The Indigenous Voice of Poetomachia

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The Various Perspectives of Textuality and Performance

Edited by

Robert Masterson and Sayan Dey

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EDITORS VOICES

Drama and theatre, as texts and the stage, are conceived in a highly constricted manner. Within the different contemporary spatio-temporal global performative structures, the stage is regarded as a linear, three-walled platform with a well-organized paraphernalia of stage props, dramatic scripts (either by renowned playwrights or self-composed), musical instruments, etc. In fact, theatre is almost synonymous with onstage ideologies. The present perspectives of commercialism are highly reluctant to recognize enactments as theatrical, which happen beyond the stage. They are usually dismissed as "primitive" and "not up-to-date" because they fail to satisfy the profiteering desires of modern art and aesthetics. But the concept of this well-structured modern stage never existed prior to the arrival of the colonizers from the West (both Europe and America). The pre-colonial theatrical enactments across the globe, before the invasion of the West, were simply meant for the entertainment and socio-political consciousness of the common masses.

Even during the court plays, quite often the common citizenry were allowed to watch them and freely debate and express their opinions. The *kavigaan* (enactment of poetic songs) cult of West Bengal, the dramatic forms of *anansesem* (oral storytelling) in Saharan Africa, and the ancient aboriginal theatre of Australia, for instance, all emerged beyond the modern linear patterns of the text and the stage. These indigenous forms of enactments did not have a well-furnished textual basis or well-constructed stages. A common community space was chosen and the common people, who gathered as spectators, enthusiastically took part in it. But with the arrival of the colonizers in different parts of the world, these forms of performatives were downplayed as "inhuman" and "barbaric," and were gradually converted into an elite class phenomenon. Since then, the different indigenous forms of theatre faded away, paving the way for the different commercial stage forms that we see today.

This editorial venture deliberately shifts from the usual critical path of text and stage analysis, and follows a tangential way that makes the following interrogations:

- What are the possibilities of analysing the performative role of drama beyond the stage?

- How can dramatic texts be re-read as verbal performances?

The chapters in the book have been thematically divided into three sections. The first section consists of four chapters. The first chapter by Mr. Partha Sarathi Nandi on "Surveillance, Sedition and Censorship" elucidates the contemporary problem of censorship of art and aesthetics, which continues to follow the colonial legacies. The second chapter, "Comedy between Production and Audience Consumption" by Mr. Mounir Sanhaji, unfolds the tensions that lie between the production-audience interactions in a very sarcastic manner. The third chapter of the book, "Writing Outside of Language: Poetomachic Power Plays in the Prose of the Avant-garde" by Dr. Gerald Raymond Gordon, argues for the importance of de-hegemonizing enactments and the importance of avant-gardism. The fourth chapter, entitled "Urs at Mastana Baba Dargah" by Mr. Sayan Gupta, steers us towards the ritualistic hinterlands of India where theatre amalgamates with religious rituals. The *'Urs* or the celebration of the death anniversary of Sufi saints is very theatrical and it is prominently underlined through his chapter.

The second section, consisting of three chapters, proposes a unique phenomenon in textual analysis. All three chapters—"Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*: A Mirror to the Socio-cultural Wasteland of Post-independent India" by Miss Sayantina Dutta, "The Seed of a Problem: Body and Speech in Basheer's *Kathabhījam*" by Dr. Mohamed Shafeeq K, and "The Art of Precision: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the Symphony Touching Every Heart" by Miss Mitra Sannigrahi—analyse their respective playwrights in a very dramatic manner. Their research methodology conjures an alternative theatrical proposition within which the text and the stage overlap. The writing technique appears to be an enactment in itself.

The third section consists of five chapters. Critical studies of playwrights like Lynn Nottage, Brien Friel, Ama Ata Aidoo, Wole Soyinka, and Girish Karnad conjure a crucial interpretative framework through this section. The five essays are: "Disregarding Cultural Roots and Self Destruction: An Exploration of Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation or The Re-Education of Undine*" by Dr. Soumya Jose and Miss N. Vijayalakshmi, "Women and War: A Reading of Lyn Nottage's Play *The Ruined*" by Dr. Sony Jalarajan Raj and Dr. Soumya Jose, "Mother Africa versus Her Betrayer Son: A Postcolonial Study of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*" by Mr. Saikat Guha, "Language, Identity and Culture in Brian Friel's *Translations*" by Dr. Khum Sharma, and "Dialectics of the Centre and the Margin: A Postcolonial Study of Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and

Karnad's *Nagamandala*" by Dr. Chand M. Basha. The essays reflect an alternative re-reading of these plays. With respect to Indian academia, these playwrights are not very frequently dealt with by the graduate, postgraduate, and research students. Moreover, the analytical mode of the plays reveals different possible and alternative directions for dramatic reading.

