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# Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: In the Neighbourhood of Liminality

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## Abstract

In my essay I would like to investigate the shift of paradigms in the relationship between theatre and politics that director, playwright and actor Ajitesh Bandopadhyay (1933-83) was bringing into Bengali theatre. I would like to analyze how in the field of theater he was trying to form a threshold space: a threshold where politics and ethics, community and the individual, global and local can exist together as equals not imparting the hegemony of one on the other. How Ajitesh strove to conceive a theatre which puts forth itself as an analytical presence of life and society unmediated by an ideological or ethical regime. I would like to argue that it is in such a liminal presence in theatre, politics and the world; that the key to our future community of equality lie. This would also be an attempt at reclaiming the legacy of Ajitesh, whose influence on Bengali theatre has been hugely underplayed by the rather scanty posthumous attention being paid to his work.

[**Keywords:** Ajitesh Bandopadhyay; Politics, Ethics and Art; global and local; luminal, Bengali theatre; Globalism and Nationalism]

## Prelude

“Decisive here is the idea of an *inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence.”

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*.

When Bengali theatre, which had ushered into modernity in a post world-war, ethico-politically charged backdrop in late 1940's and early 50's- in the hands of two stalwarts Utpal Dutt and Sombhu Mitra who dominated the Bengali stage in 1960's and 70's; finally became subjugated to the regime of institutional politics and ethical individualism respectively, it was perhaps Ajitesh Bandopadhyay in whom theatre could finally anticipate freedom from this regimentation. While, Utpal Dutt, a Marxist to the core, in the 1970's, post Naxalbari movement and coming to power of the left in West Bengal had allowed himself to be restricted by the regimes of left ideology and Sombhu Mitra was being trapped in his own discourse of ethical individualism and nationalism, it was Ajitesh who came forward with a distinct individuality. It was not as if Ajitesh was not interested in politics or in ethics of 'individual life forms'- rather, he was interested in both; but what he was most interested in, was theatre. It was this immense passion for theatre and the indomitable will to follow that passion with gusto that prevented

Ajitesh to subjugate theatre to the regimentation of either politics, or ethics or philosophy though they were nonetheless present in his theatre. While extremely aware of the importance of the regional cultural influences in theatre, he was never afraid of producing adaptations and translations of Brecht, Pirandello, Chekov or Wesker: adaptations which were as good as original plays and plays which if not politically decisive were politically analytical. Always being aware of the need for professionalism in theatre he also did never compromise on the quality of his productions. Many other such contrasting tendencies had found their manifestation in Ajitesh. Thus Ajitesh signified more than anything perhaps liminality: an existence in the threshold. Ajitesh was able to create to great extent, a harmony between theatre, life and the world while maintaining the clash or the subjugation of one by another. Thus, in more ways than other, Ajitesh I believe, presented the third alternative in modern Bengali theatre, as well as a modern Bengali, Indian and perhaps Universal subjectivity. It would be my intention in this article to investigate his aesthetic (I do not use the term 'aesthetic' here to denote just a formal aspect of it but rather in a more contextually embedded sense) universe to find out how exactly was such a potentiality being shaped through Ajitesh's thought gestures. In an era where categories like political and ethical; globalism, nationalism and regionalism are contested with such intensity and zeal, I believe it would be crucial to re-read Ajitesh who successfully negotiated them to leave behind an experiment in theatre practice where perhaps the secrets to the future of our theatre and our life lies.



*Antigone (1975) - Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay*

### **Politics, Ethics and Art in Balance**

Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay began his theatre career as a member of the cultural wing of the left party, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) at Kolkata, in the mid 1950's. He made a name for himself inside the IPTA quite early owing to his fine theatrical and coordination skills. In the year 1958, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay was

elected the secretary of the Dumdum branch of IPTA. In the second state meet of IPTA, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay was elected the joint-secretary of the West Bengal state committee. Associated with the local committee of the Dumdum branch of Indian Communist Party, Ajitesh was intensely involved in workers', refugee, cultural and teacher's movements<sup>ii</sup> (from which engagement we would find him drawing materials for his later plays). However, Ajitesh's tryst with IPTA, like in case of so many other artists had to end abruptly in 1964 because of conflicts arising out of apparently trifling matters.

As Ranjan Gangopadhyay<sup>iii</sup> reveals in his book from the recollection of Nirmal Ghosh, the rift between Ajitesh and IPTA grew keeping at the centre two principal incidents. Both of them bear a testimony to the high handed nature of a section of the IPTA bureaucracy of the period. The first one of the two was regarding a statement or opinion that Ajitesh expressed in one of the meetings at the Dumdum Patipukur regional branch. He had said that - "I think of Bohurupee as the only serious centre for thinking about theatre nowadays." As Gangopadhyay explains, the IPTA leadership present that day, began being offensive towards Ajitesh without trying to comprehend the true nature of his words. There was apparently no fault with what Ajitesh had said and neither was any lack of fidelity towards the IPTA exhibited by his statements. At the time, as Dutt had just announced his arrival in the Theatre scene and *Bohurupee* under Sombhu Mitra was being responsible almost single handedly for carrying forward the Baton of group theatre movement in West Bengal. However, based on this single statement, Ajitesh was vehemently criticized and alleged as being disloyal to IPTA. One senses that the gesture of naming Bohurupee (Sombhu Mitra's group) in this context must have invited the wrath of IPTA bureaucrats whose old differences with Sombhu Mitra had found new impetus in the early 60's. The second event which deepened the growing rift and finalized Ajitesh's split from IPTA was when in 1961, Ajitesh did a production of Italian playwright Gian Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* under the banner of IPTA. There were immediate allegations from IPTA authorities regarding the ethicality of producing a play by Pirandello under its banner, because of Pirandello's association with fascist dictator Mussolini. As Radharaman Tapadar who was in *Nandikar* then and remained a colleague and friend till the end recalls- "Utpal Dutt too had said that we should not have performed a play by Pirandello"<sup>iv</sup>. By the time, Ajitesh himself, though had already become doubtful regarding the functioning of IPTA or for that matter regarding any theatre done under direct auspices of a political institution, even if a left Marxist one. It was revealed to him that a left political institutional patronage does not guarantee the existence of a sincere and serious theatre or that matter art practice- that it can also be equally coercive framework to be in. Incidentally, one of his first popular productions in his IPTA days was *Saontal Bidroho*, which was also the first play authored by him.

