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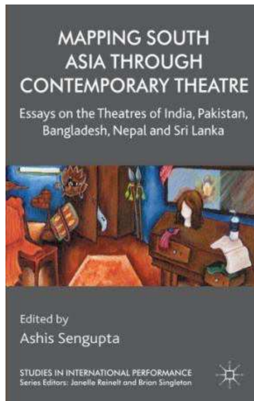
Review Article

Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre:
Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka



Edited by Ashis Sengupta
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Pp. I-xviii, 250.

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Theatre as a performing art is potentially an effective medium for bringing together sections of people across cultures and nations, particularly if it has the proper message to convey. It is more applicable to a geo-political area like South Asia with a history of shared moments and experiences. South Asian countries, which are politically volatile, have experienced turbulent periods of intra-national identity politics and violent inter-national hostilities. The 'shadow lines' that exist between warring communities and nations are the result of intensely felt, and violently executed, politics of 'difference' although the fact remains that many of them share the same origin and similar history. Artificially created national, political and religious prejudices which stem from hegemonic forces operating within nations block efforts of people-to-people cultural contact. It is in this context that the publication of *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka* edited by Ashis Sengupta may be considered to be a welcome gesture towards understanding the region from cultural points of view. The book provides a well-researched picture of the contemporary South Asian theatre in the five countries of the region mentioned in its subtitle. It is, as Aparna Dharwadker points out in her Foreword to the book, "is the first study to confront the problem of fragmentary approaches, and to think ambitiously and systematically 'beyond the nation'" (x). South Asia, recognised as "a key geopolitical area," provides the contributors of the book this "beyond the nation" space for an intensive study of its theatre movements. The approach in this volume is, as Dharwadker points out, "an inclusively 'regional' [i.e. South Asian] rather than exclusively 'national' approach" (ix).

It is, however, difficult to view the 'regional' – South Asian – nations as exclusively defined cultural zones. Many of them share linguistic and cultural affinities that invite cross-border 'infiltration.' Indeed cultural aspects and products like theatre traditions and conventions, like Hollywood films and songs, defy material borders and circulate among people of 'other' nations. This

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again paves the way for a people-to-people understanding. Cultural groups like theatre activists often go beyond restrictive state-sponsored 'national' cultural schemes and launch their own plans of participating in broader transnational cultural projects. This reviewer has suggested elsewhere that a strong pan-Asian (of course including in its ambit South Asia) cultural understanding can be created "through cultural activities like building up theatre movements and publishing and circulating anthologies of writings from across different Asian countries."[1] Madeeha Gauhar points out in an article, South Asian Theatre Committee (SATCO) festivals in Lahore (1992), Dhaka (1993) and Kathmandu created ripples among theatre activists and audiences in several countries of the region and generated an urge for mutual cooperation in this regard. These festivals, Gauhar continues, enabled the audience "to see theatre from Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and Bagladesh, and also provided theatre activists to have interaction with the visiting actors/directors. SATCO decided to organise festivals in the region and facilitate contacts between theatre groups" (253). Dialogues between theatre artists, producers and organisers across nations led to multi-national theatre productions like those of *The Sixth River*, a project of Pakistani theatre group Ajoka, and *Dukhini*, a collaborative project of Ajoka and the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA). Theatre as a creative art can thus offer scope for effective collaborative projects on a transnational scale.

