থেস্পিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

Title: Re-making 'Public Sphere' in *Tiner Tolowar*: Performing Gender, Class, and Caste of 19th Century Bengal

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DOI: 10.63698/Thespian.13.1.1904 || Published: 07 December 2025.

Yr. 13, Issue 25, 2025

Bengali New Bengali Edition
April-May

থেস্পিয়ান
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Editorial Board

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Re-making 'Public Sphere' in *Tiner Tolowar*: Performing Gender, Class, and Caste of 19th Century Bengal

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Abstract

This essay offers a neo-historicist reading of *Tiner Tolowar* (The Tin Sword), a play by Utpal Dutt against censorship, situating nineteenth-century Bengali society as a contested terrain of class, caste, gender, and colonial power. The play was first performed in 1971 by the newly formed theatre group named People's Little Theatre by Utpal Dutt. The playtext interrogates how theatre becomes a cultural battleground where colonial pedagogies, capitalist interests, and indigenous reformist/revivalist ideologies intersect. By analyzing characters like Priyonath and Kapten Babu, the paper explores how theatre dramatizes the contradictions of the Bengali *Bhadralok*—caught between colonial mimicry and indigenous assertion. The essay also unpacks the gendered structure of power embedded within the domestic-public divide, showing how female performers like Moyna become symbols of both resistance and commodification under colonial state. Drawing on the works of Tanika Sarkar, Ranajit Guha, and Partha Chatterjee, the essay argues that *Tiner Tolowar* stages a historically contingent yet ideologically rich performance of societal transformation, making theatre itself a site of cultural and political negotiation. Nevertheless, the paper is limited in addressing the political contingency in the 70s in the last century and also in the contemporary time while it was re-produced by Suman Mukherjee, an important Bengali theatre director, through a collaborative effort. Another limitation underscores the analysis of performance and scenography through a contemporary intervention as the article focuses on the context of the play text and teases out the politics in the colonial *stage*.

Article History

Received **01 Aug. 2025**
Revised **06 Dec. 2025**
Accepted **07 Dec. 2025**

Keywords

Public Sphere, Class, Gender, Bhadralok, Caste

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Introduction

> It (*Tiner Tolowar*) opens with Dutt, playing Benimadhab, taking off his costume and adorning the blue robe of Titu Mir while Sova Sen, playing Basundhara, begins to recite the dialogues from Priyanath Mallik's Titu Mir play. Chhanda Chatterjee, playing Moyna, from the 'box' up on the left side of the stage, starts signing the patriotic song before descending, assuming her role in Titu Mir as Bangalaksmi. The jeering from the audience becomes enthusiastic admiration and the British Deputy Commissioner of Police, Lambert shouts 'You will pay for this! I swear you will pay for this!' (Dutt: 1997, 141). The curtain comes down as Dutt playing Benimadhab playing Titu Mir, slays the exploitative colonist McGrear (Maguar) with his tin sword. (Sinha Roy, 2024)

This is the last scene of *Tiner Tolowar* that unfurls the rebel on stage, wielding a tin sword against the colonial power and the *Babus,* essentially, the political state from the public stage. This reflection of theatricality is metaphorical, however, showing a possibility of counter-voices against the state oppression, censorship, and the colonial instrumentalization of social barriers and gender differences. Can a tin sword serve as a weapon on a battlefield? While the stage prop is tangible in mimetic theatre, it is ineffective in actual political conflict. However, showing the sword can offer to predicate the revolt in the public domain, at least amidst the formation of voices against any oppression and denigration, not limited to any specific state, space, or time. The paper sparks the trajectory of political theatre, which is debatable as per performance theorists and philosophers like

Janelle Reinelt, Joe Kelleher, and Tony Fisher, where I look into the history of political theatre as a problematization, while arguing that the idea underscores the epistemic violence for both theatre and politics. Nonetheless, the article recuperates the colonial context of Calcutta stage life to explore the conflict between the dominant and dominated voices, through the performative trajectory in conjunction with colonial and indigenous traditions and voices. The playtext is revolutionary in terms of the approach to show the rebellion and the dialectical approach to unveil resilient voices in the conjuncture of colonial society, further creating a semblance of contemporary time, where theatre might transcend its limits to condescend its space into the broader political sphere through mise-en-scène, aesthetic tactics, and creating a newer dimension in spectatorship.

Tiner Tolowar, a play by Utpal Dutt (1929-1993), offers the critical historiography of the nineteenth-century public sphere around colonial playhouses in the context of class, caste, gender, and the intervention of colonial power. The play led to a canonical performance text for understanding the 'political' in the public sphere from the aspect of freedom of speech, gender expression on stage, and the possibility of 'democratization' against the odds of state intervention, social sanctions, and cultural 'hegemony'. Partha Chatterjee (2016) elaborates more about the public sphere around the world of theatre and playhouses in the 19th century in his words- "In British India, for instance, the first modern public sphere was created in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the form of organized demands for freedom of the press, representation in matters of taxation and limits on the arbitrary exercise of power" (202). In the late 20th century, Utpal Dutt, a famous theatre veteran of his time, established his theatre group, 'People's Little Theatre,' and started

the journey of this group with *Tiner Tolowar* in 1971. The play was first performed on the 12th of August 1971 in Rabindra Sadan. Nearly 50 years later, the play was re-designed and performed through the collaborative effort (production) of three theatre groups[1] and directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay[2].

The play, first staged in 1971, serves as a heartfelt tribute to the courageous theatre actors of 19th-century Bengal who defied social constraints and state oversight to cultivate vibrant Bengali theatre communities—an alternative public sphere of their own making. In the preface to this play (1973), Dutt eloquently expressed his reverence for these trailblazers: 'I honor those who contributed to the centenary of Bengali playhouses—individuals who never bowed to the oppressive norms of regressive Bengali society and who have faced ridicule at various stages of their lives'.[3] Dutt's statement underscores the historical significance of colonial theatre in urban Bengal, illustrating how it fostered cultural unity, patriotism, and the quest for self-identity, all while utilizing a colonial framework to channel the rich rasas and emotional expressions inherent in India's *puran-itihasa* tradition. In Mallarika Sinha Roy's (2024) language, *Tiner Tolowar* is among such plays of Dutt that were 'attempts to uncover the forgotten histories of the Indian nationalist movement or to looking closely into the crevices of colonial modern-ity'. I argue that theatre houses gradually, in the colonial 'conjuncture' and through the shift in reception, became the space for an alternative voice, a sphere, not contingent to the ideologies of any class fragments, as the performative voices were against the norms established by any order, be it of the *Hindu* or the colonizers. With the following discussion, I will show the 'political' and the 'efficacy' within the playtext: how the 'dissensus' is shown through the ploying of the 'emancipation' within the

plethora of colonial spectators, actors, and their 'autonomous', 'collective' struggle. Tony Fisher (2023) argues that political efficacy should not be viewed merely as a predictable outcome or straightforward demonstration. Instead, he presents it as an 'aleatoric' and 'prelocutionary' phenomenon—an intervention that is inherently 'unintentional' and aimed at either manipulating or disrupting prevailing consensus (267, 270). This perspective illuminates the notion that political action tends to be driven more by strategic objectives and inherent disagreement than by any unified pursuit of consensus (268). Fisher's framework highlights the significance of 'dissensual speech' and 'agonistic' performance (269, 271) within political discourse. In this light, the role of theatre in colonial Bengal becomes particularly enlightening. Here, theatre emerged as a crucial platform through which vernacular cultural forms tackled pressing social, political, and nationalist issues. Initially tailored for an audience of English-educated elites, Bengali theatre gradually expanded its reach. As Chatterjee reminds us, the trajectory embraced melodrama as a powerful tool, simplifying complex moral dilemmas into clear-cut narratives characterized by the struggle of good versus evil. Through its intricate weaving of mythological, historical, and social reform themes, Bengali theatre not only reflected the diversity of its urban spectators but also played a pivotal role in nurturing a collective sense of nationalism. In this sense, theatre transcended mere entertainment; it became a site of political engagement and cultural expression, fostering a space where dissent and dialogue could flourish in the face of colonial pressures.

