongly advocated that the application of power and the apparatus through which it is applied can't be indoctrinated in holistic approaches of class exploitation and class struggle anymore.

The thrust of Feminist approach on the Masculinity/Feminine binary, therefore, remains a problematic as a social discourse following Foucault's line of agreement. Moreover, when attempted to implement feminist approach to performance at the general level and Group Theatre's venture in particular several complex issues appeared as well. Of course, since 1990s, when the Group Theatre Movement was weakening to decay along with its highly patriarchal attributes, there emerged several strong female directors with conviction to portray the exploitation of women in all sphere of their life came to surface, so far treated under left political ideological

bias. These new generation women directors, of whom some were already veteran, clearly spelt that they were keen to address the women's issues through their creative efforts, but they do not want to restrict themselves in the limits of feminist theatre. They rather found such identity, out and out restrictive and off-putting. Neither they were agreeing to identify themselves as belonging to Leftist brand of political-ideological camp. Overtly, by then, the ruling Lefts were losing grounds both amongst the middle class intellectuals and the toiling mass at the grass root level.

1990s brought another cross current into the realm of cultural activism throughout the nation. Big corporations, MNCs, TNCs were extending their fund to sponsor cultural landmarks of Bengal from Durga Puja to Group Theatre as the part of their corporate social responsibility schemes. Popular Group Theatres could easily drag enough endowment in this connection and their attachment with government subsidies, government committees and recognitions faded in no time. Group Theatre started producing plays based on individual crisis, generation gaps, psycho-social issues instead of its community orientation in previous decades. Hi-fi technologies, casting of film stars, complex stage craft and intricate designs of the plays transformed the Group Theatre activism to a highly 'urban elitist' position at the cost of sacrificing its own audience.

At the backdrop of such a byzantine situation sentimentalizing or romanticizing women's issues through Group Theatre undertakings remain restricted to a more limited section of viewers, who perhaps were already convinced to acknowledge gender injustice through academic curriculum. Group Theatres, therefore, failed to generate any momentum through their works on women's issues taken up either by the women directors themselves or by their male counterparts.

History depicts that Group Theatre as a movement originated from a perspective of strong currents from political arena and aesthetic debates that spanned around five decades to reach its contemporary stature, where as feminism in India was imported

in the academic field as a discourse and not in the form of any movement as such, that too, approximately two decades ago. It has left some mark on the intellectual activities in the domain of performing art like theatre, but has not appeared as a trend or stream yet. Whereas the Group Theatre movement, till date, lacks any sound female playwright in exclusive sense of the term, women's issues that are being staged through the dramatic endeavor of the Group Theatre are mostly scripted by male playwrights. It makes no difference whether a man in the disguise of female is acting to reveal the plight of an women on stage as in early 19th century or female actors, big in numbers, come to perform those roles. Unless there emerges a plenty and qualified scripts where women has spoken about their experience and desires in their own word, no issue is a women's issue.

Thus it is quite visible, as an answer to the research question, that under the influence of globalised market economy emerged an opening for the female theatre activists to free themselves from patriarchal ethos and left ideological bias of the Group Theatre at the same time to speak of their own, but due to lack of resources and preparedness towards building the genuine grounds of feminist approach in theatre activism and more importantly due to drying connectivity with the commons triggered by high level abstraction of dramatic performances of Group Theatre the possibility of sensitizing women's issues through Group Theatre movement has scrambled to a great extent.

