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The impetus and search of Bangla Narrative Performance: Interviewed Nasir Uddin Yousuff

Interview taken and Edited by Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

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The Germans have read Shakuntala before us, the Bengalis. We need to understand the potential of the Indian culture. Denying this and just worshipping Shakespeare – I am not saying that he should not be worshipped – but we also need to look ahead. Our Vaoaia and Vatiali is not the same. Although these originated from the same country, there are different. Vatiali is for the rivers, and Vaoaia is for the horizon. Thus, the songs, dance techniques and theatricalities of the aboriginals, who live in hills, are not similar to those of the plains. Then how could they match that of the Bengalis. So everyone is beautiful in their own rights. Everyone is capable of expressing oneself in his/her own way. That is their cultural heritage.

- 'Subornaputra' of Bangla Natya, Nasir Uddin Yousuff Bachchu – 2014



Bangladesh is the name of a war trodden, undaunted civilization. Amidst all the adversities, it has kept the desire for a prosperous and peaceful life alive. The institution which recognizes this and deals with the issues of common mass, their culture and activities in their plays, is the 'Dhaka Theatre'. 'Dhaka Theatre' was established during a time when the economic stagnation and political rifts created an air of restlessness and uncertainties in the newly independent Bangladesh. 'Dhaka Theatre' was able to establish the innate doctrines of the theatre in Bangladesh and gradually unfolded it into the life and culture of the larger populace. It has also established the 'Gram Theatre', bearing the spirit and essence of the rural Bangladesh. 'Dhaka Theatre', who are pledged to stage the fundamental and indigenous theatre, has Nasir Uddin Yusuf as its director. We got a scope to interact with him, a part of which is published in this issue. I myself, us, as well as the whole theatre world got enriched.

THESPIAN *When did you start your career as a theatre artist?*

In the year 1972, just after the Liberation War. I had started working for theatre after returning from the war. I was doing MA from the University of Dhaka at that point of time. Indeed, there were theatre performances even before the Liberation War - from '56 to '62 - although I was much younger then. There was a group near my house called the 'Drama Circle'. Bazlul Karim and Moksud Us Saleheen led the initiative. They produced plays like *Raja*, *Oedipus*, *Kobor*, *Milepost*. They used to perform plays of all over the world.

...In English? ...

No, in Bengali. The American Cultural Centre endorsed that. It was also supported by the British Council. It was 'group theatre' and it was quite remarkable. I was about eight or ten when I saw those performances. This attracted me, but I was interested in doing cinema at that time. After the Independence we thought of starting our work. But we did not have enough money for cinema. But, theatre does not require that much money. So, the cultural secretary of the student union of the University of Dhaka proposed to form a drama circle. M Hamid was the cultural secretary. I was in



Mohsin Hall then. Selim Al Deen was a student of the Mohsin Hall [University of Dhaka]. The play *Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon*, written by Selim Al Deen and directed by me, made a nice impact. It was an absurdist play. The dialogues did not have any meaning whatsoever. Dialogues were scattered and isolated ones. Overall, a person utters some dialogues amidst an uncomfortable ambience – I put my effort to execute this production in a different way. But, there were western influences in *Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon*, especially in the scene-transition. Actually, I was a huge fan of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus at that time. That was the reason why this play by Selim Al Deen had attracted me so much. So, I directed the play. Prior to this, I had worked as a background artist in the groups like ‘Aranyak’, ‘Bohubochon’ and others. Meanwhile ‘Drama Circle’ again started their work after the war in 1972. These groups were making productions regularly at that time. Although they were able to sell tickets and make profits from their ventures. At this point of time I used to design sets & lights and write reviews. Everyone used to say that you write so much, now show your work. Then I did the *Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon*. It was the best play in all the groups of the inter hall competition of the University of Dhaka. Then some people wrote in the newspaper that “some insane people have entered on to the Bangla stage, let’s drive them away. They don’t understand anything about theatre, nothing, they have no idea what they are doing, there is no order or sense in the dialogues, there is no incident, they just don’t make sense. What kind of theatre is this? It’s nothing but madness.” So I and Selim began like this. But today I can say that the journey we started in order to make something new - which has received so much love and appreciation - actually starts from *Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon*. That is my beginning.