One of the main characters of *Tiner Tolowar*, Kapten Babu ('Captain' Babu), is the manager/master/director and the leading actor of the group, the 'Great Bengal Opera'. He is

portrayed as a decadent actor-manager of the colonial Bengali stage. While Basundhara, the star actress of the previous decades, may claim attention through her performance, Moyna has emerged as the new 'star' under Kapten Babu's guidance. The struggle of women actresses on stage is a crucial dynamic, as the gender role in the cultural sphere reflects upon the relationship between colonialism, class, and gender in the urban society of Bengal. Dramatic Performance Act (1876) is a context or situation of the play that illustrates the 'struggle' of the actors to claim their autonomy in managing and producing their voices and expressions.

Empire and the Land: Situating *Sahib*, *Bibi*, and *Gulam*

The 19th-century Indian society was a complex tapestry of multiple racial, cultural, and ethnic fabrics. However, the colonizers also had a complex power operation to make the divisions more prominent and help the dominant create 'hegemonies' for the 'otherized' to be ruled and 'governed'. With a growing capitalist economy and governance system by the colonizers in Bengal, we can observe a growing middle-class society; they were called the *Babus* of Calcutta. However, the *Babus* were not a homogeneous class; it included *Babus* who were educated in Western knowledge and those who were not. Apart from this classification, there was an economic classification too; those who had lands and depended on the 'rent' from the land to display their aristocracy, and those who could successfully become businessmen and had a mercantile caliber to use the surplus from their land. There could be another category: those who, although culturally sophisticated, had lost the 'surplus' and become economically impoverished. In *Tiner Tolowar*, the complex society of *Babus* is not only displayed through the 'scenographic' details, but there are many layers in the

playtext for creating reference to political commentaries through dialogues, display, and gesture, historicizing the discrepant society. In the introduction of her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001), Tanika Sarkar discusses the genealogy of the Hindu society in the 19th century to explain the instrumentality of 'masculine' control of the 'nation' through gendered space and dynamics.

The establishment of 'Permanent Settlement'[4] transformed the lands into a dominion solely controlled by the landowners in Bengal. However, due to the different policies of the colonizers, the 'surplus' from the land became less usable in trading. The policies include discrepancies for the export by the native traders by imposing heavy duties. Thus, a few could establish their trading with the help of the European administrators. Meanwhile, other *zamindars* relied on the rent incurred from their lands, and for the growth of an economic surplus and their aristocracy, they became oppressors of the peasants. This agrarian ecosystem for the landowner class turned into the paternalistic values and modalities of a family system; it was orthodox for the women, as the control over the women, according to the Hindu customs, grew more assertive. This is because of 'revivalist' tendencies from the native *Babus* against the European societal discourses to establish an antique pride as a separate Hindu cultural prescription. The judiciary became robust in the case of the 'jurisprudence'. Here, let me explain how jurisprudence withholds localised customary practices and retreats to a uniform idea of 'justice' in the 19th-century agrarian economy of lands. In nineteenth-century British India, jurisprudence—the colonial system of codified law—served as an instrument of domination in the agrarian sector, restructuring indigenous land relations under capitalist property regimes. As Radhika Singha argues, colonial legal

rationality transformed fluid agrarian practices into rigid ownership systems, legitimating landlordism and dispossession under the guise of legal modernity (72). Likewise, Lata Mani shows how colonial jurisprudence universalized patriarchal and class hierarchies, recasting customary relations of land and labor into juridical categories that privileged elite male landholders while disenfranchising peasants and women (89). Jurisprudence then ceased to be merely a tool of governance and instead became a moral-legal apparatus that naturalized exploitation, codifying agrarian subjugation through the construction of inequality. Ironically, there was staunch resistance from the missionaries against the landowners for such oppressive gestures. As a result, many of these peasants were converted to the Christian faith. This transformation polarized society in an ordeal. However, the movements of the Muslim peasants since the 1830s, such as the *Wahabi* and *Farazi* rebellions[5], need to be recognized. For instance, the Lex Loci Act of the 1850s judiciary system propagates that Hindu peasants converting to other religions can retain their property. Therefore, the rural orthodox prescription for the Hindu 'jati' system becomes fragile on the legal ground. The amendment of the 1859 Tenancy Act in 1869 further empowered the landowner to be more agile to the colonial intervention in the Hindu society. The amendment prescribed that the cases related to land disputes would be shifted from the revenue court to the civil court, which might increase the expenses for court cases, as every land dispute case needed to be treated as an individual case in the civil court. The judicial intervention collectivizes a sense of 'defense' within the Hindu dominant castes to protect a distinct Hindu culture, prescribed in antiquity (their 'Shastra' or religious prescription), from the European 'liberty' and 'freedom', alien to the age-old societal system of the Hindus. However, those who successfully navigated the trade landscape often compromised this 'cultural' defense to maintain their advantages with

British officials. In contrast, within the insular framework of Hindu society, the emerging Bengali mercantile class upheld a paternalistic caste identity, controlling family systems while adhering to the values dictated by the 'shastras' with a chauvinistic tone. As Sarkar (2001) notes,

> For landownership does not entail a pure economic role or property relationship: it involves a moral economy of paternalistic relationships where extraction and expropriation are masked and softened by personal encounters and caste based normative values associated with labour, service and ritual activities. It also depends on a self-image of local sovereignty that finds an appropriate resonance in normative and prescriptive gender relations. (11)

Due to the changing dynamics of Hindu society, historians divide the phenomenon into two categories: revivalist and reformist. The ones who wanted to change the Hindu society with the assistance of the Western Knowledge System were the reformists. Moreover, those who wanted to glorify the ancient *Sanatani*[6] past by reviving the normative values and social system as a cultural defense fall into the latter. The entire dynamics were part of the upper and middle-class male business, directly or indirectly affecting gender relations, its 'performance', and the labor structure.

The *Babu's* Play

In the play *Tiner Tolowar*, this complex situation is dominantly visible. Characters like Birkrishna Da fall into the mercantile Bengali class who follow the Hindu societal prescription and believe in caste purity but at the same time manipulate the normative for

material pleasures. He keeps a good relationship with the colonial administrator and uses his theatre group as a token of entertainment for other *Babus* and British administrators. In this way, he retains his influence in both the sections, the landowner class as well as the administrators. His encapsulated wealth allows him to stealthily patronize any form of art and literature that he sought, and impregnate the 'safer' themes through the play-selection, distant from the state's censorship, indignation, and repression. However, their inclination to such playtexts, silent and innate in reaction to the colonial injustice, was critical to the Babudom, thereby asserting his positionality in the 'governmentality'[7] constituted through administrators, service agents (gomastas) and land owners.[8] In *The Bengal Bridgehead: Eastern India and the Origins of British Empire, 1740–1828*, Peter J. Marshall argues that Bengal served as the critical experimental site—or "bridgehead"—for establishing the economic, administrative, and social structures of British colonial rule in India. His central argument is that British dominance in Bengal emerged not merely from military conquest but from the systematic reordering of agrarian and social hierarchies through law, revenue administration, and classification (Marshall 43-5).[9] Dutt's reflection on the power of capital to control societal systems and cultural peripheries would come dynamically. Although, in his theatrical depiction, the 'power' is resisted by a few who find theatre as an ecosystem of promulgating voices against the manipulation and oppression by the ruling class. Priyonath and Benimadhab both represent 'Babus,' but they lack the 'capital' to control dominance. In terms of gender, there is a lot to elaborate on, as the complexity in gender relations, being a then societal phenomenon, seeks attention for a critical evaluation, relegating to the class/caste dynamics. However, colonialism is a crucial phenomenon as it had a direct effect on both gender and class/caste dynamics of the 19th century.