While, it is true that the first phase of his career was spent in drawing forth all his energies in enriching an outright political theatre practice, it is also deserves

mention that Ajitesh's first association with theatre in his childhood was not in form of any political engagement; but as he recounts to fill up an existential void created by the horrors of the war in the 40's that haunted him as a child. Ruminating on those days he later wrote-

I felt very helpless. War- Why a war, a war with whom? I did not know when, at what time in a war with whom we would all perished by the strike of a single bomb. The year passed by amongst these horrific thoughts...To fill up this void appeared three claimants- Football, politics and theatre. Among these, I left Football; Politics left me and thus I am only left with theatre now.<sup>v</sup>

Thus, it is a fact that almost similar to Sombhu Mitra<sup>vi</sup>, in case of Ajitesh too, there was an extremely subjective sense of ethical crisis from which along with theatre, Ajitesh's interest in institutional politics too developed. In many ways it was a personal gesture. However, as circumstances changed, with CPI gaining in power, he gradually found it difficult to sustain such an ethical position while remaining within the party especially with regard to his theatre practice. We find him voicing these realizations in a number of his writings at that time or which he wrote later. In one of his essays titled *Atyalpa Abhijog* (A Few Complaints) he writes-

They try to explain that, *Avigyanam Sakuntalam* (Kalidas) might be an excellent play but; does it contain any reflections of the political problems of our contemporary society...Our audience then do not remind them that the theatre does not begin and end with only a theatre of political problems. Psychoanalytical plays, plays about conflicts within the individual, plays analyzing the ethical ends of science and religion in their social contexts have formed the subject of theatre since ages and many of them have also found recognition with posterity... Actually our audience, do not realize that the commitment of these people lie not with theatre; but with the theatre business. Not in politics; but in exploiting politics to commercial ends.<sup>vii</sup>

Thus, here we find Ajitesh trying to make two significant critical points regarding the practice of political theatre in Bengal. First of all, he stresses on the fact that there can be problems in society which might not necessarily be relevant to 'institutional politics' and theatre does not begin and end with only a singular category of 'political' theatre. Therefore, it would be wrong to begin with such a precondition for any theatre tradition that to be relevant, it has to be only able to represent institutional politics by confirming to a particular ideology. Secondly, the very significant point that he makes is that, such politics like every other phenomenon of our times can be used to fulfill commercial ends. People can be fooled and exploited in the name of a political ideology. Politics and especially electoral one can often try to take advantage of their weakness. He presents a keen analysis of the technicalities of such exploitation in case of theatre in another of

his essays, *Baiblabik Theatre Ebong Amader Ajker Sangram* (revolutionary theatre and our present struggle). He says-

Thus, we try to assert our importance by abusing each other. The noble expression of anger which imparts importance on the creation, has its own risks, therefore our outbursts of anger excites the audience only for a while. Our anger against the political system or social system never reaches the revolutionary climax. We are careful about being angry too. A pattern of our anger too has been created. Thus, all our angry plays have patterns too.<sup>viii</sup>

Thus, we find Ajitesh here making a crucial point. He voices the concern that, more often than not, contemporary revolutionary theatre in Bengal had fallen into a trap of a representative pattern. It had become trapped in formal and structural regime which renders it into an empty signifier.

While Ajitesh parted from IPTA and thereafter was strongly against doing theatre under the patronage of either the government or any political party, his theatre did not forsake political thought. Though vehemently criticized by the critics during their productions as being apolitical, *Sher Afgan*, *Manjari Amer Manjari*, *Teen Poysar Pala*, *Paap Punya* and many of his other plays today at hindsight seem to open a very interesting space for analysis of socio-economic-ethical structures in the society. Ajitesh, we find, did believe that doing theatre without any politico-philosophical thought behind it, is futile. He says in one of his essays-

I can accept this fact without reservations, that an art should always be influenced by a political philosophy or it will lose its essence in amidst the cultural activities, at least that is my experience. Why I am doing a theatre? Which play would I like to do? How would I do it? If an artist is not politically clear about these things, I feel it is impossible for him to reach a certain degree of completeness.<sup>ix</sup>

Veteran theatre critic Samik Bandopadhyay in his lucid and enlightening article *Ajitesh: Theatre-Rajniti* provides us an extremely well thought analysis of Ajitesh's views regarding the relation between politics, ethics and theatre. He says-