THESPIAN *How did the Dhaka Theatre start?*

Yes, among these, ‘Nagorik Natyasmaproday’ successfully staged *Baki Itihas* – in February 1973. I really appreciated it, Sunday morning shows are running, people are queuing up for tickets, really liked it.



...Sunday morning?...

Yes, Sunday was off day. Before that I worked with Kabir Anwar for *Jone Jone Janata* in the auditorium of Engineering Institute. It was in February 1972, just two months after the Independence. But it was not successful; ran for only four shows. But 'Nagorik NatyaSamproday' staged shows for consecutive 8 weeks. Meantime 'Dhaka Theatre' was already built, in July 29, 1973. Indeed, all the groups were formed in and around 1973. 'Nagorik' was formed in 1973, we too were in 73. In 1972, only 'Bohubachan' attempted to make shows by selling tickets, and before that 'Parapar' by Kabir Anwar did the same thing. Although, 'Aranyak' also did a play called *Kabar*.

THESPIAN Was 'Aranyak' formed in 1972?

Yes, 1972, 'Theatre' also started at that time. But they made their first production in 1974. 'Nagorik' started in 1968. They produced a play called *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron*, by Madhusudan [Michael Madhusudan Dutta] in 1972. Then 'Nagorik' started their production in 1973 in exchange of tickets. They were the first theatre group in Bangladesh to successfully do so. 'Dhaka Theatre' was the second group to do that successfully. There is an auditorium called Krira Samiti near the Dhaka Stadium. It was small in size, with ceiling made of wood. We did 13 consecutive shows with Selim's *Samvad Cartoon* and Habibul Hasan's *Samrat O Protidwandigon*. 'Nagorik' did eight, in each Sunday morning. The shows were successful; many people came to watch the shows. Stalwarts like the poets Al Mahmood and Samsur Rahman, the editor Shahjat Chowdhury, novelists Akhtaruddin Elias, Showkat Ali, Hasan Azizul Haq, Rafiq Azad, Nirmalendu Goon, Artist Ranbi came and saw my shows. All of them were immensely popular at that point of time. This was the beginning of the 'Dhaka theatre'.

THESPIAN Have you ever attempted acting?

in Selim's [Selim Al Deen] *Explosive O Mul Somosya*. My acting was so poor that I



did not try again.

THESPIAN *How did u suddenly decide right after the Liberation War that you were going to get involved in theatre? I mean to say – what was your inspiration?*

If you say inspiration – the chief inspiration was Selim Al Deen. Other than him I have often seen with great wonder the stalwarts like Shombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra. We came to know about Sombhu Mitra around the 60s. They came here [Dhaka] in 1972 to perform. Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghora* was also performed. It was a splendid performance. We had not yet seen Kolkata's theatre then - that was the first time. Then I thought that we have fought as a warrior in our Liberation War for independence, we should have a cultural revolution and movement which would carry the consciousness of the Liberation War to the masses and make it relevant. It would also inspire the people to protect all the people's right, promote secular politics, bolster democracy and secure the rights of the people from each religion and race. The essence of the Liberation War is secularity and democracy; and only theatre can take this essence to the people. Another thing is that we thought that an independent country must have an independent and unique theatre convention and style. I and Selim had our doubts while we were doing plays like *Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon* or *Samvad Cartoon*; but we believed that we were doing it in a good form and manner, and people also loved it. I have said earlier that *Samvad Cartoon* is made in the line of Piscator's documentary. But I also wondered if all of it embodied me. We thought if Bengal's tree, soil; Bengal's climate, nature; Bengal's birds, meadows, people and their social life could find expression in it. If this style or convention embodies this, then the radical theatre practices of the 'Dhaka Theatre', professional theatre and the thoughts of taking this as a profession – all these lead myself, Selim Al Deen and M Hamid to be the convenor. People like Raisul Islam Asad, Piyush Bandopadhyay, Al Mansur, Habibul Hasan, Abdul Kader, Basanti Gomez also joined. In 1974, I again directed *Jaundice* [*Jaundice O Bibidho Balloon* by Selim Al Deen] in exchange of tickets. Then 'Nagorik' started staging shows in the 'Mahila Samiti Auditorium'. We too went over there. 'Mahila Samiti' started with ours and Nagorik's plays. Next, we