Priyonath represents a complex identity; he is a self-proclaimed 'reformist', a 'babu' by lineage, and a rebel by both choice and experience. Priyonath studied at Presidency College, the earlier name of which was Hindu College. He comes from a very affluent family, and as a student of the Western knowledge system, he has always carried an alien European attire and gestures foreign to ordinary people. He is perceived both as *Babu* and *sahib*- a prelude to the early form of 'hybridity' under colonial influence.[10] Priyonath is well-educated and possesses English communication skills. Unwittingly, communication is used as a power to rule. In a notable scene, Bachaspati, an orthodox Hindu of the area where the Great Bengal Opera is situated, arrives to disrupt their rehearsal, accusing their 'theatre' practice of blasphemous activities in a Hindu society. Priyonath's command of English saves the group members from the indignation and curse of the local Brahmin leader, Bachaspati. This situation underscores how mastering English within the Babudom was intricately used to create ethnic and social divides.

The guards accompanying Bachaspati view Priyonath with apprehension, mainly because he speaks English with the fluency of a *sahib*. The occidental orientation of Priyonath is a power to be used as a colonial instrument for 'governmentality'; regardless, the intent of Priyonath is overlooked. Kapten Babu and others often polemicize him as he speaks in *sadhu* Bengali or in English, which they are only familiar with as a gesture of a *sahib*. In addition, including Kapten Babu, other group members suspect Priyonath of whether he has the caliber to write a *pala*[11] in Bengali. Priyonath is exuberant about his remarkable knowledge of Bengali and Sanskrit. Through this defense, he tries to escape the accusation of being a mimic *sahib*. However, he assails the system of public theatre as it perishes through

performing some age-old, trivial *palas* without serious commitment to reform the theatre space; moreover, a public sphere is potent with reformation for a larger socio-political intent.

Priyonath's work serves as a reformist endeavor, using theatre as a powerful metaphor for society. Kapten Babu's attack is presented in a farcical song against the *sikhshita*[12] Babus. This farcical attack could be seen as a miniature sketch in the subaltern public sphere of print literature, mainly in the *Battala*[13], where these books had a market. Theatre as a public sphere is shown as critical to the reformist. Ranajit Guha, in his first lecture of the series "An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda" (1988), elucidates the colonial difference between *Vidya* and *Sikhsa*, proclaimed by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1866. *Sikhsa*, in the 19th-century pedagogy, after the development of Macaulay's education strategy, is assumed to be an instrument of the colonial education system, with a student's development of Western knowledge. On the other hand, *Vidya* is more of an oriental knowledge learned primarily in the native language. Thus, English as a language becomes a semiotic system for learning the signals of the colonial system and wearing a colonial lens (Guha 24). This critical historical intervention becomes evident in the play, particularly as the theatre company led by Kapten Babu is named 'The Great Bengal Opera', despite facing significant opposition to the reformist agenda.

On the contrary, the English name of the group attracts the 'reformist' Babus as well as the Englishmen. Kapten Babu compares himself with a great actor from Britain, Garrick, which shows the ideological 'hegemony' of the English language and Western culture as a subordinating tool to its political and cultural institutions constituted locally, seeking patronage from both the *babus* and *sahibs*. Colonial education was an ideological tool used in

two aspects, in the propagation and negotiation of power and culture, between the facilitator- the colonizers and the benefactors- the colonized (Guha 15). Priyonath is shown as an epitome of the contemporary Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a poet affluent in English letters who spent his critical and productive years in England. However, Dutt ended up coming with the most minor fame from Britain. He got despondent as he, being attracted to Christianity, converted himself to that religion and culture and was not received well among the people of English letters. Nevertheless, he is remembered as a canonical Bengali writer who changed Bengali literature's generic and formal aspects and envisioned the trivialized idioms, experimenting with themes of ancient epics and literatures from different *purna-itihasa* traditions. Priyonath, from the very beginning, proclaimed to create a canonical content of Bengali theatre. Indeed, he, as a 'genius,' decides to teach 'theatre' to the 'great' Bengali actor-director Kapten Babu as he asserts his pride in being a student of an English theatre veteran during his studentship in the Presidency. Kapten Babu, in his colloquial tone, attacks the so-called pride of Occidental education.

Indeed, the idea of 'freedom' and 'liberty' promoted by the Western education system reveals a deep hypocrisy, as the 'intellectual' application is only registered in correcting the regressive aspects of Hindu society. All the same, the 'bhadralok' *sahib* never questions the power structure of the British Raj. The cultural and ideological tools that the Bengali *sahibs* carry due to possession of the Occidental education and knowledge system are a part of the British political hegemony in the fabrication of the 'Nation-state'. In response, revivalists create an alternative vision of indigenous nationhood that, while speculative and imaginary, serves their propaganda within political discourse. The entire cultural dichotomy between

Kapten Babu and Priyonath shows this dynamic. However, Dutt strategically employs certain character traits and transformations to reach a synthesis that favors a materialist struggle, necessary for highlighting the historical context of the struggle faced by 'cultural laborers'.[14] Guha notes:

> The phrases 'liberty' and 'freedom' were meant to militate only against values and relations internal to Hindu society and not against those that inhered in the power structure of the Raj. All of this shows how words and ideas that had served as political dynamite in Europe had their critical change doused and defused by colonialist education in our subcontinent. Indeed, what most of the nineteenth-century beneficiaries of that education system imbibed from it as a code of power was the unquestioning servility of the ruling power (18).