Before concluding, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht from Stanford University for furnishing us with an invaluable foreword, Mr. Rob Harle (an eminent poet and writer) from Australia for such a meticulous introduction, and Dr. Oluwole Coker from Obafemi Awolowo University for writing such a beautiful Preface. We are also grateful to Nirojita Guha (research scholar) from Banaras Hindu University for her valuable suggestions, Anna Patalano (visual artist) from Bronxville, and Soumali Roy (assistant teacher) from Varanasi for their unforgettable support.

So here it goes...
Lights! Focus! Action!

Professor Robert Masterson and Sayan Dey

PREFACE

I am delighted to write an expert's note for this book, *Poetomachia: The Indigenous Voice in Text and on Stage*, which is a timely book in postcolonial studies generally. I say this because, as a scholar of African literary and cultural studies, one has been confronted in recent times with the need to evolve African-oriented paradigms of analysis. Hence, a book of this nature is a response to the critical lacuna of postcolonial theorizing.

Several labels exist for scholars and scholarship coming from the so-called Global South—from postcolonial to indigenous to third-world and the like; yet, what is certain is that we did not give ourselves these names; we were rather christened by the West. This is not only confounding but also demonstrates the capacity of an imperial order to dictate the future of the Other, having demonized their past. This clearly suggests that, for any epistemological probing from the repressed to be meaningful, it must be a conscious determination to tell one's own stories.

I identify with the efforts of the contributors to this volume. Rather than belly-aching and standing up to challenge ideological and epistemological stereotyping, they have chosen a noble path, as Chinua Achebe advocated, to write their own stories. After-all, to quote Achebe, "Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." This is what the endeavours in this collection have strived to do in this important book.

This book is also coming at an auspicious period in African studies when scholars seem to have come to a conclusion on the inevitability of decolonizing knowledge. This, of course, can only materialize when "subalterns speak," and they speak clearly and audibly! As such, in appreciating the essays in this volume I acknowledge the dexterity of the contributors in affirming the "indigenous voice" in their expositions. It is my firm conviction that the perspectives of the contributors all contribute to the much-desired repositioning of the indigenous or postcolonial in literary and cultural studies generally.

On a final note, I commend the initiative and industry of the editors. They have succeeded in rallying important intellectual dissipations in putting this book together. I certainly welcome this book as a resource for scholars of postcolonial studies generally. It is a robust assemblage of well

thought-out and inspiring essays that demonstrate the viability of the indigenous voice and the accompanying approaches of analysis.

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FOREWORD

THE CENTRIFUGAL POWER OF PERFORMANCE

When we say "theatre" within Western cultural premises as they have long become the global cultural condition, we simply refer to the one specific dimension of "literature" that has replaced the written word as its medium of expression by the bodies of actors. But while this specific "literature" form may appear to be both a transcultural and metahistorical option, it is in reality the result of a historically unique development that occurred in Europe during the second half of the sixteenth century, between the prohibition of medieval Passion Plays, as violent rituals of Christian religion, and Shakespeare's plays as they have become foundational and "classic" for our concept of "theatre." Different from all forms of medieval performance, theatre presupposes the exclusively modern modality of fiction, materialized in the curtain that separates worlds "as if" from the realities of the individual and the collective every day. Above all, theatre foregrounds the level of narrative to a degree unknown to premodern rituals. Over and again, all forms of theatre are constituted by the progressive unfolding of "characters" as complex semantic structures that are embodied, such as Hamlet, Macbeth, or King Lear. When we watch theatre (movies or tv sitcoms), we take the actors' bodies as signifiers to represent such fictional personalities.