The volume under review was conceived from such a broad perspective. It forms part of "Studies in International Performance" Series. The books in the series, Series Editors Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton observe, attempt "to expand their disciplinary horizons to include the comparative study of performances across national, cultural, social, and political borders" and to explore the "complexities of transnational cultural productions" (xiii).The 'cultural productions' in the context of the book under review are 'contemporary' theatre performances in the five South Asian countries mentioned earlier. It is rather comprehensive in the sense that it covers not only the English language theatres but mostly those in the local languages, not only mainstream genres but also sub-genres specific to the areas; moreover, it goes to explore the dialogues between the linguistic mediums of the productions, and between genres and sub-genres. In the long critical and insightful introduction ("Introduction: Setting the Stage") which is a pillar of strength for the book, Ashis Sengupta, the editor, provides historical and cultural perspectives from which the theatre performances of the region may be viewed. The introduction which contains surveys of performances across South Asian nations also provides incisive, critical commentaries on the trends of the theatre movements in the countries. This will lay a strong foundation of South Asian theatre criticism for the future scholars. For convenience Sengupta has divided his introduction into several sections. In the first section he redefines the term 'South Asia' reiterating the fact that the imperialistic overtone hidden in the term has been replaced by a strong postcolonial consciousness. He further extends the scope of the term by including diasporic elements beyond its geopolitical boundaries. In the next section he shifts on to 'contemporary South Asian theatre,' defining its meaning and scope. He is basically concerned with the meaning of the word 'contemporary' which he discusses discursively and then conceives the term as "a site of 'conjoined yet incommensurate' elements, both past and present, in 'multiple configurations and variations,' a site of what

[1] This was stated in an article entitled "Sharing a Future: Looking from Cultural Perspectives at Possibilities of Pan-Asianness." It will be published in *Writing Out Identity: Individual Claims, Group Perceptions, and Socio-Cultural Constructions of the Self in Asian Literature* edited by Ulrike Middendorf and published by Ostasien Verlag (Deutsche Ostasienstudien 9).

could be described as different and competing temporalities, multiple and alternative modernities, one transecting another" (5-6).He argues that in respect of countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka the word 'contemporary' may be taken as 'post-independence' and 'postcolonial,' while in respect of "Nepal, which was never a 'colony' as such, [it] should mean the stretch of time since the dissolution of the Rana oligarchy (1951)" (6).In all these contexts, there are 'postcolonial engagements' in the sense that there are engagements with power sources and power structures, the most important of these being the State itself. The 'contemporary' in the book projects "the complex, diverse theatre landscape of South Asian countries since independence" (7), countries that have a history of common linkages and of violent separations. Mapping such a complex history of a complex region, we understand, is really a challenging job which Sengupta and his colleagues have done successfully. By delineating the different political histories of the different countries in the next section, Sengupta accounts for the different theatre landscapes of the countries and shows that "even when a particular sub/genre of theatre (for example, Boal's theatre of the Oppressed) is popular throughout the region, it has its countless variants depending on the ground reality and performance tradition of the country in question" (10). In the next section, he goes into the question of both history and drama as acts of representation and observes that "[t]heater in its different forms …supplements conventional history" (13). In engaged theatre which is mostly oppositional, he contends, the relationship between the theatre and the 'real' is more direct. The effect of such a theatre on the mind of the audience is more lasting. "And therein lies such social theatre's efficacy" (16). The next section is a detailed commentary on the theatres and contexts of the five countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka – which prepares a context for the reading of the articles on the individual countries by individual contributors and this is followed by his brief comments on the essays in the volume, He rounds off with his revisiting of the objectives of the book itself.

The first article of the book – Shayoni Mitra's "Dispatches from the Margins: Theatre in India since the 1990s" – takes the 1990s as the main domain of its discussion. The decade, she observes, was marked by the opening up of economic markets in 1991, de-monopolisation drives, private economic investments, and consequent restructuring of the cultural capital. It witnessed a total shift of the Indian theatre norms – from the centralising and homogenising tendencies of the earlier phase to a more accommodating, even radical, ones. The plays performed since the 1990s interrogated the discourse of the singular 'national' theatre and foregrounded the visibility of many theatres representing many Indias. The 'contemporaneity' projected in this article is evidently not in conformity with the editorial understanding of the term 'contemporary' as being 'post-independence.' Mitra is rather 'radical' and more 'contemporary' in her conception of the term since she focusses on the theatres from 1990s onwards. But, then, in order to show the radical difference of the latest phase, she discusses the earlier post-independence history of theatre practices and policy making. This is avowedly for the purpose of contrast rather than for a comprehensive survey. Nevertheless, the effort provides a fuller picture of the contours of the development of 'post(-)colonial' Indian theatre. Her projection of two important moments of Indian theatre – 1956 and 2008– is intended to show the difference of perspectives. Two different seminars were held in the two different years mentioned above. While the first Drama seminar held in 1956 reflected the stand of 'Nehruvian soft nationalism' and reinforced the concept of a singular 'national' theatre to the exclusion of the marginal ones, the latter, interestingly titled "Not the Drama Seminar," (three different years of the seminar 2006,