did *Samvad Cartoon*. It received much attention. It went on for many shows – almost 23 or 24. Doing 23-24 shows were big deal back then. In this way the theatre began in Bangladesh. Yes it was in a dire state, there were not much glamour and riches but the soul was there. After us and ‘Nagarik’, ‘Theatre’ brought in another production, namely, *Subachan Nirbasone* by Abdullah Al Mamun. It was quite a popular play. In this way the basis for our theatre was built and the movement started. I was about 21/22 then. I was crazy and enthusiastic. More so because I had been in contact with literature and poetry and saw films...I used to read a lot of world literature and thus western influences were obvious in my plays from the very beginning. So these were my influences. I used to visit my native house in childhood. I was born in Dhaka in the year 1950. When I used to go to village – there was a cousin elder brother of mine – Kashem master, he used to perform in jatra. He was also a school teacher. I used to be very amused to see his jatra. In winter nights, in the seaside of Chittagang under moonlight and with lantern light, with patromax, – on one side there was sea and on the other side he was performing on a stage made of soil – the character of Tipu Sultan. The sound of sea at the background, wind – incredible! I was eight then. I used to play the son of Tipu Sultan. These are also inspirations for sure. All these lead to the awakening of a cultural urge within. I was not aware perhaps. Before the Liberation War, I thought of doing cinema while I was studying in University. In a programme, Syad Salauddin Zaki (one of the proponents of the ‘Dhaka Theatre’) told me that I had apparently told him on 13 September, 1971, when the Liberation War was still underway, that “Once the country achieves freedom, I shall do theatre.”

So, these are the things that inspired me.

THESPIAN *How did you started walking in a unique direction? Or shall I say, how did this search for Bengal’s own theatre convention or tradition had begun?*

After graduating in Bengali from the University of Dhaka, Selim started teaching in Jahangirnagar University. He has lived his whole life in villages whereas I lived mine in cities. He grew up in village. He did his schooling in village, and then spent his



college and university life here [Dhaka]. Just when Selim wished to start research on this area, he thought of a drama department. Before this happened, we were not able to relate ourselves with the plays that we were making. Rather we were not sure what we were doing. If these were originally ours, if we have brought these characters from somewhere, if the plots are ours or have been borrowed, if this is art or just copying – all these questions lead to our search. We had a few questions in our mind and while searching for answers we wondered about the forms that we have, like *jatra*, *pala*, *gamvira*, *alkap* and the kind of performance these constitute. What we are doing in the cities is theatre, then what is the thing that they do? The question lies here. Then if they do it, it is not theatre and if we do it then it is theatre – the question strikes here. They can easily present a whole scene through a narrative, but we make a ridiculous presentation with lots of show and splendour. Suppose, to act as Hamlet or Oedipus, do we need to paint ourselves white, wear the ‘jobba’, which is not there in our body or soul, and which does not connect to our inner being. If we perform in such a manner, is that an art work – these questions started haunting us. While addressing these queries we started going through many books and found out about Bharata’s *Natyashastra* and its notable practitioners Ujjwal Nilmani, Roop Goswami and Nandikishore. We explored their differences with Aristotle. Europe has made substantial progress by positing Aristotle in the foreground and constantly practicing and simultaneously questioning him. On the other hand, India, despite being a far more ancient than Europe, and despite its art’s morality, art philosophy, life philosophy, political principles, its governance being its very own and indigenous, and despite being very different from their western counterparts, don’t know why theatre and painting became like that of the West. Which did not change and did not change for many years are its dance and songs. I think that because of the two hundred years of colonial rule, theatre has lost its continuity. If there had been no colonial rule for two hundred years, then this continuity would have given birth to a modern theatre. The Muslims of Central Asia have taken our classical music to an altogether different level. They have looted our riches alright, but they have not taken it back to the Central Asia, they have become king and ruled here. They have also



contributed substantially to painting. In the next phase, the medieval Bengali literature was enriched by them. On the other hand, Europe has only plundered us and enriched their home, England. Not just that, they have tried to harm our culture as well. But, such was the foundation of our culture, especially the music and dance, that it was not possible to break through those. But they have altered theatre according to their preferences and a 'babu culture' was formed. We began to read and explain this history critically. We saw that we had made several mistakes then. Then what needs to be done? Do we have anything called our own theatre! If Japan has *kabuki*, if Indonesia has *Ramleela's Ramayan* in their own theatrical tradition, then why won't we search for our own Bengali theatrical tradition? While doing this, 70s decade had elapsed. We call it our search period.

