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On the Paths of *Gram* (Village) *Theatre*

---- Selim Al deen

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The joys of 'Baisakh' are sparkling on the ways of the *Gram Theatre* like the sunlit-moonlit young foliage in the 'gajari' forest. Let this shine dwell forever on the faces of our comrades. May our pathway experience dust- encounter storm- and then finally, the blooming of flowers.

In fact the enthusiasm showed towards organizing the *Gram Theatre* has gained steady momentum even this year, in spite of several obstacles.

The greatest contribution of *Gram Theatre* towards anthropological research in Bangladesh in the year 1994 is to discover an almost extinct ethnic group or tribe called 'Mandai'. One has not come across any reference to the tribe with regards to anthropological research in this country prior to this. This year- during the winter of 1994- two cultural groups comprising of 'Mandai' people have been formed in the Sakhipur and Bahadurpur areas of Tangail and Mymensingh districts of Bangladesh under the initiative of the *Gram Theatre*. Janab Lutfar Rahaman, a member of the national council of the *Bangladesh Gram Theatre* and an assistant professor in the department of Drama and Dramatic theory in the Jahangirnagar University, was felicitated as the chief guest in the cultural fair organized in Sakhipur. I went to Bahadurpur. In these places, we have been successful to encourage the 'Mandai' folks to compose songs and plays in their mother tongue as a part of the project to rediscover and put in use their almost obsolete language.

This winter the *Rang Meher Theatre* has been formed in the Munshiganj area during my felicitation at the Tungibari College. The chief organizer of this program- was the young story writer Tajul Islam Firozi who is also an assistant professor in Tungibari College.



Overlooking the red eyes of draught this summer I went to the *Puthiya Theatre* in Rajshahi as a chief guest. Under the leadership of Kaji Sayid Hasan, *Puthiya Theatre* arranged an elaborate and vibrant traditional Bengali Theatre festival then. In one of the central councils of the *Gram Theatre* it has been decided that such fairs would be held regularly every year under the title of *Jatiya Loknatya Utsav* (National Folk Theatre festival). The festival was inaugurated by one of the greatest narrators of contemporary Bangla story-Hasan Azizul Haque. Folk Theatre groups from the far-flung villages of the area came to join this festival. *Panta Moroler Kessa* by *Amrita Theatre* is undoubtedly a notable contemporary example in the tradition of Bangla Theatre. The actor playing the ‘morol’ (the village head) is a septuagenarian. His entire family is engaged in acting. I have heard that the voters, mesmerized by the acting skill of their Panta Morol, selected him in the local Union Council election. It seemed to me that this revered veteran actor had tried to give the rustic *shang* culture a shape of character-acting in a large scale. This three-day long folk festival witnessed an assemblage of four to five thousand visitors every day. *Puthiya Theatre* can surely claim special acclamation as a part of *Bangladesh Gram Theatre*. I was accompanied in my Puthiya tour by Humayun kabir Himu, the editor of *Gram Theatre Bulletin* and Sanoar Hossain Sunny.

Comrades, after this, on the 24th of April I went to Kalukhali to attend the fourth Baisakhi fair organized by *Pragati Theatre* in commemoration of ‘Dillir Badshah’ (the Emperor of Delhi). It was really a very delightful new experience. It seemed to me that *Gram Theatre* was actually very close to folk culture. I was introduced to *ashtak* song in the fair. This performance involving song, dance and acting by eight performers has a tradition almost four-five centuries old. We do not know for sure if its old form existed during the era of prevalence of Nathism. But it could be ascertained that the present form of ‘ashtak’ dates to post-Chitan¹ era. This means that an alternate meaning of and explanation for post-fifteenth century variation of *ashtak* has been given by Kazi Sayed Hosen Dulal, the chief organizer of the *Gram Theatre* in Ilamitra area. According to this explanation the origin of the name *ashtak* goes back to the eight fundamental elements that anyone taking a vow of ‘sannyas’ (renunciation) should repudiate i.e ‘kama’ (lust), ‘krodha’(anger), ‘lobha’ (avarice), ‘moha’(illusion), ‘mada’ (pride), ‘matsarya’ (envy), ‘sanchaya’ (excesses) etc.