The existential and ontological opposite is the case when we participate in events of performance—although Western-style education has long imposed upon us a misconception of performance as "theatre." Performance, in fact lies in the display and perception of human behaviour as a presence that is a tangible bodily substance that occupies and inhabits space. Rather than representing the world for spectators, as "theatre" does, performance is a world in its permanent process of constitution that invites other bodies to participate. Performance can repeat and highlight institutional frames and social choreographies where our lives take place (in the literal sense of the word). These are the forms of performance that we call "rituals." But performance can also destroy institutional frames with the violence of body movements that have no assigned place. Carnival, for example, as a countercultural enclave within the Christian

church year, has always implied such a potential of violence and revolution.

Opening our critical thinking for a first perception and experience of traditional Indian forms of performance that had been repressed and hidden under global concepts of hermeneutic understanding for centuries, this volume, edited by Robert Masterson and Sayan Dey, has a centrifugal power. It is "centrifugal" because its contributions and the materials they are describing may begin to activate our historical and theoretical imagination, so that it may grasp what performance used to be and may become again. It is also a "power" because a book can never be more than a potential for intellectual violence that has not yet turned into destructive gestures.

Whether this centrifugal power will yield a revolutionary impulse of cultural violence or motivate a more peaceful appropriation of non-Western traditions in a multicultural context will fully depend on the readers that Masterson's and Dey's book find.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

Albert Guerard Chair in Literature
Professor of Comparative Literature and of French and Italian and, by courtesy, of German Studies
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INTRODUCTION

It was indeed an honour to be asked by Sayan Dey to write an introduction to this important, unique, and inspiring book.

Theatre has of course changed considerably over the centuries; however, it has always been a vehicle for the expression of concerns about corruption, the suppression of civil liberties, and the abuse of power by the wealthy elite to control and keep ordinary people subservient. Now, with the increase of global commercialism, out-of-control capitalist greed, and the subsumption of indigenous and minority groups into a homogenous society we need activist, hard-hitting, and revolutionary theatre more than ever. We need theatre to jolt the public out of its somnambulism and wake up! As Salman Rushdie said, referring to poetry, "A poet's work … to name the unnameable, to point to frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it going to sleep." This, in my opinion, is equally applicable to theatre.

The essays in this book consider these matters in quite distinct ways, using very different forms of theatre. As Gordon says in his essay, "Poetomachia can be a useful tool for examining not only wars of words but also more general dynamics of how the dominant hegemonic cultural power establishes itself, holds totalitarian sway and marginalizes critique through its control of language, ideology and thought."

Censorship, prohibition, and laws against protesting injustices need to be challenged and exposed for their suppression of human rights. These insidious and immoral practices are on the increase, not, as we should expect, on the decrease! As an example, in the state in Australia in which I live, the government is attempting to make "peaceful protesting" illegal! This came in the wake of "our" successful protest to stop the disastrous environmental practice of CSG mining. As Shukla's essay in this book discusses, "nature" has always been a perennial theme in literature and theatre, both as a phenomenon to praise or worship, and also as one to preserve for posterity (and our continued existence).

I personally believe we have had enough wars and violence in the world, so protest, in a peaceful Gandhian sense to bring about change, is the only humane action available to us, and especially marginalized indigenous groups. As the old adage goes, "the pen is mightier than the sword," so Poetomachia's "war of words" is a useful tool in the hands of

the sensitive playwright to help make the world a more equitable and better place to exist for everyone.

The twelve essays and two interviews in this book, all by experienced influential scholars, delve deeply into these concerns and are globally representative, from countries as disparate as Ireland, Africa, Japan, and India. Unfortunately, there is always a limit of space for these publications, and if anything I would have liked the book to be a little longer, and include an essay on Bertholt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Perhaps this could become part of a follow-up companion book?

Apart from being a very interesting read for the lay person, I believe this book should become a "core reader" for tertiary education studies in performance, theatre, political philosophy, and literature.