2007 and 2008 are provided by Mitra on pages 69 and 72, a glaring oversight for a book of such high standard) organised by India Theatre Forum challenged the ideology of the former. She observes,

> The oppositional 'Not' in the 2007 (sic) seminar then is the key to unlocking the aspirational identities of twenty-first century Indian theatre. It is *not* in Delhi, the nation's capital, it is *not* attempting a singular historiography for Indian theatre, it is *not* concerned with a Sanskritized classical past, it is *not* positing Hindi (and by extension a version of militant Hinduism) as key, it is *not* limited to the very elite of the field. From within this emphatic series of negations, emerges a tentative attempt at heterogeneous, and perhaps utopic futurity. (72; emphases original)

The marginalised theatre, now being encouraged, became more and more visible. Mitra mentions three main areas where the rise of the 'marginalised' can be noticed: women's theatre, Indian English theatre and the Dalit theatre.

Women's theatre obviously was absorbed into the grand spectacle of the national theatre where their identity was rather subservient. They became much more assertive since 1990s. Mitra quotes Tutun Mukherjee who observes that "women are found to be largely absent from the documented history of modern Indian theatre as a cultural process and drama as a literary genre" (qtd. in Mitra 80) and then comments, "In summary what has come to connote modern Indian theatre since independence is either a playwright-driven cache of urban middle-class plays or a director-propelled experimentation in formalised aesthetics. Women theatre workers have pointedly been excluded from this process of cultural nationalism" (80). Nevertheless, India has seen the emergence of a host of talented women theatre workers who are "the antithesis of the big bill production – it is the intimate, non-linear, non-naturalistic performances of women like Anuradha Kapoor, Anamika Haksar, Maya Rao, and Zuleikha Chaudhari" (80-1). Mitra notes two important aspects of women's theatre: 'mediation of female subjectivity' which makes their avant-garde works 'politically' significant and the use of technology which, she says, is not just 'an invisible facilitator' but 'a participant in the action' (83).The second category of marginalised theatre mentioned by Mitra, interestingly, is Indian English theatre which does not have a big enough constituency to receive the productions. Even then they are occasionally produced in metropolitan centres and in academic campuses. Students and teachers of Indian universities are the main producers and consumers of campus productions. Most of the Indian English playwrights write and produce their plays in more than one languages. Mitra discusses Mahesh Dattani in some detail as he projects themes that concern the deviants and the marginalised.

In the third category Mitra discusses the Dalit performances and indicates their 'radical imaginary' which is being projected in the post-1980s scenario. The performances expose the 'mechanisms of othering bodies' (93). Mitra notes down the techniques of subverting the hegemonic caste-influenced systemic mechanisms:

> So firstly, the caste and outcast body is of central concern to dalit performance. Secondly, following from this, realism is often sidelined for genre bending idioms that embrace allegory, musicality, dance, poetry, narrative, and gesture in equal measure. And thirdly a range of folk, rural, urban, and popular forms become available for mobilization since dalit performance does not feel the need to provide a teleological and evolutionary account of contemporary everyday life. (93)

Since accessibility of the performance space like a big auditorium is always a problem for cash-trapped marginalised theatre groups, Dalit theatre, like many other theatre groups, moved out to streets as the site of their performance. In such alternative spaces were born theatre performances, both realistic and non-realistic. Mitra rounds up her article by mentioning that Indian theatre has witnessed shifting margins, appropriations of the marginal into the centre and reconfiguration of new alliances 'in unlikely places, through unexpected collaborations from unpredictable inspirations: its history a testament to the temporary" (98). She thereby hints at the great possibilities of the Indian theatres lying ahead.