In later years, Ajitesh did not directly participate in what today can be called a political theatre. Rather, Nandikar (Ajites's first group) moved away in certain ways from directly political thinking. There is no reason not to accept that. There was a certain thinking of Ajitesh behind that. He had voiced about that thought to us a number of times. That notion was the understanding that it is not only by directly representing the reality on stage or bringing forth a political decision at the moment that the political responsibility would be fulfilled. Because, if one has to do a political theatre, if theatre has to play a political role then, that could never end with mere

providing facilitation to a few people with similar opinions or belonging to the same the same party.<sup>x</sup>

Theatre has greater objectives to fulfill. Being political in theatre means to Ajitesh as he himself would say according to Bandopadhyay-

I feel if we have to do political theatre, then we would have to realize firstly what form of politics is going around the world and contextualize it. Secondly, we have to criticize it without fear, without thinking of receiving any aids or benefits whatsoever. Thirdly one would have to show the historico-philosophical way forward and for that one will have to read books of various theoreticians.<sup>xi</sup>

Thus, we find a completely different definition of politics in Ajitesh's thoughts. Politics to him lie, not in promoting or ridiculing a particular group or institution. Politics, meant to him to be concerned about, to think and analyze in depth in a historical context problems that concern people as a collective-

The responsibility of a political theatre is a bit more... That can never be reached by providing certain stereotypical political decisions. There, one has to judge critically- one has to distantiate himself. A little bit of the past-the continuity-one has to place the moment among these. The moment is never a distinct and independent one.<sup>xii</sup>



Tin Paisar Pala (1969) - Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Keya Chakraborty

'Politics' for Ajitesh, has ethical dimensions too and politics to him does not mean a total control by a specific party or group. Politics happens in a continuous

dialogue between the self and the community not to the exclusion or subjugation of any of these; but by finding ways of coexistence. Thus politics for him always lie at the liminality of an individual ethics and a collective responsibility without compromising on any of them. Theatre as an art form however, again for him exists at a liminality of its being an art form and also an expression of ethico-political concern.

### Negotiating Globalism and Nationalism

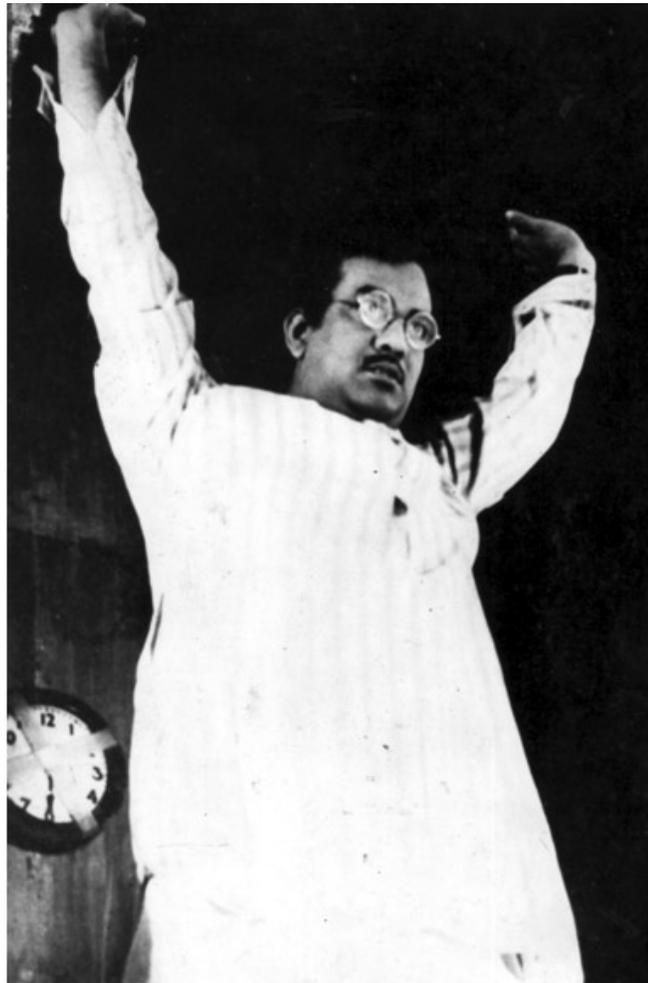
“The Postmodern is possibly a luminal bridge in history, a period conscious of itself, its past, and its multiple potentials as future.”

Richard Schecner

*Performative Circumstances: From the Avant Garde to Ramlila.*

It is now indeed for some time that in India, and almost all the countries with their new found independence from colonial regimes, we have been witness to two

contrasting tendencies in the field of arts and perhaps more so in the field of theatre than any other forms of art. On one hand, has emerged a discourse of globalism and multiculturalism, a cultural enrichment through unrestricted sharing of aesthetic signifiers and real political concerns. On the other, such conceptions of a blissful co-existence have been jeopardized by new hegemonic structures identifiable within the discourse of globalism itself. There has been a gradual erasure of languages in their traditional purity. Thus, new forms of language have emerged, compulsively hybrid in their origin, what Marxist critic of postmodernism, Frederic Jameson has termed “pastiche”<sup>xiii</sup>. Theatre by its very nature being political<sup>xiv</sup> as an art form, has been, especially in the countries struggling through the



Manjari Amer Manjari (1964)- Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay

after effects of a long regime of colonial exploitation and a new found modernity, in the very midst of this cultural phenomenon. Responding to such a situation of course, two mutually conflicting set of political discourses has emerged in these countries relating to the field of culture generally and theatre in particular. A certain half of theatre practice has responded to the globalization process by openly accepting thematic and stylistic effects of foreign theatrical and cultural traditions<sup>xv</sup>. While the second half has found its objective in searching and preserving traditional forms in their purity, making them their cultural bastion of identity and resistance<sup>xvi</sup>. In the Indian context however, contrastingly, the discourse of cultural identity has been used as a tool of governance to enforce the field of arts into a secluded, formalistic, aesthetic cocoon and thus render it politically impotent. It is rather the urban or sub-urban cosmopolitan globalised theatre which has emerged in India as the politically sentient voice.