The very name of the fair- *Dillir Badshar Boishakhi Mela* (Fair of the *Dillir Badshah*)- arouses some confusion. No, the fair was not to commemorate a certain Emperor from Delhi; but it referred to a mendicant ‘baul’ singer of the village. He had renounced everything, lived his life on alms and called himself the Badshah of Delhi. The comrades of *Pragati Theatre* had named the fair after him.

Next day we left the fair at Kalukhali and the train for Rajbari was boarded at around 11 PM under the leadership of one of the chief organizers of the *Gram Theatre*, Walliul Hassan Manju. When we reached the tiny town, she was in deep slumber. We- me and my companions- went to reside at the abode of one of the important patrons of culture in Rajbari, Janab Shafiur Rahaman Chowdhury. I really liked his simple yet big bungalow, not only for its looks but also for the comfortable dwelling that it offered. This time my mates were the founder-President of *Rang Meher Theatre*, Tazul Islam Firozi and Rangan from *Bangshai Theatre*.

My student Piyush reached next day at 9 in the morning. We commenced our journey for Faridpur at around eleven in the morning. The sunny day spread herself till the limits of the horizon, her gaze still telling of her dawn-time trance. Two cultural functions were organized there for us- one at the Begum Rokeya Girl’s School in Kanaipur and the other was by one of the most famous Theatre groups in Faridpur, the *Faridpur Theatre*.

We were delighted to listen to the story of inception of the Girls’ School in kanipur. This centre for learning was established with the fund that the school girls accumulated as alms on weekends. The Principal of this school, Prabir Shikdar- my close bosom friend and classmate- was a student of the untimely-deceased novelist Quais Ahmed. Prabir possessed the rare personality of a good organizer and his face was confident with such experience. During the ‘Mukti Yuddha’ (Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971) the ‘Razakar Bahini’ (paramilitary force organized by the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971) killed his family members and buried them in a nearby well. Prabir’s father was also a well-known teacher and he was also killed at that time.



This bleeding memory had not weakened him; on the contrary it had encouraged him to sing hymns of awakening humanity.

On that scorching noon, sparing a little time from their lunch break- more than hundred students of the School waited in a queue for me. Some had garlands in their hands. It was enough to titillate the heart of a writer; especially in this country where newspapers and garlands are the indexes of equations of power and politics.

I was invited to a congratulatory meeting by dear Zahidul Islam Ripon. In the afternoon I attended that meeting arranged by the *Faridpur Theatre* and also delivered a speech. There I also watched a small fragment of a play directed by Ripon.

It was raining when we were returning; and it continued to be so on our way to Rajbari.

I had to deliver a lecture to the cultural workers at the Municipal Hall there. How skillful the staff of the *Charan Theatre* are, how dedicated to their mission, was decipherable from the way they arranged the meeting. Chaired by Walliul Hassan Manju, the speakers in the meeting were Advocate Chitta Ranjan Guha, the President of the Rajbari unit of the Coordination Committee, Shafiur Rahaman Chowdhury et al.

The evening assembly took place in the office of the *Charan Theatre*. They stated their plan to present the play *Chaka* as a mimodrama. I laid out a proposal to build a welfare fund for the comrades of the *Gram Theatre* by collecting weekly, monthly or yearly subscriptions from the members to help them out in times of emergency. All showed their interest about the proposal.

The concern displayed by the members of the *Charan Theatre* made us resolute- we were determined to develop the welfare fund for the members of the *Gram Theatre*.

We sincerely hope that we'll be able to begin the process of building the fund very soon with support and aid from all our units in the country.



Our experience in the paths of *Gram Theatre* is gathering strength day by day, and it'll continue to do so- this is our motto.

[Approx 1995]

Notes :

1. Post *Chaitanyadev* era.