THESPIAN *Is this the beginning for the modern narrative theatrical tradition?*

Yes! After that we tried to understand the structure of the narrative performance in its presentation, acting and so on. We found out that there are differences in verbs. They differ from that of the spoken dialect. Sentence structures are different. The rhythm is also different. Then we decided to stick to the narrative tradition. We had the will but lacked knowledge. So we started to train ourselves. But this is not the 'modern' theatre. We thought that indigenous theatre should be the only way for Bengali theatre. By indigenous theatre we implied those by the indigenous playwrights but all of those were in method acting tradition. Today we call that colonial theatre. We are not saying that those are bad, but this has turned into a stereotype. A kind of theatre form has been established by assimilating both the forms. I am not going into value judgements but I wish to stress on the understanding. Another one is the latest 'modern Western theatre'. That is also not bad. It is much modern in terms of convention. Although 'colonial theatre' is dated, we can see a kind of expansion within it. But in Rabindranath we will see that he has become modernist by following the *panchali* tradition. We have tried to follow this. But our style is not the same as Rabindranath. Our aim was same but way was different. Rabindranath kept the character, we also did the same. We called it the time of 'classical reality' for the



narrative theatrical tradition. From where does a character like ‘Sonai’ in *Kirtankhola* [by Selim Al Deen] draw his strength and courage? We thought that he derives his power from the *puranas*. The people in *puranas* fight for humanity, for truth and derive strength from it. Today’s farmers, workers, middle class men gain inspiration from this. I saw that, yes, Saiful Muluk’s sea voyage and that of Sonai almost become synonymous. Likewise, the *Keramat Mangal* [by Selim Al Deen], which is composed in an epic style and which is considered by Akhtarujjaman Ilias, Ahmed Sharif as the epic of our time which starts with the riot of 1946 and ends in the next year of the Liberation War of 1972, reflects each and every creation of mankind – a civilization. This consists of narrative, *Adam Surat* which is there in our tradition and also in our *puranas*. Then what happened to the narrations through this parallels? Image was created, verse was composed. So called dialogues lost its necessity and the scope for the western style characterization was decreased.

.....the convention has been changed.....

Yes, and the characters also witnessed change. Because when you bring in narration in the place of dialogues, then the nature of the character also changes. So, the way in which an actor makes up a character that also changed and the process also changed. This is absolutely necessary; and after this we produced *Haathadai* [written by Selim Al Deen]. In *Haathadai*, we came nearer to the narrative theatrical tradition where there are narration, acting, dance, song and dialogues. Many called *Haathadai* as carnival theatre. Selim Al Deen brought the whole world, from Hokkaido (near Siberia) to Argentina into a space with dance, songs and abundant energy. He made us travel through the oceans. He narrated this incredible story in a story-telling and conversational technique of the *Arabya-Rajani*. You know Bivash, this narrative is everywhere. We should remember that this narrative reached its peak from the Greek and Roman theatre to Elizabethan theatre, Isn’t it? Greek theatre reached its zenith in the hands of Sophocles and Euripides. But we would get the best of all from Shakespeare, then Marlow, and then Germany’s Goethe. Goethe also expresses his likings for the narrative form of Kalidas’s *Shakuntala*. He even translated it in that



era. The Germans have read Shakuntala before us, the Bengalis. We need to understand the potential of the Indian culture. Denying this and just worshipping Shakespeare – I am not saying that he should not be worshipped – but we also need to look ahead. Our *Vaoaia* and *Vatiali* is not the same. Although these originated from the same country, there are different. *Vatiali* is for the rivers, and *Vaoaia* is for the horizon. Thus, the songs, dance techniques and theatricalities of the aboriginals, who live in hills, are not similar to those of the plains. Then how could they match that of the Bengalis. So everyone is beautiful in their own rights. Everyone is capable of expressing oneself in his/her own way. That is their cultural heritage. Then why won't the Bengali would go ahead with that in an independent and free country? With this thought, we got inclined to the narrative theatrical tradition. Within this inclination, this is also a step forward. Where the narrative tradition helps to narrate the story in an incredible way, itself becomes many characters and where we saw many characters converging to one. It is then when the question of Selim Al Deen's *Dwoitadwitobaad* comes into play.