The second article "Theatre Chronicles: Framing Theatre Narratives in Pakistan's Socio-political Context" is written by Asma Mundrawala who traces the country's theatre from its 'complex beginnings' (103). From its very beginning Pakistan has been facing the dilemma of not only charting its own political destiny but also of how to reconfigure its own national identity simply because it derives its origin from the 'mother' nation called India. The basic problem lay in how much it owed to its 'Indian' past which was intrinsically associated with a secular (and often with a dominant 'Hindu') cultural history. As Mundrawala observes, Muslim middle class, after the partition, was very conservative and "denied any shared heritage with India and considered all elements of Hindu culture as borrowed and therefore not Pakistani" (105). Despite a deliberate attempt to deny its cultural past, the early Pakistani theatre clearly showed its debt to the age-old Indian traditions, including the popular, folk and oppositional-ideological (e.g. Marxist) theatre conventions. To make matters worse, the rise Islamic fundamentalism, military-politician-feudal nexus, a strong anti-India feeling posed threats to the development of a secular, democratic theatre. Moreover, Islamist ideology of Pakistan "harbors a hostile attitude toward the performing arts because of their capacity to question beliefs and their 'foregrounding' of the body" (105). It was in an environment of intolerance of the 'others' – the religious, ethnic, linguistic groups, and women – that the new Pakistan theatre was born. The promulgation of Martial Law (1977) and the enactment of many prohibitory laws made protest movements a very difficult proposition. Even then two theatre groups that staged political performances relentlessly are Sheema Kermani's Tehrik-e-Niswan (1979) and Madeeha Gauhar's Ajoka (1984). They supported various resistance movements including women's movements and workers movements. There were other theatre groups like Ali Ahmed's NATAK and Aslam Azhar's DASTAK (1982) who too participated in the anti-establish movements by staging theatres. Most of their plays were political in nature and directed against, among others, Zia-ul-Haque's repressive measures. Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajokain particular "embraced traditions from their predecessors, ranging from indigeneous forms and early theatre encompassing social issues and themes of national unity to Western realism and ultimately the Brechtian tradition as appropriated by leftist theatre in South Asia" (116). Ajoka's play *Jaloos*, Mundrawala points out, bears distinct influence of the Indian playwright Badal Sircar's *Michhil* written in Bengali. She quotes from a news source to label it as "theatre of defiance" watching of which gives a "sense of participation in that defiance" (117).

With the onset of neoliberalism Pakistani theatre's support for political causes declined. Market economy played an important role even in the theatre productions. There emerged donor-driven, NGO-inspired theatre as a tool for development. There were training programmes for creating, and honing the skill of, theatre artists. Interestingly, 'a new brand of English language musicals' emerged with government support - these often promoted crass entertainment values. But even in the midst of this lure of the market, Ajoka and

Tehrik-e-Niswan consistently followed their ideological engagements:

> Battling the commodification of theatre and many other hurdles impeding their growth, both groups continue to address resounding issues – such as persecution of minorities (*Hum Rokaen Gae*/We Will Stop It, Tehrik-e-Niswan 2012), the rising wave of fundamentalism (*Hotel Mohenjodaro*, Ajoka 2008), and evils of war (*Jung Ab Nahin Hogi*/ There Will be No War, an adaptation of Lysistrata, Tehrik-e-Niswan, 2002/2010) – amongst many other concerns of social and political relevance." (131)