In examining the case of Priyonath, one notable factor is his rejection of 'servility'. Priyonath initiates his journey as an anonymous theatre group member guided by the counsel of Kapten Babu. Initially, he faces ridicule from fellow group members for his attire and attitude, like a *sahib*, but eventually becomes a part of the fraternity and fights against the odds of censorship and economic restraints. It is a political device, and Dutt used it to show the need for a collective act to stand against the power structure in a theatrical public sphere[15]. Priyonath wrote a play like *Titumir* that dashes against the British Raj and its oppressive rule. As mentioned, the development of Priyonath's character traits shows a contingency with the historical figure Madhusudan Dutt. Madhusudan Dutt's later writings in Bengali are an allegorical attack against the power system. The lack that the reformists have is compensated for by the epitomes of Priyonath's character when such principles are used

against the British Raj and its tyrannical power. The role of theatre is very prominent here as a collective cultural space for the unification of progressive voices, exterminating any cultural hegemony, transgressing the exclusivist colonial public theatre space into the 'real'/alternate public sphere through a 'counterpublics'. The 'counterpublics' are constituted through the actors' rebellion within their space of praxis, violating the state's structure of both the repressive apparatus[16] and 'governmentality', drawing from the argument by Janelle G. Reinelt (2011). Kapten Babu, a theatre person trained in the Oriental knowledge system, compliments Priyonath at the end of the play for staging his script of *Titumir*, an ideal example of synthesizing the 'rebellion' from different cultural groups against oppressive governance. The entire scenario is quite complex: the 'theatrical public sphere' in the nineteenth century, with a growing popularity of the playhouses among a heterogeneous audience, a shift in patronage, and the subsequent changes in the themes and the process of democratization could be witnessed. I argue that the 'counterpublics' here, as reflected through the advent of such a play, *Titumir,* emphasises the changing patronage and a broader horizon of the public reception: it is a voyeur from the middle-class, elitist connoisseurship to the larger public domain. This corresponds to the hope of juxtaposing the theatrical public sphere and the political one outside the playhouses through the liquidation of themes, forms, performance, affect, and reception. Here, I second the accounts of Partha Chatterjee and corroborate the shift in this ironic climacteric when the old-school Benimadhab agrees to stage *Titumir*, written by the young Priyonath, to ploy the 'change'. This conjuncture is what Dutt substantiated his 'propaganda' against state repression and censorship, stimulating a succor in 'dissensus' within, for transgressing the performance space into a 'political' one through using 'history' as an important instrument, as articulated by Tony Fisher (2023) and

Freddie Rokem (2000).[17] Partha Chatterjee's insights (2016) resonate profoundly within this discourse when empirically considering historical accounts –

> Early attempts at producing a modern theatrical repertoire in Bengali, Marathi or Hindi were severely limited by the constraints of patronage. In Bengal, the early patrons of plays written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra were wealthy landlords who made available their spacious Kolkata mansions for these edifying dramatic productions meant for a culturally sophisticated audience. But the professional theatre that soon made its appearance could not afford to be elitist in the same way. It needed the support of a larger public that could be induced into buying tickets for an evening's entertainment. Unlike the modern European theatre of the same period, the professional theatres of Mumbai, Pune or Kolkata could not survive solely on the patronage of an educated middle class. Consequently, the new Indian theatre turned out to be neither courtly nor bourgeois. It had to invent a different theatrical style in order to deal with the fundamental problem of all democratic regimes, namely how to elicit the support of the masses for the rule of property and privilege. (206)

Kapten Babu's decadent life represents the resonance of the then theatre culture. However, he proclaims himself a genius, and his acts stand against the norms of society. He brings Moyna, a roadside vegetable seller, to make her the lead actor for the play- *Mayurbahan Pala*[18]. He needs to compromise with the proprietor of 'The Great Bengal Opera', Birkrishna Da, in the case of play selection and other unnecessary interruptions by

him. He calls himself 'the Garrick of Bengal' and believes he can build an actor; likewise, a potter creates an idol. However, he focuses on the purity of the Bengali language to enhance Moyna's acting skills. This clearly shows the linguistic dominance functioning through class, caste, and gender as an entry point to the intellectual domain of the Bengali middle class, thereby showing the fragility of the 'public sphere' as an exclusivist stage for the upper class/caste Bengali male. However, showing this so forth, Dutt's intent to create a 'counterpublics' or identifying it in the 'residual' phenomenon is poignant.

In the case of spectatorship in the nineteenth century, one interesting aspect is the *Babus*, including Birkrishna Da, who seek the young woman on stage as a device for entertainment. In response, once, during their hooliganism at the play, Kapten Babu protests against their act and asks them to visit a nearby brothel if they come here for such entertainment. In this reference, however, the protest occurs from the actor-manager, but with a sense of a critical historiography, I argue, the gender question outside 'home' is seeded through the lens of the patriarchy. The prostitutes are, although, differentiated from the 'work' of the actresses, but functioned as the repository in the colonial Calcutta, from which the actresses in the colonial playhouses used to come. In colonial Calcutta, the emergence of actresses from prostitute backgrounds on the Bengali stage destabilized gender and class hierarchies. These 'public women', such as Binodini and Sukumari Dutta, embodied both visibility and exclusion—admired for artistry yet denied respectability (Bhattacharya 146–47). Their identities were negotiated within the *Babu's* patriarchal patronage system, where female performance was simultaneously commodified and condemned. As Sumanta Banerjee argues, the *Babu's* fascination with the *besya* mirrored the imperial gaze—an ambivalent

desire that feminized Bengali modernity while disciplining women's sexuality (Banerjee 129-30). Together, theatre and empire inscribed gender through spectacle and moral regulation.

Kapten Babu attempts to avoid acknowledging an actor's caste or cultural identity as a factor in connoisseurship. However, Priyonath does the same and wants to be remembered as a writer. In contrast, Priyonath insists on being recognized primarily as a writer. His rationale is to undermine economic capital and build a robust aesthetic foundation within the theatre community as a counter to the diminished 'Babu' culture However, I presume, the 'Cultural capital'[19] allows Priyonath to speak and establish his aesthetic discourse, influenced by Western traditions, against the *Babu* culture, which is, within the complex conjuncture of *Babudom*, contingent on the colonizer's interjection of 'governmentality'.

Despite the predicament, his stance is more of a reformist one. I perceive the role of Kapten Babu, also known as Benimadhab, not merely as that of a sickly member of the *Bhadralok* or *Babu* class. Rather, I see it as a theatrical device that embodies a potential rebellion both on and off the stage through his performance. The progression of his traits suggests a sense of 'liberty' and 'freedom' that could be used against an oppressive power structure. However, he is the one who is not affected by the heinous censorship act of the colonizers on Bengali theatre and the repression of the actors of other groups in the form of imprisonment by the British administrators. He compromises with Birkrishna *Babu* in exchange for Moyna acquiring his land and investing in a better theatre auditorium. Indeed, he opposes the idea of chastity once pronounced by Priyonath when Priyonath takes Moyna's side, as she does not want to lose control of herself and her body. Kapten Babu accuses Priyonath of being an orthodox Hindu for believing in chastity.

In a way, Dutt showed how discourses are used to acquire capital, which, in association with the 'surplus', creates a repressive power structure. Through dramatic apparatus, Dutt used historical conditions to show the structuring of power as an instrument of a colonizers' nation-state. Priyonath accuses Kapten Babu of being similar to the representative of the oppressor. Angurbala, his companion in theatre for years, is compelled to identify him as similar to Birkrishna da in his utterance and gesture. The exciting progression of his characters is critically identified and performed to display the nature of an oppressor. It is a technique to bring about the class characteristics from a historical condition to highlight the Marxist understanding of class and society and suggest a solution, which kicks in collectively, bringing the oppressed into a struggle. Through a cultural scenario, the play offers the hypocrisy of the *Bhadralok* class in terms of gender relations and the exercise of power, where the historical condition becomes a materialist lensing of social dynamics to understand the incidence of the problem.

