



থেশ্পিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed Journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-15

Editor

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Title: *Gram (Village) Theatre and Its Roots [Gram Theatre O Brikshamul]*

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Yr. 3, Issue 2-5, 2015

Bengali New Year Edition

April-May



Gram (Village) Theatre and Its Roots

---- Selim Al Deen

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Gram Theatre refers to theatrical practices in the rural region of Bangladesh which conforms to modern theatrical aesthetics. In the year 1980, during the staging of *Kittankhola* (written by me), my and Nasir Uddin Yusuf's plan to form organizations promoting tradition as well as contemporaneity in arts in the rural areas of Bangladesh saw the first broad daylight.

The beginning of *Gram Theatre* was the inception of a fair by the school teacher Aminur Rahman Mallik. The fair took place in 1979 at Taluknagar in Manikganj and its occasion was the festival ('uras') of Late Pir Khandakar Azahar Bayati. We offer all kinds of aids and assistance to the disciples of Azahar Bayati, visiting the fair from different parts of Bangladesh.

By this time writing the play *Kittankhola* was almost complete. Its style smelt of the thousand-year old down-to-earth theatrical tradition of Bangladesh. The beauty of the full moon in the month of 'Kartik', the plentitude of cloudlets resembling gold coins scattered all around in the bloomed winter sky, all exerted a pull in your blood. We felt the little yellow mustard blossoms galloped from Ghior to Terosree to Kusta and Ulain. The migratory birds and a profound pleasure made the firmament appear like an indigo 'sitar', filling the air with melody. It was through the fair (mela) that the desire to create a new form of art was generated in me, was generated among us. I kept on thinking about the possibility of surviving in the fond public memory for another century- not through my own plays but by being a part and parcel of this process of revivification of folk culture. I know I sounded overambitious. I felt that the charges of complexity and incomprehensibility against my



writings could be redeemed and such errors be rectified in my close connection with the simple, rustic fair (mela).

Nasir Uddin Yusuf and I started our preparation from the month of December, 1980. Within a short span of twenty-four or twenty eight hours I wrote the story called *Saifuler Daira Yatra* which was intended to be the plot line for our next play. The source of this work was Dona Gazi's *Saifulmulk Badrujjamal*. We contemporized the plot in a manner that fitted a 'yatra'. By this time the seed of weariness had already germinated in my body and mind following the writing of *Kittankhola*.

Saifuler Daira Yatra was written in much haste. Hence it was neither much praiseworthy nor noteworthy. However, this was not the only reason. The chief cause for the play's mediocrity was my excessive preoccupation with organizational activities, such as, how would the theatre be like in villages, the section of agrarian spectators it would cater, stage arrangements and other technical details and such like. Issues like finance, sponsorship and stage were primary concerns. In the process writing was, therefore, rather neglected. In spite of that I was much satisfied and pleased with the way our audience appreciated the saga- the pursuit of a dream princess by Saiful and the subsequent emotional subplot concerning the pain of his royal parents caused by his voyage- that *Saifuler Daira Yatra* was. At least it allowed me a seat in the school of folk theatre. Moreover, it was with *Kittankhola* and *Saifuler Daira Yatra* that I sought to set out my sails into the vast and inhospitable ocean of the medieval tradition. This unsuccessful play would pass off into oblivion but not before leaving a trail for the next plays in the genre.

I often end up perspiring when I even try to recall how with a breakneck hurry I could manage to write *Saifuler Daira Yatra* in the form of a drama within two or three weeks. I wonder how even Nasir Uddin Yusuf could manage to engage himself in a directorial venture in such a hurry. We were not sure about the fate of the play as by that time all the preparations for staging *Kittankhola* were already done. We underwent the dilemma of whether to concentrate on that sapling which was about to bloom or focus on planting a new one in the garden of *Gram Theatre*. Amidst this confusion, instructed by Yusuf, I had to leave



for *Pabna Theatre*. Sonai and Sultan Mohammad Rezzak invited me there. Along with them was Sajedul Auwal Samim. Samim was young, with a pleasant disposition and was very enthusiastic about new waves in literature. I had then engaged myself in the almost impossible task of making him my comrade playwright. The outcome was his play *Fanimanasa*. I watched it at *Pabna Theatre* in a programme which was delayed by the late arrival of the DC. At 3:30 AM next day, after staying awake all night to watch the play I boarded a bus from Pabna to return home. Suddenly, in that state of trance caused by previous day's sleeplessness, I could hear the jingles of the 'nupur' in the sky. I could feel flocks of teal flying towards the unnamed, unknown lake. I kept on conjecturing how wonderfully miraculous is my world. In the Holy Book the Creator has said – "Search me in the diversity and think of me there." The holy words of the Creator made an epiphanic visit into my mind in the shape of a contrast between the buzz of a bus engine and the twitter of the flying flock of birds.

When I boarded the ferry a new day was already dawning. I and my companion Sajedul got to meet two mendicant 'baul' singers on board. One was an old fellow with grey hair and beard and the other had black, curly hair. I started singing while playing on 'khanjani' and 'chaita' and I danced to its tune too. Adolescent Sajedul did almost the same. Nobody knew us there; we, therefore, could not be stopped by the customary hesitations that accompany mediocrity. Thanks to this, our return was marked by forty-eight hours of constant wakefulness. We had, then, drenched the roots of *Gram Theatre* with the happiness incipient from forty eight hours of restive sleeplessness. In this insomniac age of crossed youth this happiness is carried in five or ten milligram sleep inducing pills.