Next let's talk about the 'Kathanatya'. Selim says, since it is ruled by 'katha' [speech], hence it is called 'kathanatya'. Natya is theatre; we are now calling theatre as 'natya', not the 'written text' but the performing art. You would see in *Chaka* [written by Selim Al Deen] and *Jaibati Kanyar Mon* [also written by Selim Al Deen] that the character is playing the part of the narration but not *as* narration. Up to *Shakuntala* [by Selim Al Deen] the narration was different. Starting from *Kirtonkhola*, we find no narration. I also understood that. Selim had understood this before that I could not apply this on the stage out of apprehensions and lack of experience. However, *Kirtonkhola* was popular enough as the my first work (in the narrative tradition) and because of its epic expansion. But it is true that it is of mixed tradition. *Keramat* [*Keramat Mangal*] is also in mixed tradition. But, in *Keramat Mangal*, the dialogues became narrative. Selim understood my weakness and thus wrote the dialogues in a way that the dialogues were not merely dialogues but became an amalgamation of narration and dialogues. Next, we would see in *Haathadai* that at times, the character – Anar Bhandari or 'kachhim shikar'[tortoise hunting] - becomes



narration - a dialogue of two pages. I may call this 'poetry' or 'stage poetry', or 'stage poems', but this is just a dialogue. Now I turned it into a physical art form, not merely a dialogue. I made some parts of it as acting – the part which is related to dance or mime. But the thing that I was trying to do is that narration will not be restricted into just description or speech, but it should also come into your expression. Your body also narrates many things. So, if I take that narration along with dance, song, dialogues and description, it creates a new image. That image is created through bird-hunting, cock-fighting. When there is vast description of cock-fighting, I told Selim – what to do with this! He said, "why, you will stand there and say that cocks are fighting, birds are being hunted." I told, "but that is not theatre, I want to do theatre, I am not doing a *pala*, I am not a *gayen*. I am working on several characters with several people".

After that I wondered if it was possible to make a new modern convention by altering the tradition of *gayen* and *pala*. Which may then be called the modern theatre of Bengalis. This was my prime target. In *Haathadai*, it made a space for itself. But we did different work in the *kathanatya* part. Jamil Ahmed did *Chaka* with much interest. This somewhat gave me confidence. We saw that we could establish our narration on the stage through acting and presentation. There are a few dialogues which we replaced with dance. But when would the dance happen – in a moment when the dialogues will lead to a stage where dance would follow naturally and inevitably. This stages need to be transformed magically. I learnt these works myself. I was thinking and executing. Next we worked with the *panchali* tradition. Plays like *Bonpangshul* [by Selim Al Deen], *Prachya* [by Selim Al Deen], *Himu* [Humaiun Kabir Himu] and Jan Bergstrand directed *Horgaz* [by Selim Al Deen], *Dhabaman* [by Selim Al Deen] and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* were enacted in the tradition of *Panchali* and *Nrigosthi*. Amongst these, we did several works in *Nrigosthi* tradition. It is also there in *Keramot Mongol*. Selim staged the *Marma Rupkatha* in collaboration with Dhaka Theatre and Jahanginagar University by presenting the performance in their own way, by taking the maramas all the way to Dhaka. These experiments surely had encouraged us. We could come out of the colonial mind set and was doing something