One of the questions which was often being asked or rather a demand often being made in cultural field in the post-independent Indian context was for an Indian or national theatre. Sometimes as an aesthetic searching of roots, as in case of Habib Tanvir, Sombhu Mitra and at others as propaganda by the Central Government of India or the National Congress; any hint of foreign influence on Indian theatre was being criticized. Indigenous and traditional forms existing at the very verge of extinction were being proposed as alternatives. In the context of West Bengal, it was Ajitesh Bandopadhyay who more often than not, was the bane for most of these attacks. We have already discussed the vehement criticism that he faced for producing Pirandello. He was even more criticized for his adaptation of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, *Teen Paisar Pala*. Utpal Dutt was severely critical of the production claiming, Ajitesh to have done injustice to Brecht by rejecting the Marxist context and reducing Brecht to a mere formal exercise<sup>xvii</sup>. Samik Bandopadhyay presented a vehement criticism of the production in an interview *Problems and Directions: Calcutta's New Theatre*. He said-

The popularity of *Tin Paisar Pala* makes us somewhat apprehensive, for it corrupts and destroys the basis of the experimental theatre on the one hand and that of the strongly committed political theatre on the other.<sup>xviii</sup>

Ajitesh however continued to produce translations and adaptations of Brecht, Chekov, Pirandello, Wesker and others throughout his career.

It is indeed an irony of sorts that it was Ajitesh who was alleged of being partial to Western cultural influences. Ajitesh unlike Utpal Dutta, Sombhu Mitra and most other urban born and brought up theatre practitioners, spent his childhood away from Kolkata in a small town. He came to Kolkata only during his college days and it was while studying English Honors at the Manindra Chandra College, Calcutta University that he came in contact with various foreign playwrights. However, it would be simply nurturing a wrong conception if it is thought that Ajitesh's theatre activity was alien to Bengali cultural contexts. In one his essays written during the IPTA days we hear about his desire to reach a wider

public than urban intellectuals or even urban masses. He was not interested in doing fringe, parallel theatre-

It was not about performing easier plays for common mass or performing difficult plays in an easy and careless manner; it was our objective that the commitment with which we have presented any play for the urban intellectuals, we will reach out to the audience at Asansole or Durgapur with the same commitment...<sup>xix</sup>

However there are a number of questions which would be claiming to be answered and which were often asked to Ajitesh in regard to his production of translated and adapted plays. Ajitesh in one of his essays titled *Anudito Natok* (translated plays) articulates his defense in this matter. First of all, he addresses the most fundamental of all questions: why translated or adapted plays?

Ajitesh begins by mentioning the importance of translation in sharing of knowledge. He draws evidence from the history of theatre to show that how much poorer the tradition of world theatre would have been without translations. He points out that productions of Shakespeare's plays or the most modern English plays would never have happened in Russia if there was no translation. Moreover, Stanislavski could not have produced *An Enemy of the People* if he did not have access to a translation of the play by Norwegian playwright Henric Ibsen. Bertolt Brecht could not have produced Greek plays if they were not translated to German; and in very recent times, Italian Pirandello could not have been produced in England. He reminds that the hundred and seventy year old Bengali theatre that was founded by a Russian, Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev(1749-1817), began with translated plays only. He lists three distinct ways in which any theatre tradition can benefit from translated plays-

- a) New spirit- forms, structure, characters, events, rhythm and emotions are brought into literature. The production of the translated plays similarly brings to the stage new spirit- forms, structure, characters, events, rhythms and emotions.
- b) The translated plays bring the realization of the fact that people of the world all belong to the same family, and their life too flows by the same variant and blissful stream.
- c) Facilitates weak, underdeveloped understanding of theatre to move towards gaining maturity. Translated plays work as its friend, philosopher and guide.<sup>xx</sup>

The next aspect of criticism that Ajitesh responds to is a voice of dissent heard quite often from both critiques and directors of the period: 'is not translation and production of translated plays a hindrance to the writing of original plays?' In reply to this, Ajitesh says that such allegations to producers would be unjust in the very beginning as- if they are able to produce plays by Sophocles, Chekov or Arthur Miller successfully then there should be simply no reason whatsoever, why they

would not be able to produce original plays with the same efficiency. Thus, he concludes, the problem lies elsewhere; that is in the absence of good plays being written and he says unless and until good plays are being written, producers would have to produce translations and adaptations of foreign plays. However, he continues to say that it is the very translations and adaptations from which the future authors of plays should take lessons.