Tanika Sarkar (2001) situates the context of the second half of the 19th century by forming a newer public sphere. In the introduction of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Partha Chatterjee (1992) identifies two broad types of nationalist tendencies—Western and Eastern—to explain how anti-colonial nationalism developed within and against the framework of colonial modernity. Chatterjee argues that Western nationalism emerged as a product of Enlightenment rationality, political liberalism, and industrial capitalism, emphasizing the sovereignty of the modern nation-state and individual rights (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought* 1-3). In contrast, Eastern or colonial nationalism—as seen in India and other colonized regions—developed in response to

imperial domination. While adopting certain modern political forms from the West, such as the concepts of the state and progress, it also aimed to safeguard an "inner domain" of cultural and spiritual autonomy that stood in opposition to Western materialism (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought* 6–7). Thus, Eastern nationalism was "derivative" in form but distinctive in substance; it utilized the language of Western modernity while reinterpreting it through indigenous cultural consciousness. Chatterjee's analysis highlights the paradox of colonial nationalism—it both resists and perpetuates the logic of the West, revealing the inherent ambivalence within postcolonial identity. When there was a broader liberal commitment from the educated (*Sikhsita*: educated in the Western knowledge system), there was a revivalist nationalist tendency to defend an ancient Hindu culture. Bills like the Age of Consent by the colonizers were a step forward in attacking the revivalist spirit of a conservative Hindu society. They lap it up as an intrusion to alter the gender relation. However, reformists and revivalists tend to assimilate the lower caste (Sarkar 2001). The conversation between Kapten Babu and the sweeper in the first scene is a visual metaphor to show the process of 'assimilation', which is inevitably refused by the sweeper. In the opening of *Tiner Tolowar*, Utpal Dutt dramatizes the class and caste divide shaping Bengali theatre. Benimadhab, a weary theatre worker, is mocked by a scavenger who dismisses his plays as irrelevant to the poor—mere spectacles of 'tin swords' filled with royal fantasies and ornate language. When challenged to write about a laborer instead of kings and queens, Benimadhab's defense of his identity as a simple 'theatre man' rather than a Brahmin falls flat. Through this humorous yet biting exchange, Dutt exposes the alienation between bourgeois theatre and working-class audiences, turning comedy into a critique of cultural elitism: 'attempt at producing both a bourgeois myth and its subversion' (Sinha Roy 39).

Captain's Dilemma

Kapten Babu is the epitome of the representative of the 'vernacular' cultural elite who believes in having a cultural capital to exercise his art. The characteristics are altered when he finds the state's repression detrimental to 'freedom of speech' for the public theatre. In a historical context, the act of the colonizers, like the staunch censorship of Bengali drama to mute the public sphere, provokes several theatre actors to highlight a nationalistic spirit in the form of satire. Ultimately, he transforms from a neutral artist to a rebel and decides to perform a play, *Titumir*, penned by Priyonath Mullick, a historical 're-memoration' delving into a subaltern peasant rebellion against the British state, zamindars, Jotdars, and greedy Bengali mercantile class belonging to the babudom. Unlike urban polemics like *Gajananda*, *Titumir* is a strong resistance against colonial rule. It inevitably shows the collective register of a public voice in support of a violent class struggle. However, the 'coming' of such a play, *Titumir*, which was, in reality, written by Utpal Dutt, came through as a 'need of the hour', through a rigour of theatricality. Kapten Babu, amidst the audiences of higher orders such as the British administrator and Birkrishna, breaks in the lines of Titumir with rebellious gestures against those audiences, and a spectacle of resistance is built on stage through Kapten Babu's redemption. This is, I argue, an aesthetic tactic to ploy a shock with spectacle that dashes the audience through a melodramatic turn. Mallarika Sinha Roy (2024) describes it:

> However, the revolutionary artist in Dutt takes a final swipe at the public theatre by allowing the disgraced Benimadhab a moment of redemption in the final scene. As a defeated, Benimadhab forces his actors to play an innocuous

social farce instead of a nationalist play to an invited audience, said audience jeers at him. Both Moyna and Basundhara tried to reason with him about the pride and honour of The Great Bengal Opera in upholding the uncompromising glory of defiant theatre, and yet Benimadhab persists on compromising with the colonial government. His sudden awakening occurs when he remembers that certain doyens of the public theatre have been imprisoned for protesting against the Dramatic Performances Act, and he decides the company will switch to performing the nationalist play Titu Mir, written by the young idealist Priyanath Mallik. Benimadhab utters the famous line – 'the tin sword is now unsheathed' – in the middle of the social farce and in so doing transforms into the principal character in Titu Mir. This prefiguration of Titu Mir in Dutt's theatre is interesting in itself, but the play within a play in Tiner Tolowar is already a weapon for fighting colonial-capitalist oppression, indicating Dutt's vision of the purpose of true political theatre (39-40).

Dutt used the rhetoric of class and gender as 'the sign of an ideological operation by which historiography, in its turn, was assimilated to nationalism' (Guha 58). Guha decoys attention to an essential gooeyness of a domestic sphere that, in a way, is operated by the nationalistic assimilation of class, caste, and gender. In the scene, Kapten Babu advocates for Moyna's well-being, asserting that in exchange for her with Birkrishna, he would receive his dream, his playhouse, devoid of any interruption. Kapten Babu identifies the capitalist excess of Birkrishna Da, who promises to keep Moyna as *Rajrani* (Queen). On the other hand,

Moyna protests for losing control over her body, work, expression, and even profession (earlier transformed through Kapten Babu and later by Birkrishna Da by putting conditions and transforming her actresses' identity as primarily *a Rakkhita's* identity), which someone else decides. Moyna speaks about her transformation into a Bhadramahila, making it impossible for her to return to her previous job. The only option left for her is to become the Rakkhita of Birkrishna Da, which essentially means taking on the role of a private prostitute.

Kapten Babu regards Moyna as his daughter, yet he finds himself compelled to strike a deal involving her, which may be surprising. However, what is even more significant is the notion that a woman—regardless of whether she is a Bhadramahila or a domestic figure—is considered the private property of a bhadralok. Kapten Babu, at this point, turns down the paternalistic family sentiment by dismantling the idea of protecting the chastity of a woman. In the article "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India", Uma Chakravarti (1993) examines the structural framework of gender relations in early Indian society. She argues that the subordination of women, especially among upper-caste individuals, was fundamentally tied to the sexual control necessary for maintaining caste purity and ensuring patrilineal succession. The article emphasises that caste and gender hierarchies were intrinsically connected organising principles of Brahminical social order. In response to the Nation-state of the British Empire, the 'writing back' took place through the revivalist model, bringing in the antiquity of *puran-itihasa's* notions of state, power, and societal orders of 'imagined' *logos*. Certainly, Moyna's fabricated identity as a *Bhadromahila* crystallizes the woman of a higher caste/class outside 'home'. Hence, the exchange directly depicts the 'value' of a higher caste woman in the form of capital: an exchange between socio-cultural

and economic capital. Again, the preservation of chastity is linked to the Brahminical order of society, idealized through the old prescriptions, drawing the criticism of Kapten Babu. However, this is a social dialectics— a double-edged sword in the case of Moyna's identity, performativity, and mobility, as the question of her desirability, which is to acquire the professional acumen on stage, is 'unvoiced'. I argue that the desire, being an anti-capitalist element, comes through the natural linkage between the spectacle of agency and the passion for a practicable life in theatre to achieve that. This idea of passion, as argued by Nicholas Ridout (2013), plays through egalitarianism, camaraderie, love, and friendship, stifling the capitalist notion of work-time, and propagating through the different sense of temporalities possessed by different bodies, accessing the differences, de-capitating the 'unity' in both the revivalist and reformist societal dynamics or the 'governmentality' posited by the state through surveillance. The question arises against the pride of both the sections engendered through the nation formation, the question of citizenship, and the sovereignty of women's space. In the juncture of the complex colonial spatiality, women's agency, in terms of caste/orders/class, is contested in various dichotomies. In the case of Moyna's fabricated identity, the idea of chastity is lost and retained in the imagination through the patrons, who are the mercantile babus or landowners. Chastity is lost as she is perceived to come out of the 'home' for financial reasons. However, it is retained still due to her baggage of a caste lineage, 'unremovable' due to the societal sanctions. This is why, Birkrishna, however, in his mind, wants to keep Moyna as his *rakkhita* but uses the word *rajrani. This indicative patriarchal assertion* attracts the notion of 'protectiveness' suggested by the word *rakkhita,* but on the other hand, posits the class and caste ornamentation with the term's assemblage to Moyna's social position. Indeed, the *rakkhita* becomes the *rajrani* and the *rajrani* becomes

the *rakkhita*. The agency of women both in the domestic and political spheres is contested, dimensional, and dialectical, liquidating the 'displayed' dichotomies through the theatrical public sphere.