Rob Harle

Writer, Artist, Reviewer, Nimbin, Australia

SECTION 1-

BEYOND THE STAGE: COLLABORATION AND CONFLICTS

SURVEILLANCE, SEDITION, AND CENSORSHIP: CONTROL AND THE PROSCRIPTION OF PERFORMATIVE SPACES IN INDIA FROM THE COLONIAL ERA TO THE POSTCOLONIAL ERA

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Recently, the slugfest between the Censor Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and the producers of *Udta Punjab* (a film based on rampant drug usage in the state of Punjab) generated much controversy in the media and various social networking sites. The ongoing debates and discussions have provoked some very interesting questions regarding the validity of censorship in the age of the internet (where everything is available online), and the need for any specific government institution to monitor, filter, and affiliate films (or performing arts, in general) before opening them for public discretion. And, by doing so, the controversy once again raised the eternal question of freedom of expression of thought versus surveillance and proscription by the authoritarian institutions.

This article is divided into two sections. The first attempts to build a theoretical basis of censorship in general and revolves around the question of its complex relationship with the freedom of speech and expression through the ages. Unlike my first section where I am attempting to locate the issue of censorship within a temporal dimension, in the second section I will be engaging mostly with its spatial dimension. By providing a brief historiographical account of the factors leading to the emergence of colonial censorship in Bengali drama, I will focus on the historicity of censorship in the form of the Dramatic Performances Act (1876), locating it within the context of the emergent nationalist tendencies in the nineteenth-century theatre of Bengal.

I

The concept of censorship is not new and can be found throughout time and space. From the ancient societies of China, Greece, and Rome to seventeenth-century Germany (the inhibition of the press during the Thirty Years' War) and England (the Licensing Order of 1643, the Licensing of the Press Act, 1662, and the Stage Licensing Act, 1737) until today, the spectre of censorship haunts the freedom of expression and the development of free media throughout the globe. But before addressing the issue of censorship versus intellectual freedom, let us examine the underlying ethical theories at work. This issue can be related to two kinds of moral theories: consequentialist and de-ontological. While consequentialist moral theories (such as utilitarianism) are oriented towards a choice of action that emphasizes the production of a profitable outcome (i.e. a positive end-result), de-ontological theories focus more on the right or wrong aspects of an action (i.e. the moral and ethical issues related to the action) rather than the consequences. So, basically, it can be seen as a war between the means (de-ontological) and the ends (consequentialist). However, the consequentialist theories fall short due to their inability to address the issues of rights and justice. Also, it is often argued that the utilitarian philosophy would permit or even authorize actions that might violate individuals' rights in order to derive maximum profit. De-ontological arguments, on the other hand, favour freedom of speech and expression and believe in the independent exchange of thoughts and ideas (both desirable and undesirable).

Now let us examine the case of *Udta Punjab* in the light of these two philosophical connotations. The CBFC objected to the release of this movie on the basis of certain issues, such as the explicit usage of cuss words and drugs (which can be "morally harmful") and the mention of certain locales (definitive territories), and therefore the revising committee suggested eighty-one cuts, which "would mean that nothing is left in the film anymore" (Rakshit 2016). The chairman of the CBFC hinted at the involvement of some subtle political underplays to malign the state of Punjab. So technically, the debates over *Udta Punjab* pitted a de-ontological rights argument (for freedom of expression and portraying the real situation) against a consequentialist one opposing its release. However, the "protection of intellectual freedom" argument won over the "consequentialist objections," and the movie was released with some minor modifications.

The consequential argument (raised in the case of *Udta Punjab*) is in some ways similar to the objections raised by the Puritan regime that led to the closing down of theatres in England in 1642. On September 6, 1642

(during the English Civil War), the theatres were shut by an order of the Parliament because such "amusements" and "diversions" were highly undesirable in such turbulent times. In addition, the Parliament also instituted a censorship ordinance in 1643 (known as the "Licensing Order") in order to check the royalist propagandas and regulate printing and publications. John Milton was one of the first to argue that censorship could not function by, "pointing to the incompetence of censors as mere bureaucrats required to assess complex arguments, and the inadequacy of their numbers to the scale of the task if taken to its logical conclusions. But this did not prevent him from taking on himself the role of licensor for the Commonwealth a few years later" (Patterson 1984, 12). However, Milton, in his polemical pamphlet *Areopagitica: a Speech of Mr John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England* (1644), performs the role of a public orator for the defence of free speech, which reminds us of Isocrates' *Areopagiticus*. Milton's allusion to the classical antecedents is explicitly evident at the beginning of this tract where he quotes Theseus' speech from Euripides' *The Suppliants*:

> This is true Liberty when free born men
> Having to advise the public may speak free,
> Which he who can, and will, deserves high praise,
> Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
> What can be juster in a State then this? (Milton 1918, 1)

This speech by the Athenian spokesman Theseus for liberty against the Theban tyranny, which Milton consciously uses in his pamphlet in order to empower his own arguments on the basis of the classical struggle for freedom of expression, can essentially be read as the de-ontological struggle against the consequentialist authority. However, this dialectics is sometimes problematized by utilitarian philosophers like John Stuart Mill, who argues against censorship and defends the freedom of speech and expression from a consequentialist perspective. For Mill, censorship is undesirable because of the consequences it produces (due to the suppression of free ideas and expression), and as Ward observes, "Censorship is wrong because it makes it less likely that truth will be discovered or preserved, and it is wrong because it has destructive consequences for the intellectual character of those who live under it" (2008, 86).[1] So, for Mill, "To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure that it is false, is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility. Its condemnation may be allowed to rest on this common argument, not the worse for being common" (Mill 1954, 79).

However, in the case of nation states (even those nations that embraced the ideologies of "liberty"), the administration in charge never withholds their control over institutions like hospitals, armed forces, and schools (and even if they do let go of certain institutions, they keep them under surveillance). However, with the passage of time, and the changes in the structure of institutions, the control mechanisms also evolve or change their forms.

As Deleuze observes:

> the *societies of control* … are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies. "Control" is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future. Paul Virilio also is continually analyzing the ultra-rapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system. (1992, 4)

Here, Deleuze is talking about the emerging forms of control (like techno-biopolitics[2]), which are now turning their gaze from the earlier enclosed institutional spaces and are trying to penetrate deeper into the individual spaces, taking control over their subjective lives and choices.

Though censorship, be it classical, modern, or the postmodern, changes or modifies its forms over time, the inherent content of surveillance and repressing resistance (regardless of their space of emergence: within or without) remains the same. And this process of silencing is mostly accomplished through well-established legal structures (and sometimes even by adopting various repressive apparatuses). Marxist thinkers like Louis Althusser and New Historicists like Michel Foucault often point out how the system tricks us with a false sense of liberty while confining us in their structure. But in their discussions they emphasize the ideological control exerted by the public institutions over the individuals (while analysing and revealing the underlying power relations) and ignore the issue of censorship.

The later revisionist critics like Richard Butt or Annabel Patterson, however, have identified this lacuna and are attempting to develop a theoretical framework for activities (like street performances, plays, songs, films, the oral circulation of news and rumours, political caricatures, and various other forms of expression) often identified as seditious and libellous, and are suppressed/silenced by the state (or the civil or religious authorities). This attitude of the state is put forth by Francis Bacon in his essay "Of Seditions and Troubles"[3]: "Libels and licentious discourses against the state, when they are frequent and open; and in like sort, false

news often running up and down to the disadvantage of the state, and hastily embraced; are amongst the signs of troubles" (Bacon 1908, 60–1).

The essay "opens with advice to the Shepherds of people as to how to interpret the symptoms of political tempests" (Patterson 1984, 17). Bacon also analyses the *causes and motives of seditions* which, according to him, "are, innovation in religion; taxes; alteration of laws and customs; breaking of privileges; general oppression; advancement of unworthy persons; strangers; dearths; disbanded soldiers; factions grown desperate; and whatsoever, in offending people, joineth and knitteth them in a common cause" (Bacon 1908, 65). This *common cause* often results in the development of a resistive force against the state, and in turn instigates the authority to adopt coercive measures for the repression of this resistance through the mechanism of censorship (as is evident from the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, which will be discussed at length in the next section).

II

Theatre, due to its interactive space, has always been a very popular medium for voicing opinions and staging resistance. Authoritative forces fear this performative space more than any other forms of literature because of its potential to stir up public opinion. This threat still looms large, even if they prohibit or close down a play. Patterson notes one such instance of resistance in her book *Censorship and Interpretation*:

> In 1936, the New Theater in Sydney, Australia, put on Clifford Odets's *Till the Day I Die*, a famous expression of anti-Nazi sentiment. In a striking re-enactment of the case of *A Game at Chess*, it was not until Dr. Asmis, the German consul, complained to Chief Secretary Baddeley that the play was "unjust to a friendly power" that the government banned it; and when they did, the audience threw the police out of the theater, and the play proceeded. (1984, 14)

This act of resistance, however, was not unnatural in the late-twentieth-century scenario where attempts were made to use theatre to serve political ends or portray the painful predicaments of the oppressed people, who were vocally against government injustices. Interestingly, this act of "natural" resistance becomes "unnatural" if perceived within a colonial framework.