on our own. In *Panchali* tradition we would finally see that dance, acting and dialogues are complementing each other, like in *Bonpangshul*. This means that not one aspect was ruling the performance. Everything was collaborating in the performing art. This transformation was absolutely necessary. We wish to affirm that as the Japanese have *Kabuki*, Chinese have *Oriental*, likewise we also have *Panchali* tradition. We have modernized the *Panchali* tradition and called it 'Nabya-Panchali' tradition. Tagore's *Raja* [*The King of the Dark Chamber*], *Raktokorobi* [*Red Oleander*], *Dakghar* [*The Post Office*] – all are written in *Panchali* tradition. May be he has written the dialogues in a different manner, but those are in the narrative tradition. There is vast difference between the plays staged by the Great National Theatre and that of Rabindranath's. We tried to lend value to that empty space in plays like *Bonpangshul*, *Prachyaa* and *The Tempest*. We have made a long journey. But this is not the end. Someday, *Panchali* tradition will also be changed and a new Bengali tradition will be formed. We believe that while searching for the roots, we should not revert back to the same place from which we were displaced by the colonial rule. Rather, we must take the essence from our roots and look ahead. So we are saying, "may the past, the eternal music of Bengali stage be rekindled on the world stage". There is another slogan of the Gram Theatre – "thousand years in our hand; we are marching ahead". Our drama began since the time of the *Charyapad*. Then why should we say that our theatre is two hundred years old, after Lebedev. I and Selim were much criticized for saying this. Many have called us ignorant. Nevertheless, I think that a garden looks good when there are varieties of flowers within it. It is not that we will stick to the *Panchali* tradition for ever. There are several conventions like this. For example, I think that when the fishermen come back after fishing – the process of fishing undergoes a ritual – with drums and songs. The indigenous games that we use in our theatre – like cockfights, wrestling and so on – are integral ingredients of our culture. These things are there in our theatre. In this way, people of Bengal have found their own roots and tradition in the hand of Selim Al Deen and 'Dhaka Theatre'. Now it is the time to move ahead. Youngsters like you are there. And not only the 'Dhaka Theatre', there are other groups as well. They will



take this task forward.

THESPIAN *Then what was the role of the 'Gram Theatre'? In this relation...*

Yes, 'Bangladesh Gram Theatre' started in 1982. The primary thoughts for this hit our mind around the year 1980. Bangladesh does not have any institutionalized system to disperse notions about our folk or traditional theatre, presentation and writing style. I thought it is of prime importance that people have appropriate ideas about the traditional music, dance and natya/theatre, palagan, the presentations that are made following the *Manasamangal* tradition, gamvira, leto, alkap and so on. Then our Gram Theatre was established by Selim Al Deen through a fair (mela) at Taluknagar which was called Azhar Bayati's mela. The Taluknagar theatre was established in 1982. Selim went over there several times before. I went there for the last time in the month of Magh, 1982. We presented a play called *Saiful Muluk Badiujjaman* in the *Jatra* tradition. I was introduced to *Gazir gaan* there. That time onwards, the influence of *Gazir gaan* can be traced in several of my plays. I think our journey has been quite much successful. We started in this way but we did not obviously think that our journey would be so successful. But we had the determination. We knew that there will be problems. But we got great responses when we came to Dhaka and said that we want to do this kind of work in the whole country, this surely benefitted us a great deal. Then we tried to approach such organizations which produce play all over the country. We had a meeting with the 'Dhaka Theatre' along with three organizations – Bogra's 'Bogra theatre', Feni's 'Songlap theatre' and Kushtiya's 'Bodhon theatre'. A committee was built. I was the convener of that committee. We decentralized the committee and thought of a one member central committee. Selim was in charge of Dhaka, Humayun faridi was in charge of Noakhali, Piyush Bandopadhyay of North Bengal and Zahir Uddin Piyar took the charge of South Bengal and Khulna. We got huge popularity in Selim Al Deen's area – which is Dhaka. However, Selim was not limited within Dhaka, he travels all across the Bangladesh. In this way, 'Gram theatre' was started. We tried to say with the 'Gram theatre', that "thousand years in our hand; we are marching ahead." We have