***Rakkhita/O-Rakkhita*: Gendering The Theatrical Public Sphere**

Interestingly, in the scenario of the nineteenth century sphere of Bengal's renaissance, Sukanta Chaudhuri provoked an important question that Joan Kelly initiated in the case of European renaissance- 'do women have renaissance?' The idea of *Rakkhita*, which is synonymous to a second but 'unacknowledged' wife, is necessary for the *Babus* to maintain their status. So Birkrishna Da needs to add one more in the list and Moyna becomes one. However, in the public sphere of the Babus, the idea of *Rakkhita* is associated with no more than a prostitute. The perception of the babu society does not only problematize the question of women agency, the class also intervenes in the women's questions. Mostly, the *rakkhitas* are from the lower class/caste, sometimes from the performative traditions, so even if the idea of women objectification is critiqued by the reformist, the reform is limited to the higher and middle class domestic women as the enlightenment for them from a ritual based superstitious life could appropriate the western discourses of 'modernity' the reformist men attained. In Mallarika Sinha Roy's words, 'Dutt was critical and fascinated in equal measure by the reformist achievements of this period. In both plays he explores the limits of the reformers' attempt at modernization' (29). That's why the character of kapten babu becomes important— a 'theatre man,' critical and frivolous to any 'doxa' propagated by either of the sides, reformist or revivalist, however, delineating the different 'antithesis' of the society. Dutt's dramaturgy stands significantly in the fulcrum of the political overtones on stage in

delimiting the theatrical public sphere using the site as a 'citation' historically to connect the societal discrepancies, problems in power structure, and gender issues. Kapten *Babu* diminishes the identity of lower class Moyna and creates an actor's identity- a 'craftswoman,' which is absurd to the babus. Certainly, in the context of women actresses, the idea of craftswoman liquidates the notion of class, caste, and even sexuality and unfurls the agency through gender performativity. On the other hand, through her craft, she becomes a cultural 'labor' who has a liberty to use her means of production to create 'excess' for her. This, being however contradictory to *Leftist* arguments in the paradigm of popular art, is a necessary aspect to inquire the economic questions of women, mostly addressed in Marxist feminism. Supriya Chaudhuri (2010) shows in her seminal essay "Women, Rebirth and Reform in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in Renaissance Reborn" that the renaissance or the enlightenment in colonial India has never promulgated the agency of women. Despite this, the potential of the economic question linked to women's liberty and agency is shown through Moyna's question of her freedom. The reformist stance did not always support women agency in the public sphere, especially within the theatre circuits. There were many instances that the reformists have boycotted such performances where women acted and performed. Binodini's life provides this historical inquiry with this dilemma. Chaudhuri's account is important in this regard.

> If reason, then, is capable of such cunning, how precisely are we to view its operation in the public sphere of social reform? Feminist historians have pointed out that despite the debates about child marriage, kulin polygamy, widow remarriage and, later, the Age of Consent Bill in the 1890s, about

> Strishiksha or female education, and about opportunities for women in the public domain, the atmosphere of male oppression, illiberality, and abuse is so general that it would seem surprising to speak of women's education and their social empowerment as male projects. Moreover, even in reformist tracts, there is a constant iteration of the pettiness, ignorance and superstition of women, conditions from which they need to be rescued by enlightened male reason and prudence. Conservative authors, on the other hand, assert that traditional womenfolk were properly pious, devoted and possessed of all household accomplishments, while the modern, 'reformed' woman is shallow and incompetent. Again, the scope of this dispute is confined to middle- and upper-class women: little attention, if any, is given to the actual status of the large mass of labouring women in the lower strata of society, among whom child marriage was certainly widespread, though widows might not have been as cruelly treated (160).

In continuation of the discussion, what I see, Kapten Babu being compelled, creates an artist's identity for Moyna, however exploits her economic and sexual freedom for safeguarding own identity as a 'master' in theatre as well as his 'freedom' as an artist itself. Moyna's 'freedom' and prosperity are compromised by him in terms of a capitalist deal. This is again a tendency to reiterate how the colonial 'masculinity' controls the gender subject. The *ghar* (domestic space) is prefigured, manipulated, and controlled by the *Bahir* (the outer world), irrespective of the political or cultural identities of a *bhadralok*. Moyna, primarily in the outside of the *bhadralok ghar*, could be seen as a worker keeping up with her dignity.

Now, she learns the *suddha* (pure Bengali) pronunciation to become a *Bhadramahila* on stage, which draws a competitiveness among the *babus* for keeping her as their *rakkhita*. Birkrishna Da says, 'I have never kept a *Bhadramahila rakkhita*.' In response, Kapten Babu mentions that he kept one of that kind, as his wife is one of them. The scenario of the playhouses is difficult to assume at present, as the house patronage was in the hands of such Babus, who wanted entertainment, not serious commentaries or a liberal public sphere. The female actors used to come to the playhouses from the nearby Shobabazar area, which was famous as a red light area. It took much work for the playhouses to get as serious attention in the public sphere as print media could get. In the play *Tiner Talwar*, the conflicting stance of the print media run by the *Bhadralok* and *Sikhsita Babus* against the playhouses was prominent. They often humiliate their plays as obscene, which is again a rhetoric set up by the ideological state apparatus of the nation. Tanika Sarkar, in her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, describes the scenario as,

> The new Calcutta theatre, again, boomed largely through lower-middle-class patronage and, in turn, stimulated the growth of print through the continuous turnout of play scripts…The red light area of Chitpur Road borders on it and this, in the nineteenth century, was the main source for the supply of actresses. The success of theatre depended significantly upon lower-middle-class themes and preferences. (27)

As another essential public sphere, the print culture, even one of the potent weapons for the *bhadralok* to build an opinion, seemed to believe in either part of the nationalistic sensibility in the case of gender expositions. The question of obscenity by the dailies'

editorial, analyzing the public displays of performances of the playhouses, scrutinizes the challenges exhibited by the 'actresses' (with a non-domestic background, not the *Bhadramahila*) of their 'un-controlled' transmission in the outer world, that is *Bahir*. On the other hand, the Babus like Birkrishna Da assume 'actresses' are 'commercialized' commodities displayed on stage, as they do not have their modest 'value' (a social possession attributed by the male), their chastity. Chastity, criticized by Kapten babu, is a dialogue built by Dutt with the nation-state, as it becomes the qualifier for women (whether they are *Bhadramahila* or not!) in the nineteenth century and retains in the layers of society later. Obscenity is shown for making the play a product for the lower-middle-class audiences. However, obscenity is 'weighed' and determined by the news report.