Thus, as his final explanation, he says that if he supports doing translations and adaptations of foreign plays, he feels it is this practice which will finally lead to writing of original plays. He quotes famous English critic Kenneth Tynan to the support of his statement, who while evaluating the consecutive productions of Sophocles, Sartre, Ionesco and Pirandello in England, had written-

Even if it seems absurd to hear now, I can foresee that within one or two years we would start finding good plays in England. Realizing this belief of Tynan the next year only was produced “look Back in Anger” and there ushered in a new age of theatre in England.<sup>xxi</sup>

It is indeed a fact that tilting the land of theatre with translations and adaptations of foreign plays did yield rich dividends in case of Bengali theatre. In form of crop, not only we have got excellent plays by Dutt, one after another; who, one should remember began his career by doing Shakespeare first at the Saint Xaviers college group and then with the group of famous English director Jeffrey Kendhal, Shakespiriana; but in the 60’s and 70’s we got brilliant plays by Badal Sircar like *Ebong Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas* and others and also by Mohit chattopadhyay like *Mrityu Sanbad*, *Rajrokto*, *Konthonalite Surjo*, *Captain Hurrah*, *Mahakalir Baccha* and others. These plays have been of immense value to the development of Bengali theatre and it is a fact every theatre enthusiast would know that the inspiration behind writing of these plays were reading of foreign plays and also watching them being produced by the contemporary amateur theatre groups.

However, Ajitesh in spite of being a supporter of translations and adaptations from foreign plays, was, as have been often been wrongly alleged, not indifferent to the question of Indian regional forms of theatre. In this essay, he devotes a few lines too on the ongoing debate on the issue of a national theatre and asserts that we would have to draw as much material possible from the available history of our Sanskrit tradition of theatre and he stresses on the fact that, that too can happen only through translation of Sanskrit texts. He says-

We can discuss in this context how in recent times our intellectuals have begun discussing about an ‘Indian theatre’. We cannot; but feel interested in this issue. At least, from the curiosity of knowing history we would have to think- how much can we look to get from the practice of theatre which has become extinct in our country? When the history of Sanskrit theatre is discussed in the countries abroad... our neglect towards the roots of our own theatre is truly painful...Today, without Bengali translations of our

Sanskrit plays and a few successful productions of them, we cannot hope to realize our dreams of developing an 'Indian Theatre'.<sup>xxii</sup>

Not only from ancient Sanskrit theatre; but we need to have translations of plays written in various regional language in our times, he stresses-

We at times through the newspapers get a feeling of where thoughts regarding theatre exist in various other Indian states. When we hear about famous director Ebrahim Alkazi we naturally fill interested to know about his productions. Regarding this matter however the work of translation is still much neglected.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Now, if we come to an analysis of Ajitesh's work on how much he was actually doing what he was preaching, we find that even his productions of

translated or adapted plays are replete with influences from regional culture. His adapted plays like, *Manjari Amer Manjari* (adapted from Chekov's *Cherry Orchard*), *Sher Afghan* (adapted from Pirandello's *Henry IV*), *Teen Poysar Pala* (adapted from Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*) or *Pap Punya* (adapted from Leo Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness*) become independent plays by their sheer rootedness in Bengali culture and traditions. Each of these plays provides keen study of socio-economic conditions in, marginal spaces of and individual psyches of people, in Bengal. Ajitesh's brilliant study of human nature, their physical and linguistic habits were infused into the characters to



Sahi Sangbad (1974) parts- Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay & Amitabha

the extent that losing their foreign garb they became of regional. Neither were they poor mimicry of their originals nor fine parody: their distinctness as texts situated in Bengal was apparent. Ajitesh's adapted plays thus provide a very interesting overlapping space between Indian and foreign cultural traditions. While, Ajitesh did adaptations of foreign plays he also did not reject ancient Sanskrit or regional plays. Thus we found him also producing *Mudra-rakshasa* or *Andhay Yug*."

There is an opinion about Ajitesh often voiced by people: that he was passionate and thus produced or did whatever he felt passionately about. But that

is perhaps only a partial truth. A close look at Ajitesh's theatre career reveals a rather strategic approach. Theatre according to him was a European medium and thus Ajitesh wanted to understand it through practice. He had a thought that through these exercises he would be able to give shape to an Indian form of theatre. One has to realize, that when he began with adaptations or translations of foreign plays, he was not interested in their philosophy but their form. Ajitesh himself clarifies-

When Nandikar performed foreign plays it was this exercise with form which the principal objective. It was same reason to do Pirandello. We were not much concerned about the philosophical nitty-gritties of Pirandello rather we were enticed by the form of Pirandello's plays...<sup>xxiv</sup>

Later on, when he produced *Mudra Rakshas*, he had a similar objective. But it is evident that he knew, that these forms in themselves were not an end and certainly not without a content which was relevant to our country, our state, our times. He has always expressed such a notion-

For the content as I will look towards the whole world I will also look towards villages.<sup>xxv</sup>

He knew in the end he had to reach through this arduous journey through which he could conceive of a harmony between the form and content and figure out a new and unique language of theatre. When he wrote his second independent play in 1976 it was perhaps the first step towards realizing this objective.