#### **7.4. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE WAY FOR GROUP THEATRE TO SENSITIZE ON WOMEN'S ISSUES.**

It is the same period of 1990s, the declining phase of Group Theatre activism that an alternative paradigm started emerging in the field of theatre activism in West Bengal through the strivings of Janasanskriti Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed at the remotest part of the state where basic civic facilities are yet to develop properly. The *Theatre of the Opressed*, as championed by the Brazilian Theatre doyen Augusto Boal,

is changing the life and thinking of rural women and empowering them by growing a community feeling amongst the women as oppressed class. By means of the methodology of forum theatre, the women learn to share their experience and develop theatre shows that allow the viewers to intervene and change the course of the act to a decisive angle. Before adopting and responding to such interventions their practicability and consequences are debated by performers and viewers. Through this model of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, though silently but effectively, Janasanskriti has, to a considerable extent, changed the way women respond to gender injustice like dowry, domestic violence, selective reproduction, country liquor addiction etc. Janasanskriti is expanding in other areas of the state and throughout the nation to feel the pulse of the women from the weaker economy and greater social stigmas.

When Badal Sirkar introduced the Third Theatre in India, more specifically in West Bengal, it was a path-setting experience to break in the myth of colonial theatre and to mix the indigenous style of Nukkad with modern acting style using the body of the performer as a metaphor. Third Theatre could attain popularity amongst the theatre activists due to its flexibility, portability and inexpensiveness that match the prerequisites of a third-world aesthetics following the legacy of IPTA. Third Theatre opened enormous possibilities of creativity and became handy mechanism of agit-prop theatre in India. Similar is the experience, here, in Janasanskriti model of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

The present thesis asserts that *the theatre of the oppressed* has the potentials to operate as an instrument for women's empowerment, and in forbearing the authoritarian standards of patriarchy, and for construction of strategies opposed to women's subjugation. In the context of the present research trying to focus upon the efforts of the Group Theatre to highlight the women's issues in West Bengal during the Left Front regime, the Janasanskriti model of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* proves to be not only a means to resistance, but at the same time the method of enquiry and scrutiny



about women's repression and liberation, thus answering to the most vital set of research question of the present study.

What qualifies the Theatre of the Oppressed method in the native context is its interactive nature and the use of intervention as a procedure of progression not only to reveal and expose women's repression, but it also facilitates the commotion of regulatory customs of gender injustice and gender identities constituted through performance by means of construction of strategies against the gender oppression. As Judith Butler proposes, regulatory standards and customs and gender constructions are preserved and continued through their routine performances and bodily manifestation [Butler, Judith; *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*; Routledge; New York; 1993]. In that sense, the Janasanskriti methodology of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which emphasizes more on performance of experiences and experience through performances, facilitate to uncover the gender oppression and submit the formation and organization of gender perceptible and debatable. Although initially performances materialize in terms of imaginary tale within the preparations of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, this fictiveness in point of fact opens up a space for the women to deliberate their domination in the context of that particular performance. The bodily expression, concurrently, authorizes the women to break off the hegemonic matrix, and produces an opportunity of resistance through performing in the techniques of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

I would, then, conclude referring to a famous quote of Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa, one of the leading figure of 19th century Bengal renaissance, as he once advised Girish Chandra Ghosh, the giant of early modern theatre of Bengal “থ্যাটারে লোকশিক্ষে হয়” [theatre works as an agent of mass education], Janasanskriti model of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* is thriving to 'educate' women towards a genuine empowerment.

Thus, from the Colonial Theatre to a Nationalist Theatre, from there to the Peoples' Theatre (IPTA), from IPTA to Group Theatre and from Group Theatre to the Theatre of The Oppressed, the dialectical development of Indian theatre continues to sustain.