In comparison, the *babus* who are a few but grab the prime seats of an auditorium demand obscenity. This picture clarifies how the representatives of the dominant class decide the display of gender and how the women could be commercialized as they cannot have the chastity to claim their bodies. As Moyna has been introduced to Birkrishna as Shankari, a poor *Bhadramahila*, the attraction to transform the stage 'actress' to a private commodity for 'entertainment' becomes excessive. The reason is to exploit the chastity the other 'actresses' do not possess as a property. Tracy C. Davis' seminal book *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (1991) parallels the women actors' socio-economic position in the nineteenth-century Victorian stage. Per her argument, 'actresses' are less valued socially and economically and given less valuable works such as ballet and burlesque to draw audiences' attention. They were not treated as artists but as laborers, as they had economic independence and were paid much less. Their economic independence results from

the loss of chastity assumed by the audiences and the patrons.

This is shown in *Tiner Tolowar* not only as a partial portrayal of women actresses but also through their voicing. Kamini, an actor in the group, raises the question of getting smaller parts to support the other characters. Basundhara, who carries a great legacy of theatre training under Ardhendhu Sekhar Mustafi, must take care of the group's domesticity. She compromises with her perished stardom by pleading for a pardon to a grocery shop owner for not paying back the loan for their food items. Therefore, the same Victorian morality is displayed in the Bengali stage. It is a colonial instrument to employ ideologically the male gaze to commercialize 'actresses' as commodities, not even the means of production. As the 'actresses' do not carry the household expectations, such as reproduction, they are seen as prostitutes who display their bodies, exempted from chastity and reproduction, and hence become the product themselves. Therefore, Moyna, an independent seller, becomes the imitator of *Bhadramohila* on stage and carries a commodity value even to Kapten Babu.

As Victorian morality prevailed in the middle class and the dominant class male, they kept the *ghar* (domestic sphere) as a metaphoric domain of political and ideological control for the outer world or *Bahir*. In the domestic sphere, be it for the reformist or revivalist, the tension between the gender display and the masculine control was a myriad phenomenon. Indeed, the idea of *Bhadramahila* is an unwitting mimicry of the 'memsahibs', the women of the foreign land in the reformist case. On the other hand, for the revivalist, the 'karta', the central patriarch of the family, expects the women to be aligned with goddesses and rituals to celebrate womanhood through chastity. We have to understand how the idea of 'colonial

memsahib' is superimposed on the allegorical representation of the *bhadramahila*. This categorisation is somehow derived from the 'idea' of 'cultured' women: an idea borrowed from the coloniality of subjugation is the way chaste upper caste women should be. This in turn is implied as per the expectation of the *bhadralok*, who believes that the women of his household should withhold the sense of 'civility' in them by imitating the English 'memsahib': dressed and behaved in a chaste manner, filled with colonial mannerisms and tendencies. The women who do not fall into this order naturally are then deemed as 'abhadra' or unchaste; thereby reiterating the idea of public mannerism and ritualistic civility. Priyonath's effort to save Moyna from being a *rakkhita* of Birkrishna Da is a reformist approach to project the contingency of the memsahibs on Moyna- it is, even happening in the outer world, a domestic operation to ideologically register a *Bhadramahila* class concerning a *bhadralok's* expectation. On the other hand, the treatment of Moyna as a daughter is rhetoric, morally projected by the colonial hegemony of 'controlling' the 'political' by controlling over bodies. Tanika Sarkar scrutinizes the 'home' (the domestic space) in the nineteenth century as,

> The home, then, had to substitute for the world outside and for all the work and relations there that lay beyond personal comprehension and control. 'Just as the king reigns over his dominion, so the head of the household (karta) rules over his household'- began a mid-nine-teenth-century tract on domestic management. 'The karta sometimes rules like a king, sometimes needs to legislate like the lawgiver and sometimes needs he adjudicates like the chief justice', said another, 'Who ever can run a Hindu family can administer a

> whole realm' was an assertion frequently made within this body of writing. Yet another tract advised the karta on how to marshall his forces to face a rebellious woman within the family. The karta, therefore, becomes within the home what he can never aspire to be outside it- a ruler, an administrator, a legislator or a chief justice, a general marshalling his troops. Apart from compensatory functions, the strategic placement of the home assumes other functions as well. The management of household relations becomes a political and administrative capability, providing training in governance that one no longer attains in political sphere. The intention is to establish a claim to share of power in the world, a political role that the Hindu is entitled to, via successful governance of the household. A possibly unintended consequence, however, is that in the process, this renders household relations into political ones. (38)

Dutt further historicizes the existing political sign in nineteenth-century society in a performance structure, where gender becomes a performative semiotics through the inter-relations of the metaphoric representation of the characters. The paternalistic structure of the family is seen in the display of the Great Bengal Opera, where the *karta* (patriarch), Kapten babu, carries an economic compulsion and tries to save the group by operating an ideological dominance over Moyna. Angur Bala seems to worship him as a teacher, not a paternal head, but she ceases to worship him when he makes such a deal with Birkrishna. The worship, epitomes of the ideal customary for women at home, is assumed to be retained in the group, the apparent outer circuit of the society. 'Worshipping' is a trope, in this context, for creating

a hegemonic control over the 'performance' of gender. The 'commitment' to ritual, which was to be expected by the middle-class or dominant-class men, is to distance the women from accessing economic or political independence. In this case, the exchange of Moyna is for the sustenance of the Great Bengal Opera with a great deal of financial assistance from Birkrishna. However, the relationship could not be linear, as Moyna's financial independence as a theatre laborer is snatched once she is not required to 'earn' money from her performance or labor. The extravaganza of the elite 'Babu' culture dazzles Moyna, once she starts receiving attention from the urban landowners, but she quickly has a realization once her 'freedom' of her body is compromised with the deal between Kapten Babu and Birkrishna Da. Even the economic benefits she could enjoy for being a paramour of Birkrishna become the only way to remain an 'actress' as the theatre company would never exist otherwise. This compulsion brings her to a state of ideological dominance in the outer sphere to transform her body into a confinement within the domestic sphere.

The ideological relation between the domestic and outer spheres exercised by masculinity is a rubric of power introduced by colonial intervention and well-captured by Dutt in visual language. The question of morality is compromised, but at a level where morality exists as a domestic subject for a woman, and not applicable in the outer sphere. Moyna shows no morality or commitment to theatre, an outer space, after she becomes a *rakkhita* of a wealthy Babu like Birkrishna. She comes late in the rehearsal, keeps everyone awaited, and justifies her 'stardom', a commodity brought in exchange for her 'un-freedom' within a domestic sphere and on her body. However, she becomes 'evil' to Birkrishna once she identifies a potential in the play, *Titumir*, and demands the play for staging. As the play

could problematize the financial and political relationship between Birkrishna and his colonizer's acquaintances, he tries to control Moyna through both financial restraints and physical violence. The accessibility of such knowledge as 'freedom' and 'liberty' from her life experiences is responsible for creating pleas for Moyna, as it does not fall into the discourses prescribed for women in the domestic space. Sarkar writes, "The archetypal evil woman of these times was not the immoral or economically independent one, but one who, inspired by modern education, had exchanged sacred ritual objects for foreign luxury ones. There was thus an interchange between economic compulsions and pleas feminine commitment to ritual". (35)

Conclusion

Therefore, *Tiner Tolowar* offers a robust criticism of nineteenth-century society in British India. In a visual and performative language, the criticism may create a 'dialogue' or a 'Carnivalesque' as a visual or performative engagement for the current audiences with a materialist consciousness concerning themes like censorship, gender, and subaltern identities. Utpal Dutt's *Tiner Tolowar* brings immense force to engender an understanding of the theatre as a mode of living history, a very able mediator for exposing the cracks of colonial modernity where political, performative, and historical domains interact. The play resists the art-activist divide by redefining performance as an epistemic activity that reclaims suppressed voices. By addressing the nineteenth-century Bengali stage in the context of class, caste, and gender, Dutt raises questions about the colonial and patriarchal rationalities that privileged a specific idea of the Indian subject. The actress's body, the babu's moral anxiety, and the

revolutionary's transgressions serve as performative traces of a civilization attempting to move into modernity.