Thus, here too we find Ajitesh drawing from both western and Indian paradigms and formulate a third and new language out of it. While there have often been demands for going back to roots; and while there indeed might be important resources to be utilized in Sanskrit theatre tradition or indigenous traditional forms but under changing socio-economic structures in the last hundred years and especially so after our independence a complete transposition of our theatre to the form of a Sanskrit theatre or indigenous one is a thought of gross stupidity. As Ajitesh would say-

Of course we live in Bengal and India and are the part of Bengali theatre tradition. Therefore, the problems of Bengali theatre concerns us and thus we are driven by thought whether Bengali theatre would be able to achieve a form of its own. But the matter at hand is not so simple. Numerous complicacies of tradition and modernity entwined that. We have the tradition of Indian Sanskrit drama or Bengal's very own rural traditions. But theatre is ultimately an urban phenomenon and how much Jatra (an indigenous form of performance in Bengal) would be able to facilitate its growth is a question yet to be answered...But it is true that Indian theatre has a characteristics of its own...But how to put that in to use in our contemporary largely western influenced society and find an Indian form?.. It is because of the need for this knowledge about forms the translations

and adaptations of foreign plays need to be performed. At the same time we should also perform Sanskrit classical play.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### Man Beneath the Mask

“One must therefore also "con-sent" that his friend exists, and this happens by living together [syzen] and by sharing acts and thoughts in common [koinonein]. In this sense, we say that humans live together unlike cattle that share the pasture together”.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Bibhash Chakraborty, a renowned director and founder member of the amateur theatre group Theatre Workshop in one of his essays on Ajitesh Bandopadhyay titled *Ajitesh: Bhitore Agun Baire Proshanti* (Fire within, calm without) says-

When the third Pandav of Bengali theatre made his first appearance in the Bengali theatre scene, Utpal Dutt at the Minerva theatre and Sombhu Mitra at the New Empire had already established themselves. People like us, who had little more self respect than others found it difficult to go near those two castles. They were great figures and our respect for them was sky high; but whatever little we could see from afar it seemed they were surrounded by a high wall, crossing which neither they would be able to reach out to us, nor we will be able to reach out to them. How could we have discovered them, if we would not been able to come at the proximity of each other? And how could we develop if the sudden instincts would have been left undiscovered by the teacher or vice versa; if both are watertight containers of safe drinking water. Ajitesh was a flowing river breaking banks and dams- one who wants to move along taking everybody in his path by making everything fertile in his path. No body is a pawn of chess in his hands; all are his companions and comrades in arms. If you are an established artist, you would have to enclose yourself in a shell- or you would have to create a cocoon around your presence- he never believed in such a theory.<sup>xxvii</sup>

One of the principal political questions of our times has been how to be friends with the other. In earlier times ‘friendship’ was generally not considered as a concern of political theory but that of the domain of ethics or morals. Antagonism was thought natural to politics, to the extent that Aristotle advised political allies to choose friendship of virtue over their alliance. But the twentieth century has been witness to such horrific violence being perpetuated in the name of politics, no longer is it being able for thinkers to separate the issue of friendship from politics. The question of the other- the colonial other, the racial other, the religious other, the national other has become crucial to philosophers as an unbelievable amount of violence have been perpetuated in these grounds. Thus politics today and our politics of future can no longer ignore the issue of friendship. So long, we have only had political regimes, and regimes by definition are constituted by unequals: those who govern and those who are governed. But

the future society, the community to come has to think beyond this dichotomy: for the sake of brevity, have to learn how to become a friend.

It is in theatre, more than any individual art perhaps that friendship is important and especially so in an amateur theatre groups as commercial prospective is sacrificed at the outset. In such circumstances it is only friends, who can be together and such difficult circumstances make easier to distinguish the friend from the self-centered selfish soul. Ajitesh's comrades in theatre or even those who were much younger to him and have worked with him have always identified Ajitesh with the term friend. Bibhas Chakraborty says-

Thus even friends of same age would often become his disciples. An intensely overpowering friendship. Nobody would be spared. In our times a rare personality who could make everybody his own and instill faith in them.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Ajitesh though coming from a middle class family did never have middle class Bengali insecurities. He was always brave enough to take any risk for the sake of his passion, theatre. For almost two decades, he managed to run amateur theatre groups, first Nadikar, and then Nandimukh without having to ask for grants to either from the Government or commercial funding agencies. He had immense self-belief and achieved everything he could, because of it. It was definitely not easy for him to come from a small town and struggle his way to become one of the finest directors in the history of Bengal. We find some the instances of his self belief and courage in the recollections of his colleagues. Debasish Dasgupta remembers-

I said if you could run the show for at least once a week it would be good. At that time it would have been quite a risk for Nandikar to decide on doing one show per week... But Nandikar began doing shows at the Mukangan and they never had to look back thereafter. Once again it was risk to take a commercial theatre like Rangana but here too making the leap and coming out a success.<sup>xxix</sup>

Ajitesh feared of nothing and nothing could convince him of doing things against his belief, though he was always open to suggestions from everyone. As Bibhash Chakraborty recounts-

Only he who has deep self belief can do such a thing and it is his self belief that gave Ajiesh immense courage. Regarding art, he had no fear and neither any compromising mentality. Many a questions arose on the context of foreign plays: Why so many foreign plays brother? Aha this is not Brecht! You did Pirandello! He is a reactionary! Again Pinter! He is absurd! None of the stupid criticism that he faced could shake him up. No political party or any person could instill fear in him. He used to listen to everybody with the same attention. But whenever he realized unwarranted criticism or advice is being made he could very easily become indifferent to it.<sup>xxx</sup>