In the third article "Designs of Living in the Contemporary Theatre of Bangladesh" Syed Jamil Ahmed clearly specifies the meaning of the word 'contemporary' as applicable to the young nation. It mentions 'the tumultuous years immediately preceding the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 at one end' and the 'first decade of the current century, at the other" (135).But in its immediately preceding national existence it shared its history with Pakistan. Ahmed's account thus intersects with that of Asma Mundrawala in respect of their earlier common but unequal co-existence. Ahmed identifies the performance of Munier Chowdhury's *Kabar* (The Grave) on 21February 1953 (when it was part of Pakistan) as "the defining moment of the narration of the nation (Bangladesh now) in its theatrical context" (136). Mundrawala also mentions this one-act play in connection with (West) Pakistan's selective amnesia of (East) Pakistan's theatre in general and its linkage to the Communist Party inspired theatre in particular. Chowdhury was imprisoned because of his Communist link and his association with the Language Movement. He "wrote the play at the request of a fellow prisoner and Communist Party member, Ranesh Dasgupta, who wanted the play to be performed by the imprisoned members of the Party to commemorate the sacrifices made by students during the Language Movement in 1952" (Mundrawala 108). The entire proceeding was kept secret. The play was staged surreptitiously "by the light of lanterns, lamps, matchsticks" (Ahmed 136). So, as Mundrawala has already asserted, *Kabar*, contrary to the common belief, testifies that political theatre did exist in Pakistan (in its eastern wing) even before the 1970s.Later, Syed Shamsul Haq's verse drama *Payer Awaj Pawa Jay* (At the Sound of Marching Feet, 1976), Selim al-Deen's plays, part of the Gram Theatre Movement in 1981, *Bisad Sindhu* (Dhaka Padatik 1991 and 1992) and many other oppositional theatres embodied the new cultural nationalist spirit of the nation, retrieved 'local histories and local performance traditions,' and challenged Islamic radicalism. Different performances also projected struggles against military-Islamic alliance. Rabindranath Tagore had been in many such endeavours a source of inspiration, particularly during the Civil War and post-independence cultural environment.

The narration of the nation in its hegemonic, majoritarian sense, in its 'arborescent' schema of cultural productions, observes Ahmed, suffered punctures when ethnic groups, long forgotten, came forward with their own performances. A 'flight' from the mainstream trends was found in Desh Natak's production of *Birsa Kabya* in 1990 which dealt with the rebellion of the Munda ethnic group (1899-1900), or in productions of performances like *Rarang* (Distant Drum, produced by Aranyak, 2004) or in *Mahedra Banabas* (The Exile of Mahendra performed by The Joom Esthetic Council from Rangmati). All these productions which probed "how ethnic diversity can be accommodated within the monolithic narration of the nation" (145) suggest the rhizomic effect that *Birsa Kabya* produced on other ethnic groups. Production of performances by the subaltern groups may also be classified from this point of view. The theatres produced from the point of view of the 'woman question' also received adequate

attention from the author of the article who has discussed performances like *Irsa* (Jealousy), *Kokilara* (the Kokilas, 1989) and *Binodini*.

But Ahmed feels that the theatre needs to be redirected to "postnational 'routes' to a pluralist process of becoming" (167) – he suggests that theatre should more effectively engage with the 'politics of difference' rather than with the 'narration of nation.' In the gender axis, it should move towards the tabooed areas like transsexuality and homosexuality.