## REFERENCES

- B. Mee, Erin; *Theatre of Roots : Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*; Berg Publishers, New York, 1999.
- Bandyopadhyay, Amiya; *Dekha Hoi Nai*; Proma; Kolkata; 2006.
- Bandyopadhyay, Robin; *A-Bidya Parar Avinetri*; Fotik Jal Prokashoni; Kolkata; 2006.
- Bandyopadhyay, Samik; "Aro Darshak? Na Minority Theatre?" in Bahurupee; 7 March 1967.
- Bandyopadhyay, Suresh Chandra; *Tirish Bachharer Lokayat Jiban*; Mitra and Ghosh Publication; Kolkata; 2007.
- Banerjee, Utpal; *Bengali Theatre 200 Years*; Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of India; 1999.
- Banerjee, Utpal; *Glimpses of Bengali Performing Arts*; Shubhi Publications, Delhi. 2006.
- Bannerjee, Himani; *The Mirror of Class: Essays on Bengali Theatre*; Papyrus; Kolkata; 1999.
- Barlingay, S.S.; *A Modern Introduction to Indian Aesthetic Theory*; Eastern Book Corporation; New Delhi, 2007.
- Bhattacharya, Rimli (ed); *Black Town White Town - Nineteenth Century Calcutta*; Seagull Books; India; 1998.
- Butler, Judith; *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*; Routledge; New York; 1993
- Chatterjee, Minoti; *Theatre Beyond the Threshold : Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage 1905-1947*; Indialog; New Delhi; 2004.
- Dalmia, Vasudha; *Poetics, Plays and Performances : The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*; Oxford University Press; USA; 2005.
- Deshpande, G. P.; *Political Plays*; Seagull Books; London; 1998.
- Dhananjayan, V.P.; *Beyond Performing Art and Culture : Politico-Socio Aspects*; B.R. Rhythms; New Delhi; 2007.

- Dhananjayan, V.P.; *Beyond Performing Art and Culture : Politico-Socio Aspects*; B.R. Rhythms, New Delhi, 2007.
- Foucault, Michel; *Religion and Culture*; Routledge, New York; 1999
- G.E. Ross, Fiona; *The Printed Bengali Character On Stage*; Curzon Press; London; 1996.
- Hartmann, John; *"Power and Resistance in the Later Foucault "*; 3rd Foucault Circle; Cleaveland; 2003
- Kershaw, Baz; *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*; Routledge; Abingdon; 1992
- Lal, Ananda and Dasgupta, Chidananda (ed.); *Rasa : The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years (Vol. II Theatre and Cinema)*; Rawat Publication ; New Delhi; 1995.
- Mukherjee, Tutun (ed.); *Staging Resistance Plays by Women in Translation*; Oxford University Press; New Delhi; 2005.
- Mukhopadhyay, Kuntal; *Theatre and politics: A study of group theatre movement of Bengal, 1948-1987*; Bibhasa; 1999.
- Nandy, Ashis; *The Secret Politics of Our Desires - Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*; Oxford University Press; India; 2001.
- Paul, Rajinder (ed.); *Contemporary Indian Theatre*; Eastern Book Corporation; New Delhi, 2006.
- Poulantzas, Nicos; *State, Power, Socialism*; New Left Books; London; 1978
- Raha, Kironmoy; *Bengali Theatre (India, the land and the people)*; National Book Trust; Delhi; 2001.
- Reddy, K. Venkata and Dhawan, R.K. (ed.); *Flowering of Indian Drama : Growth and Development*; Prestige; New Delhi; 2004.
- Richmond, Farley P. (ed); *Indian Theatre (Traditions of Performance)*; Seagull Books; Kolkata; 1993.
- Roy Chowdhury, Reba; *Jiboner Taane – Shikorer Taane*; Papyrus; 2005.
- Sen, Shova; *Nabanno Theke Laaldurgo*; National Book Agency; Kolkata; 1989.

- Silva, Neluka; *Politics and theatre: A comparative study of the construction of nation and gender in the contemporary Sinhalese and Bengali theatres*; Regional Centre for Strategic Studies; New Delhi; 1999.
- Somerset, Fiona and Watson, Nicholas (ed.); *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity in Bengali Theatre*; Pennsylvania State University Press; November 2003.
- Talwar, Urmila and Chakrabarty, Bandana (ed.); *Contemporary Indian Drama : Astride Two Traditions*; Rawat Publication ; New Delhi; 2005.
- Uberoi, Patricia; *Freedom and Destiny - Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India*; Oxford University Press; India; 2006.