thousand years of heritage. Bengali theatre should be built in its light. It's a search for that. If we are successful in our search, then there is research. Through that research, we wish to build modern Bengali drama in its light. This is the primary aim. Simultaneously, we wished to provide momentum to the Bengal's own culture as opposed to the Western cultural influences on mediums like television and cinema. Apart from these, we sought to provide impetus to the economic activities of the people, as well as the cultural exchange through the inception of fairs (mela). This means comprehensive social, cultural and economic progress. We bring this into focus through our work and our plays, the issues of consciousness of the freedom struggle, religious tolerance, democracy and equal rights to all men. In the next step, we made several organizations of the 'Gram theatre', almost 262. But several organizations was closed down also. Reason is that they don't have patience. The social system of Bangladesh has not provided them stability amidst the political, economic and social crises. Naturally we face several difficulties. These social hindrances are also cultural. Moreover, there is also another stream in Bangladesh which opposes the consciousness of the Liberation War and they seek to establish a new culture which is not multi-dimensional but a narrow one. They do not tolerate multiplicity of opinions. They wish to follow religious fanaticism. They don't believe in anything earthly, they believe only in afterlife. We don't oppose those who believe in afterlife, but our culture wants them to perform their duties in this life as well. May that culture be fostered. May that culture be lead, controlled and enlivened by the progressive politics. We and our 'Gram theatre' wanted that culture to form a multidimensional stature.

THESPIAN *Was it contrary to the mainstream? What do you think?*

To some extent it was. The problem with the mainstream is that they considered the colonial theatre as the only form of theatre. We are not denying the colonial rule, but our country has been divided because of the colonial rule and as a result of that we have been separated from our roots and heritage, and colonial theatre has taken its place. We cannot deny the colonial theatre but only that has to be practiced and others



will be ignored – we could not agree with that. That is why ‘Gram Theatre’ was incepted. But it is not that the ‘Gram Theatre’ has been able to perform that task completely. ‘Gram Theatre’ has not reached that point yet. The reason is the long practice of the colonial theatre. They are growing up in that theatre discipline. So they have trouble in following our workshops. These do not have any resemblance with the television. Television necessarily means modernity. Then how could this be modern. This is not a progressive thought. We appreciate the developments that the colonial theatre has made in our country. But, our folk theatre, which has been built along the tradition of the traditional theatre, which we call the modern Bengali theatre, that should also be practiced and appreciated. Although it has been appreciated. Selim Al Deen has proved that through his plays. Those have been discussed all over the country and abroad. Several translated plays are also being performed in huge numbers. Starting from Brecht, through Shakespeare, it has reached a nice phase. I don’t see this negatively. There are three streams in Bangladesh. One is European/Western or Foreign modern tradition, colonial tradition and another is traditional Bengali one. Thus we think that we are in a state of mutual coexistence rather than a mutually exclusive one. At the beginning, there was a sense of negligence about us, but gradually people have started to see truth, although not entirely. But we think, most of the cultural workers think that the ‘Gram theatre’ has performed a pivotal role in the progress of the Bengalis. Furthermore, these new traditions are playing an important role in determining the national theatrical tradition.

THESPIAN *You were saying.....about Rabindranath....Rabindranath had started plays along the tradition of the Panchali...*

I think Rabindranath...If we see *Raja, Dakghar, Raktakarabi, Basanta* which was a tribute to Nazrul, and even in *Chitrangada*, the tradition of Panchali has been dominant. Many confuse this with the opera. But Tagore never thought of the Opera. If we analyse his sentence structure, we will see that those are actually “sanglap natya”. He rather accepted our narrative tradition. For this he has avoided all contradictions and confusions. The contradictions in Rabindranath’s plays are



resolved in several styles. Because it is Nandini who leads Raja out in *Raktakarabi*. This is entirely opposite to the western theatrical tradition or philosophy. Rabindranath has also worked from a philosophical point of view. The philosophy that is inherent in Indian people's lives is worthy to be written, not only the tradition and style. This is very important. Rabindranath was as much an Indian as a modernist. I thought Selim Al Deen has done this sort of work. It had developed through Rabindranath and it could have gone as a movement, but it did not happen. Several years later, Shombhu Mitra applied this in his *Chand Boniker Pala*. But it is Selim Al Deen who has given impetus to this tradition and made it modern.

THESPIAN *A small query here – would we call Selim Al Deen's work as an extension of that of Rabindranath?*

Yes, Certainly. But since the plays which were staged in Rabindranath's time had not been much discussed upon, we can say that Selim Al Deen has established that into the mainstream. This is his prime contribution. Selim has been able to prove that this is a unique theatrical tradition and that it is a tradition of Bengal itself. He also started establishing the precepts of the same.