According to those who have worked with him, Ajitesh not only had self belief; but could instill belief in others and perhaps this formed the key to his being an unmatched coordinator. As a coordinator, Ajitesh's tremendous courage and uncompromising mentality has now become proverbial. The way, he had to begin, again and again from the scratch with all the humility of course bears testimony to such a conception. He had struggled himself to a position of importance within IPTA, but had to leave it. He then constructed Nandikar almost from a scratch. Nandikar did never receive in the time of Ajitesh any financial aid from any institution or political party. However, Nandikar did performances continuously not only in Kolkata; but also in towns and villages. The second blow came in form of fourteen members leaving Nandikar in 1966. Ajitesh in response produced "Sher Afghan" in the rehearsal only twelve days. Nandikar regained strength. Again in 1977 he left Nandikar with not a single penny in his pocket and through unmatched rigor formed Nandimukh and produced Paap-Punya".<sup>xxxii</sup>

However, in spite of the being an extraordinary person, he according to his co-workers, never had airs of one. Humility was inherent in Ajitesh's character. Perhaps because of this he had to work more than others but he tried to never disappoint anyone. As Bibhash Chakraborty reflects-

This simplicity in the extraordinary had made him a true people's artist. Whenever he received a call for a show from anywhere in Bengal he never failed to do a show there. Never did the difficulty of the journey, meagerness of the allowance become a hindrance in his way. He used to say- how much you can, wherever you can, act; go to the people. In this manner he has taken Chekov and Brecht to even to the most remote parts of Bengal. He has made his group Nandikar the busiest of all Indian groups, we must remember without governmental subsidies or support from the embassy or patronage of a particular political group.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Now let us come to one of the most important facets of his personality- Ajitesh as a teacher. Ashok Mukherjee had told this author, that even as a teacher, Ajitesh was a more a friend. His method of teaching acting to the young members of his group was also not hegemonic. In one his articles on Ajitesh he voices his views on this issue more clearly-

I have seen many individuals, who were never destined to do theatre have sacrificed their life at it's alter falling in love with Ajitesh. But the most important of all his virtues was that he never put himself before his art, overshadowing it. Like many a great yet proud theatre experts he never had the audacity to say that "my dear I am greater than theatre itself". The true humility learnt at the very outset of his life from the poor people has always saved him from such follies. Thus, he never imposed himself on his students. The only hard oath he had made his students take is: may their emergence be from inside, may they discover themselves by themselves.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Thus, we see Ajitesh never believed in any of his disciples mimicking him, neither did he believe in directing them in their every other action on stage. He always allowed them with space to develop in their own ways. Sandhya Dey, one of his disciples describes Ajitesh's method of teaching in her recollections, which presents us with a very similar picture-

I could understand Ajitesh Bandopadhyay as a director to some extent in the production of *Pappunya* at Nandimukh. He never used to create any sort of pressure on anybody. He always gave any actor or actress a certain amount of independence. His technique was to bring out of me the way I could play the character. He imposed nothing. Thus, one would realize that among those who have acted with or under Ajitesh there is none who imitate him. At many places, one can witness theatre or acting imitating Utpal Dutt or Sombhu Mitra but imitation of Ajitesh? It is not there in any of his plays, never-this is my realization. Say, Rudrada, Asitda, Chinmoy Ray, Radhuda and Bibhashda all of them have acted with Ajitesh; but none of them express any imitation. This is because, his technique of teaching was- 'I am saying it as I would; you have to express it as you would'. I think in such a process actors and actresses develop more completely. Thus, many actors and actresses of Nandikar are of high stature: all of them are skilled and well equipped. He has prepared numerous great actors like Rudradada, Bibhashda, ashokda, Maya Ghosh, Bina Mukherjee, Monju Bhaacharya, latika basu, ajoy Ganguly, keya Chakraborty, Deepali Chakraborti, Shelly Pal but none of them are mere imitators...<sup>xxxiv</sup>

We hear from Radharaman Tapadar that Ajitesh not only taught the junior members of his group to act; but gave them responsibilities which would help them develop completely, adept at every aspect of theatre-

At Nandikar Ajiteshda wanted to make everybody technically sound in every aspect of theatre. When Rudraprasad got the responsibility of directing *Antigone*, I was given the chance to direct *Saudagarer Nouka*.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Theatre is not only a reflection of life on stage but a microcosm of life in its institutional frame work too. Within that people are not only evaluated for their aesthetic imagination and artistic skills; but on also their role on being the part of a collective a community. Within the community of theatre too, as a teacher, as a coordinator, we find him practicing the same ethical imperatives that he practiced in his theatre practice. Here too, he wanted to break free from the mimetic frame work of pedagogy and appear as a presence at a threshold. He rejected the hierarchies that are inherent to such a framework. His was a struggle against middle-class mediocrity that plagued the majority of the theatre workers. He intended to know what seemed ethically right to him and follow it with all his ability and capacities. Compromise, as we see, was not his forte, neither ethical, nor economical, nor political. His allegiance was only to theatre and the theatre of

the people; not people of any group, party, community, class or religion but a category of generic people.