Rasidul Saidul Islam played the role of the King in the Taluknagar show of *Saiful Muluker Daira Yatra*. Rafiq Mahmud was in charge of stage supervision. Along with us was Shatadal Barua Bilu, Quaizar Ahmed, General Humayun Kabir [presently the General Secretary of *Bangladesh Gram Theatre*] and Ganaka Shahjahan. Saiful was played by Bilu. Apart from them there was Kamal Baiyejid. I do not remember now who else were present with us that day. But I remember that they all wore royal costumes. Such gaudy costume for the play was the idea of Nasir Uddin Yusuf. He did so probably with the aim to create a



parallel for the theatrical taste of the village folk and make the play acceptable to them. The play did not have any song. Nor was there any female character, a measure deliberately taken while writing the play. All were busy with consecutive shows of *Kittankhola*. We had very few female actors in our group and taking them to the remote rural areas would have caused a lot of problem. Rafiq's experiment to use vapour lamps on stage did not meet with much success. But we were successful in another way- we caught more than half a hundred 'koi' fishes from my father-in-law's pond.

My father-in-law, Late Maqsd Ali Khan, was a renowned educationist and a professor in the Department of Political Science at Sadat University College. He was a brave fighter in the battle of life. His contributions to the *Gram Theatre* during its commencement are still most reverentially acknowledged both by *Gram Theatre* and the *Dhaka Theatre*. He is no more with us today. But he had been a father-figure; with a paternal affection he sheltered the *Gram Theatre* workers and encouraged them to walk in this untrodden cultural path.. The cultural fair (mela) under the banner of the *Gram Theatre* is organized at the Taluknagar College Ground, a college which was built through his personal endeavour. It was he who gave us the permission to use the sprawling ground for the fair. Other people who had substantially nourished the roots of *Gram Theatre* are Kamral Hassan Khan – Majnu – Tota- though Tota passed away untimely. Two plays [written by Selim Al Deen himself] in printed form- *Chor* and *Basan* – were dedicated to his fond memories in 1983. Needless to say these were theatrical publications by *Bangladesh Gram Theatre*. Rafiq Mahmud and Kamrul Hassan Khan took the initiative to print both the plays and Kamrul also aided the process with financial support.

Aminur Rahman Manik's father Abdur Halim Master was a folk lyricist and playwright. The contribution of this family towards Azahar Bayati's *maghee mela* is no less.

I remember well *Dhaka Theatre*'s voyage to Taluknagar in Manikganj (under Doulatpur PS) in 1981. Nasir Uddin Yusuf led the team. The date was sometimes close to thirteenth or fourteenth day of the Bengali month 'Magh.' We had to take horse-drawn carriages from Barangail. From there, after crossing the Ghior canal we had to undertake a



long walk through a barren landscape. All were weary of the walk.

A few among the group were annoyed with me. But finally all had jubilant enjoyment and they also had the exclusive experience of coming to proximity with common people. This was also the time when we had an opportunity to be introduced to the beauty of the *Gazir gaan*. Till then we were trying to find a vibrant theatrical style with *Kittankhola*. But our experience in the fair of watching the way in which *Gazir gaan* were presented compelled us to rethink. That was a time when Peter Brooke was a completely unknown figure in Bangladesh. Neither did we know anything about his ideas concerning stage and acting, nor did we have any acquaintance with the collaborative effort of Brooke and Jean Claude Carriere to adapt the Indian epic *Mahabharata* into a play. We observed with much astonishment how, in spite of not being a play, the performance by a loose robe, loin cloth and velvet skull cap clad singer along with a few musical hands could enthuse us so much on that wintry full moon night and mesmerize us in the illusive lights emitted by the vapour lamps.

Saiful defied the foretelling of the fortune-teller and set out his sails in the sea- his pursuit was for Kinnari Jamal. Our voyage, too, started with the pursuit of the dream of founding a new-age theatre.

The journey of the *Gram Theatre* and *Dhaka Theatre* that commenced from the fair (mela) of Azahar Bayati, still continues. The seed of the new age aesthetics was sown in this very fair (mela) - after many a nocturnal investigations and even more nights spent in vain. Even today, during some occasional bad spells and nightmares the vibrant magic box from the first fair (mela) remains to soothe us.

Today there are more than two hundred units of *Gram Theatre* in Bangladesh. At the beginning there was just the fair (mela) and a single Theatre unit. However the experience of organizing the fair and running the unit has served in the long run. We did not begin our efforts to go to the villages with the idea of circulating dramatic theories. We had the simple purpose of reaching out to the working populace- not with any didactic intent but to learn from them. We were severely criticized in Dhaka at our first attempt. Some felt this to be a



gimmick by the *Dhaka Theatre*. But now we are in a position to confidently assert that eighteen years have passed since the inception of Azahar Bayati's fair. Nobody knew it, but it is true that I worked all night to dig up a square piece of land at one corner of the college ground to build the open stage. Golap, Subhashish Bhowmik, Faruq- all of us carried over our heads cane baskets full of dug up soil to prepare the dais.

When the little hamlet at the edge of Tangail, resting on the banks of the dried up Yamuna saw a night of excavation, Dhaka was witnessing a performance of *Keramatmangal*. I wondered- no one in the yonder city knew I was there, miles away. As I kept on thinking the dew-moistened sand glittered under the rays of the full moon. Much beneath the soil the once beautiful maiden- Yamuna- slept in her grave.

We want to resurrect her. The grains of sand were my witness when I took the oath:

“Oh dear Deceased River, one day your incorporeal waves would be carried to the banks of Euphretes, Volga, Rhine and Thames. They would know how you and your lovers pacing in the path of universal humanity.”

But is one life enough to do it all, to keep the promise? Comrades of the *Gram Theatre*, therefore, march forward in this path of accomplishment.

[Approx 1997]