THESPIAN *Then why did you not feel the urge to produce a play by Rabindranath? Where English poet Shakespeare gained your attention but not Rabindranath?*

I have not done Rabindranath because I did not get time as such. I have to do many things. Outside theatre, I need to lead many social, cultural organizations. I lose the bulk of my time there. Also, Selim's plays involve research which take so much time. I take around one to one and a half year for a play. I wish to do Rabindranath, I really do. I will do *Dakghar*. I like it very much, have read it in my childhood. Actually I did Shakespeare out of compulsion. In London's Globe Theatre, there was a theatre festival where there would be performances on Shakespeare in 37 languages of 37 different countries. Initially I hesitated a bit that doing Shakespeare is not my cup of tea. But I presented him in the tradition of Panchali. At least I have successfully proved the slogan – “may the past, the eternal music of Bengali stage be rekindled on



the world stage”. By breaking away from Shakespeare’s five act structure, I have provided it a lyrical form. I have derived a new form by combining the Nrigosthi theatre convention of Selim Al Deen and Bengal’s own theatrical convention. I think I need to break away from a lot of things if I were to do Rabindranath. Will do that; not a problem.

THESPIAN *What do you think of the present state of the theatre in Bangladesh in its socio economic context?*

I think that our theatre artists have a keen eye on the politics and keep that within their creative process. That is why ‘street-theatre’ is so popular here. They have been telling this for almost thirty years that there is a possibility of the uprising of the fundamentalism and terrorism. The government or the politicians have not taken any measure for the benefit of the theatre. Despite that, theatre in our country has dealt with the issues like the trials of the war-criminals and few other relevant agendas. As a result of which the War Crime Tribunal was set up.

THESPIAN *What is the reason behind the lack of audience in Bangladesh theatre? Where is the actual problem? Manuscript, direction, acting or somewhere else?*

There is severe financial crunch in theatre. This has not allowed us to be professional. There are theatre groups in Bangladesh at several places. But there is no place to stage a performance. There has not been many auditoriums or open stages. Rather the number has decreased continuously. We will see that number of places for worship is increasing but the number of playgrounds is on the wane. So we can understand where the society is heading. So the space for theatre has been crippled. Thus the audience is also lesser in number. Thus the theatre practice is being hampered. There are groups in or outside Dhaka, but there are no performances. There are many districts but no auditoriums. And the auditoriums that the experts of our government set up, are not fit for a theatre performance. Instead of taking care of these issues, the government is restricting the whole nation within the arena of politics. There no appreciation of the cultural activities. These are the reasons why a secular society is



gradually turning into religious fanatics. Because of this dire economic condition, we are not able to set up a repertoire theatre. Had there been professional theatre in each district of Bangladesh, the nature of theatre practice would have been different – be it good or bad. The dearth of manuscript is another major problem. I think there are many new exciting talents coming up in the field of acting and direction. They are really doing well. So I am hopeful in this regard. Apart from these social insecurity is also a major reason behind the lack of audience.

THESPIAN *To what extent our achievement vis-à-vis our search for the roots is acknowledged in the international arena; especially when you are the president of the ITI (Bangladesh chapter) and while Bangladesh possesses the seat of the president (worldwide) since the last four years.*

Regarding the ITI, Bangladesh has good reputation all over the world. However the problem is that not much of our plays are being performed on the international stage. Hardly one or two performances are staged in a year. We will not get much response in the international arena like this. Government should undertake initiative regarding this. If the government take the charge of our travel and food expenses, if they spend around five crore then each year ten groups can visit other countries – nearby countries or the far ones also. We can let the world know about our experiments in the theatre world and make sure that they understand that this is not merely a country about storms, floods, fundamentalism, terrorism or fire in the garment factory. Bangladesh is much more than that. As we have done in the Globe Theatre. Almost two to two and a half thousand people in two days have watched the performance. Everyone had liked our experiments with *The Tempest*. The production was able to create huge stir among the audience. British magazines like *The Guardian*, *The Art Desk* published large columns appreciating the work. It is here where we are lagging behind slightly. Government has given financial support in some cases. But by no means that was not enough.

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