*Saudagarer Nauka* (1976) - Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay

### Conclusion

The 1960's in Bengali theatre, before Ajitesh appeared on the Bengali theatre scene was the tale of exploits and limitations of two exceptional figures of theatre. While they were stalwarts by their own right, their limitations had begun revealing themselves in the middle and later parts of the decade. On one hand, the regimentation of the party on the other, the self, on one hand ideology and on the other ethics began clenching like shackles on the spirit of the group theatre movement. There were debates being raised over petty issues. Theatre which should have been the primary objective found itself in the backseat. New institutions of power had emerged in forms of the two leading amateur theatre groups: Bohurupee and LTG. Thus, a void was being created and craving for a new intervention was growing within: an intervention which would find a way beyond the interested ideology and aesthetics of indifference. What aggravated the crisis was a sheer dearth of good plays on one hand and on the other hand propaganda for the promotion of traditional and indigenous forms from the Central Government and finally the economical crisis and consequent risk of falling into the financial scaffolds of the Government or other financial institutions. Thus Bengali theatre was in the need of someone who would succumb to neither institutional pressure nor be lured by financial benefit and who can also find his way through the aesthetic problems of modernity evident to a post-colonial state. It was Ajitesh who appeared in the Bengali theatre scene with seemingly the promise to fill this vacuum. With only and only theatre in his mind and the

humility of a genius he negotiated with all these obstacles to guide theatre through these times of crisis. He was Passionate towards theatre; and along with passion had a very well thought out structure through which he wanted to receive and learn from both western and regional forms and ultimately, forging out a language of theatre unique in its own sense. Thus Ajitesh was a presence- a presence which perhaps cannot be summed up in a single theoretical formulation for every theoretical formulation is representative and thus exclusionary by birth. But; the only ethics and ideal that Ajitesh sacrificed his life to, was that of being a friend, an equal which perhaps is the most politically difficult task of our times yet a task which is ultimately beyond the capacity of all political theory: of a being a presence at the liminality, at the threshold of an appearance and a disappearance. But Ajitesh lost to life before he could fulfill his promise to the Bengali theatre; but today if there is any way forward for Bengali theatre or for that matter theatre in general, it would have to take into count the ways chartered by Ajitesh.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* Michael Hardt (Trans.), (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 18-19.

<sup>ii</sup> Bimolendu Dutta, 'Saontal Bidroho, Gana Natya Sangha o Ajitbabu', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 89.

<sup>iii</sup> Ranjan Gangopadhy, 'Ajitesh Bandopadhay ebong Gana Natya Sangha', *Natyanashi* II year. Volume, 12-13.

<sup>iv</sup> Radharaman Tapadar, 'Amar Ajitda', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 65.

<sup>v</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhay, 'Abhinetar Diary theke', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 13.

<sup>vi</sup> In Sombu Mitra's writings too we find vivid descriptions of horrors of contemporary situation in Bengal. Mitra cites those experiences as the reason why he joined Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Organisation.

<sup>vii</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhay, 'Theatrer Darshak: atyalpa Abhijog', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 11.

<sup>viii</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhay, 'Baiplabik Theatre Ebong Amader Ajker Sangram', *Ajitesh Bandopadhay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 22.

<sup>ix</sup> Ajitesh Gangopadhy, 'Amar Chetanar Rang', in *Ajitesh Bandopadhay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 19.

<sup>x</sup> Samik Bandopadhay, 'Ajitesh: Theatre-Politics', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 127.

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- <sup>xi</sup> Dilip Dutta, 'Ajitesh Bandopadhayer Shakhatkar: Prosongo Theatre', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 148.
- <sup>xii</sup> Samik Bandopadhyay, 'Ajitesh: Theatre-Politics', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 127.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Frederic Jameson introduces the concept of Pastiche in his work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (p-16): "The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche."
- <sup>xiv</sup> Theatre is inherently political as the audience of theatre is always people united in an arbitrary collective.
- <sup>xv</sup> Peter Brook celebrated what he called 'multiculturalism' in his production "Mahabharata".
- <sup>xvi</sup> Most of the African intelligentsia.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Utpal Dutt, 'Epic-er Sarkatha', *Utpal Dutt Gadya Sangraha Volume-I* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2011), 280.
- <sup>xviii</sup> 'Problems and Directions: Calcutta's New Theatre: A Conversation with Two Critics Dharani Ghosh and Samik Bandyopadhyay', *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 15, No. 2, *Theatre in Asia* (Spring, 1971), 241-245 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144645>>, accessed on 22 October, 2011.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anubad Natak o Moulik Natok', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 8.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anudito Natok', *Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: Godyo Sngraha* (Kolkata: Protibhas, 2010), 26.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid, 28
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid, 27
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anubad Natak o Moulik Natok', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 8.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Dilip Dutta, 'Ajitesh Bandopadhayer Shakhatkar: Prosongo Theatre', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 148.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, 'Anubad Natak o Moulik Natok', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 9.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Bibhash Chakraborty, 'Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, baire proshanti', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 82.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Bibhash Chakraborty, 'Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, baire proshanti', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November, 2010), 58.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>xxx</sup> Bibhash Chakraborty, 'Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, Baire Proshanti', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 83.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>i</sup> Ashok Mukhopadhyay, 'Hey Shomoy uttal shomoy: ajitesh badopadhayer natyo protibha', *Prosongo Abhinay* (Kolkata: Kalabhrit, 2007), 118.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>ii</sup> Bibhash Chakraborty, 'Ajitesh Bhitore Agun, Baire Proshanti', 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 82.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>iii</sup> Ashok Mukhopadhyay, 'Hey Shomoy uttal shomoy: ajitesh badopadhayer natyo protibha', *Prosongo Abhinay* (Kolkata: Kalabhrit, 2007), 119.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>iv</sup> Sandhya Dey, 'Nandikar Theke Nandimukh', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 74.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>v</sup> Radharaman Tapadar, 'Amar Ajitda', in 'Prosongo: Ajitesh Bandopadhyay', *Theatre Proscenium Natyapatra* (Kolkata: November 2010), 65.

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