In the next article "Towards an Engaged Stage: Nepali Theatre in Uncertain Times" Carol C. Davies charts out the complex history of Nepali theatre which too is intricately associated with the history of the nation. In this sense, the article, like its companion essays, projects the relationship between the nation and its cultural products, the latter changing its accents with the change in the conditions of the nation. Davis defines the 'contemporaneity' in the context of Nepal in terms of the abolition of the Rana oligarchy and the beginning of the democracy in the country. It is with this beginning that Nepal opens up to the world, particularly the West. It is the beginning of what she terms as 'Nepali modernism' (177). It is during this phase that theatre moved out of the palace ground into the popular arena like the theatre halls, or even the open streets. Religious-ritual-epic themes were also replaced by political and social ones relevant to the changing nation and its people. It was Balakrishna Sama (1902-81) who combined East-West traditions in his plays and gave a new turn to the Nepali theatre. Nepali theatre, however, entered a new stage of experimentation when the nation encountered threats to democracy, and the common people experienced state surveillance during the pro-democracy movement and later during the Maoist insurgency. AsheshMalla's *sadaknaatak* (street theatre) gave anew turn to the Nepali theatre. It presented overtly political themes through its performances. Malla's group members staged their plays with lightning speed and evaporated from the scene of performances before the arrival of the police. *Hami Basanta Khoji Rahechaun* (We are Searching for the Spring, 1982) is perhaps Malla's most well-known play. Malla reached out to other playwrights and performers to exchange ideas and to experiment with his own plays as well as to intensify his pro-democracy activities. Sunil Pokharel and his Arohan Theatre too contributed to the development of engaged theatre. Pokharel also developed *Kachahari* theatre similar to Augusto Boal's Forum theatre and this offered scope for spontaneous and extempore development of theme and style during the performance itself. Both Malla and Pokharel turned to theatre with social messages after the restoration of democracy. The latter concentrated on issues like health, poverty, community development, education, forest conservation – sometimes with funds from the NGOs or other organisations. During the Maoist phase these theatre workers staged plays pointing out the suicidal nature of state-Maoist encounters which killed thousands of innocent people. Malla himself grew pessimistic which is borne out by his plays like *Gadaicha Pheri Yudhako Ghoshana* (Who is declaring War? 2001) and *Mritu Utsav* (Death Festival, 2003).

Abhi Subedi wrote his play *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* (2000) in English. It was considered a very important play by directors like Pokharel. The Nepali version of the play *Aaruka Fulka Sapna* was directed by Pokharel himself. Subedi wrote more plays in Nepali and his *Agniko Katha* which dwelt on the conflict between the state and the Maoists won much acclaim. There were a good number of Nepali renderings of world classics like Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (*Putaliko Ghar* 2003) which were being produced simultaneously. One important developments of the Nepali theatre was the foundation of a number of theatre centres and training facilities. Pokharel was instrumental in

establishing a school of theatre called Gurukul in 2002. He also built up a second one in Biratnagar in 2009. Ashesh Malla too established his own Sarwanam Dramatic Art Centre in 2012.

Theatre in its most interactive forms continued to influence the people. The process still continues. “Nepal today,” as Davis sums up, “wrestles with aesthetics, topics, and form, and sorts out its place in a constantly shifting society” (206).

The last article of the volume – Kanchuka Dharmasiri’s “From Narratives of National Origin to Bloodied Streets: Contemporary Sinhala and Tamil Theatre in Sri Lanka” – captures the developments of Sri Lanka theatre during the postcolonial period, mainly from the 1960s to the present. Much of it was concerned with the history of turbulent political course of the country, particularly the inter-ethnic violence in which the state is widely believed to have played a partisan role. Sri Lankan theatre has been performed mainly in either Sinhala or Tamil. Dharmasiri considers modern theatre of the country as the “product of the postcolonial cultural renaissance, economic changes, and politics of space, class, and language” (209). She notes the politics of language in the efforts to equate Sri Lanka theatre with the national theatre. Gamini Haththotuwegama who pioneered the street theatre critiqued such oversimplified and hegemonic concept. Performance artists of the time also questioned the fetishes of economic liberalisation, commercialisation and commodity circulation of the following decades the effects of which were highly felt by the ordinary people. Vivurtha Veedi Natya Kandayama (The Wayside and Open Theatre) which was founded in 1974 gave an intellectual turn to theatre and in their performances they criticised the trends of commercialisation which resulted in the changes in the traditional value system. Their plays like *Open Economy* (1978) and *Wesek Dekma* (Wesek Vision, 1979) may be mentioned in this context. Its production of *You Saw … I Saw* (1989) embodies the violence of the 1980s. Theatres of the time also reflected an acute social consciousness.