Theoretically, it urges a re-purviewing of the stage as a medium for critically constructing the past—a place where it is very political to perform the past. This contributes to widening the scope of both subaltern studies and the theory of performance by putting the stage under critical examination and as a site of resisting exploration. Later on, this can be fleshed out: how Dutt's dramaturgy ties into contemporary feminist and decolonial aesthetics, and how the contemporary stage, in its counterpublic turned form, serves as an embodied protest? Through performance as a means to recover history, his gesture toward a spectatorship ethic that implores active participation rather than dormant empathy—and a reminder that the stage will remain a site of representational politics, if even for the moment.

End Notes:

[1] Three groups are Chetana, Tritiyo Sutro, and Mukhomukhi.

[2] Suman Mukhopadhyay is a well-known Bengali theatre director and filmmaker. In 2022 he was on a Fulbright fellowship with Columbia University, New York.

[3] The statement was translated by the author.

[4] The Permanent Settlement (1793) was a British colonial land revenue system that granted ownership to zamindars, fixed taxes permanently, and restructured Indian agrarian society to serve colonial economic and political interests. Historians like R.C. Dutt and Bipan Chandra describe the Permanent Settlement as a "feudalization" of Indian agrarian relations that institutionalized landlordism. Others, like Ranajit Guha, interpret it as a colonial strategy of control, aligning economic extraction with social hierarchy.

[5] Wahabi and Farazi rebellions were two important movements in the nineteenth century to reform the muslim community and create resistance against the colonizers

[6] Sanatana dharma, in Hinduism, is a term used to denote the "eternal" or absolute set of duties or religiously ordained practices incumbent upon all Hindus, regardless of class, caste, or sect.

[7] Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality refers to the complex ensemble of institutions, procedures, calculations, and tactics through which modern power operates—not by overt coercion, but by shaping how individuals govern themselves. In his 1978 lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault defines governmentality as "the conduct of conduct," meaning the rationalization of power relations through techniques that direct human behavior (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* 341). It marks a shift from sovereign power—rooted in law and punishment—to a diffuse, productive form of power that governs through freedom, guiding individuals to internalize norms and regulate themselves.

[8] B. B. Lal's work on the agrarian structures of colonial India—particularly in his essays on the Bengal countryside—argues that the category of "zamindar" under British rule was not a single, homogeneous class but

a plural and stratified formation created through colonial administrative and legal codification. In *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* and related writings, Lal explains that the British, in their attempt to impose a rational land revenue system, collapsed diverse precolonial intermediaries—such as taluqdars, jagirdars, and village headmen—into a single juridical category of zamindar, thereby simplifying a complex web of agrarian relationships (Lal 112–15).Ranajit Guha, in *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1963), deepens this critique by demonstrating that the Permanent Settlement represented the ideological core of British colonial governance. Guha contends that the colonial state sought to manufacture a propertied, loyal landlord class as the social base of empire, translating indigenous, communally defined agrarian rights into alienable property. This process, he argues, inaugurated a bourgeois notion of property in a feudal agrarian world, thereby legitimizing dispossession through legal codification (Guha 54–58). Taken together, Lal and Guha reveal how colonial jurisprudence reconstituted agrarian society into a stratified property regime: while Lal highlights the internal differentiation and local consequences, Guha exposes its ideological and systemic dimension—how law and property became instruments of imperial control.

[9] Marshall demonstrates how the Permanent Settlement of 1793 institutionalized property relations by transforming fluid agrarian tenures into fixed, legally codified landownership—creating a class of compliant zamindars aligned with colonial interests. This legal-bureaucratic transformation, framed as modernization, effectively displaced traditional forms of agrarian negotiation and restructured rural society along class and caste lines. The British deployed Enlightenment notions of rational governance to justify these interventions, rendering the agrarian economy legible to colonial authority while erasing indigenous socio-economic complexities. Marshall, Peter J. *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740–1828*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[10] In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon analyzes the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism on Black identity, arguing that colonized subjects internalize the values and gaze of the colonizer, leading to alienation and a fractured sense of self. Fanon describes how the Black individual is trapped in what he calls “epidermalization”—the internalization of racial inferiority imposed by white colonial discourse (Fanon 11–12). This process produces what he terms a “double consciousness,” where the Black subject perceives

themselves through the colonizer's eyes, seeking recognition within a system that inherently dehumanizes them. Connecting this to hybridity, Fanon's insights prefigure Homi K. Bhabha's later theorization of the hybrid subject. The colonized self exists in a liminal space—neither wholly native nor European—embodying the ambivalence of mimicry, where imitation both reinforces and subverts colonial authority. Thus, Fanon's analysis of racial consciousness anticipates the postcolonial idea that identity under empire is produced through contradiction and negotiation rather than purity

[11] a play in local performance tradition, mostly in narrative form dealing with popular social, mythological, or historical themes

[12] In colonial context, Sikhshitas are the urban *Dubhasis* elites trained in two/multiple languages studying in elite colleges for the Western knowledge system

[13] Battala Woodcut Prints (*Battalar Kathkhodai*) are the woodcut relief prints produced in the Battala region of Calcutta- these were a distinctive artform that flourished in 19th century Bengal, particularly in the urban milieu of colonial Calcutta. The press used to print cheap sketches and farcical literature mimicking and satirizing the Babus and sahibs of Calcutta, which could escape the surveillance of state and governance.

[14] The term is drawn from Brahma Prakash's book entitled *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India* (2019), published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

[15] The critical term is drawn from Christopher B. Balme's *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, published by Cambridge University Press. In *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (2014), Christopher Balme argues that theatre functions as a distinctive form of the public sphere—a space where social, political, and aesthetic discourse is produced, contested, and circulated through performance. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere as the rational domain of civic debate, Balme reinterprets it in theatrical terms, proposing that the "theatrical public sphere" is not merely a reflection of public opinion but an embodied, affective, and performative arena (Balme 3-5).

[16] Louis Althusser's concept of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), introduced in his essay "Ideology and

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THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), refers to the institutions and mechanisms through which the state maintains control primarily through coercion and force.

[17] Freddie Rokem argues that theatre's political efficacy lies in its capacity to *perform history*, bringing together past and present so as to allow actors to act as "hyper-historians"—witnesses whose embodied performance restores what history has silenced and activates publics to rethink collective memory and moral agency.

[18] This play within the play is cleverly adapted from Hamlet and Macbeth as per Utpal Dutt and documented by Mallarika Sinha Roy in her Cambridge Elements of Theatre and Performance short book series on Utpal Dutt named *Utpal Dutt and Political Theatre in Postcolonial India* in 2024.

[19] Cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu conceives it, refers to non-economic assets—dispositions, tastes, knowledge, cultural goods, educational credentials—which can be converted into social advantage and help reproduce class inequality.

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