During the Civil War, Dharmasiri notes,Tamil theatre disappeared from Colombo, the main site of theatre activities, but it was practised intensely in other parts of the country. Open theatre in community spaces prospered. K. Shanmugalingam’s Tamil play *Man Sumantha Meniyer* (With Sweat and Dust on Their Shoulders) was, however, first performed in 1985 at the Kailaspathy Hall, Jaffna. It captured the picture of innocent people trapped in the Civil War zones. Speaking of the role of gender in Sri Lankan theatre, Dharmasiri points out that though there is some visibility of women artists in Sri Lanka theatre, there is a real dearth of talented directors and actresses. The “extent of women’s presence in Sri Lanka’s theatre, however,” she feels, “is slowly increasing” (226). She also notices the presence of collaborative efforts “to foster dialogue across different communities which in itself is a very positive sign in the strife-torn island nation. She offers an interesting example:

> Founded by Parakrama Niriella and H. A. Perera in 2003, Janakaraliya holds a unique position in Sri Lankan theatre because of its production of plays in both Sinhalaand Tamil with an aim to take theatre to wide-ranging audiences. The group’s members are from both linguistic communities and some actors are of mixed ethnic origins, reminding their audiences of the problematic nature of every facile binary. Translation – from Sinhala into Tamil and vice versa – is a distinctive feature of Janakaraliya’s activities… (226-7)

She therefore displays a positive role of the theatre in the reconciliation of different ethnic groups in the context of the volatile environment of the nation. Hybridity, too, metaphorically suggests a very postcolonial phenomenon of a third space of enunciation in the nation that may be promoted.

The spatio-temporal cartography of theatre of the region during the 'contemporary' period that the book under review projects yields certain important inputs. All the countries covered by the book went through political upheavals that affected popular aspirations. Theatre stepped in to voice the aspirations and helped bringing about transformations in the system. The theatres here are therefore largely 'political' in their ideology. Street theatres were the best avenue pursued by several groups to reach the people and voice their indignation. Secondly, in most of the countries there were strong alliance between the army, politicians, and feudal lords. In Pakistan and Bangladesh in particular Islamic fundamentalists also joined the combination. Since Islam is against 'representation' and theatre is a form of representation, religious ideologues were often against theatre. Syed Jamil Ahmed in his book *In Praise of Niranjan: Islam, Theatre and Bangladesh* (2001) links this dogmatic view with "centuries old interpretations accruing from the traditions of *Qiyas* and *Ijma*. "The scholastic theologians, through 'consensus of the scholars' and through 'analogy,' sought sanctions for prohibition of representation and theatre in the *Qur'an*…" (26). He, however, argues that the passages in the *Qur'an* "contain nothing against representation in general and theatre in particular." Similarly, the Prophet, Ahmed says, "had no clearly defined position regarding this matter" (26). Even then conservative and fundamentalist elements overzealously stood against theatres. It goes to the credit of the theatre artists that they defied not only the traditionalists and fundamentalists, but against the powerful combinations of all hues. In the process they had to sacrifice a lot but the nations gained in the process.

Ashis Sengupta has done a wonderful job by planning the volume and translating his objectives into reality – in the form of*Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka*. All the articles are well-researched. The contributors, it appears, are quite familiar with their fields of research and the professional touch is never missing. The volume bridges a gap in the South Asian theatre scholarship. It has not certainly adopted an India-centred approach that is usually followed in critical studies in the field. It has juxtaposed theatre activities of the five countries side by side but interestingly this juxtaposition locates the areas of both intersections and deviations, thereby opening up the avenues of conscious collaborative theatre, and scholarly, activities. This reviewer hopes that more inclusive, and interactive, studies on pan-Asian/South Asian theatre aesthetics and practices will be taken up in future.

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