In Colonial Bengal, for example, the British East India Company imported their theatre for the sake of their own entertainment (during the seventeenth century), but later used it as an instrument to introduce

Western ideas, education, literature, and culture to the native populace. This act can be perceived as the first modern attempt at the political control of the medium.

By the early nineteenth century, Calcutta became a site of interaction between the colonial officials and non-officials, missionaries, and the indigenous urban Bengali aristocrats. Out of this interaction emerged a progressive segment of the Bengali society—the English educated middle class (who stood for modernity), and social reformers who, influenced by the European Grand narratives of rationality, liberalism, and humanism, depended on "the colonial authorities to bring about by state action the reform of traditional institutions and customs" (Chatterjee 1986, 6).

So, by the mid-nineteenth century when Bengali drama appeared in its modern form, the educated natives had two available models: modern European drama and ancient Sanskrit drama (revived and provided a classical status mostly by the European Orientalist scholars). The "enlightened" Bengali aristocracy built stages in their palatial homes and gardens to put on shows for the strictly invited audiences. Meanwhile, the performances in the Private Theatres generated a craze for theatres among the middle-class youth, leading to the formation of a number of amateur theatrical parties. "The amateur theatres depended on the patronage of the well-to-do, but in turn helped feed the rising demand for public theatres where the common citizen could enter" (Lal 2004, 40). As a result, some active members of the Baghbazar Amateur Theatre and other enthusiasts marshalled all their resources for a public theatre that was named the National Theatre. However, as Rimli Bhattacharya observes:

> The national element in the public theatre did not imply an exclusive focus on a pre-colonial past as had been the case with the amateur theatre-wallahs. Although the beginnings of the public theatre was set amidst considerable discussion in the press on the implications of "public" and "national," there was no self-conscious programme actually followed or even chalked out for a national theatre, except for the fact that the enterprise of "doing theatre" was undertaken by the indigenous thespians. (Dasi 1998, 170)

As Bengali drama entered the arena of public theatre, the performative practices attempted a union between the traditional (indigenous) themes and the Western proscenium conventions. New genres like social plays and historical romances evolved. The mythological plots were "adapted for the proscenium stage from the devotional *yatra* performances of Bengal's traditional Vaishnava sectarian culture" (Chatterjee 2013, 231). Traditional devices like song and dance were also woven into the narrative

structure. Though the theatre was consciously modelled on the European stage, it successfully drew a large native audience (from various sections of the society) by producing vernacular adaptations of many Western plays and freely employing various Shakespearean and Molièrean motifs in the indigenous plays. Thus, the nineteenth century Bengali theatre, with its "ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves," became a perfect heterotopic site, bringing "onto the rectangle of the stage a whole succession of places that are unrelated to one another" (Foucault 1999, 181).

With the emergence of organized nationalism during the 1870s, Bengali theatre escaped the confinements of the private realm, and unlike the earlier nineteenth-century plays, the Public Theatre attempted to confront the then contemporary social and political problems directly related to the masses in a more realistic way. As a result, the first Bengali public theatre opened on Saturday December 7, 1872 to put on Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Nildarpan*, or "The Indigo Mirror" (which used a combination of realistic representation and political fervour). This play has long been hailed by the nationalist critics and historians as the first protest play for its remarkably bold representation of the depredations of English planters in rural Bengal, and as a classic portrayal of the bravery and firm determination of the riots in their resistance to colonialism.

Ironically, for the emergent nationalistic vigour the Western proscenium stage was now becoming a platform for the indigenous population to raise their voice against the injustices imparted on them by the West. The success of *Nildarpan* heralded a tradition of *Darpan* (Mirror) plays in Bengali (depicting oppression and exploitation in different walks of life) like Prasanna Mukhopadhyay's *Palligram Darpan* [*Mirror of Rural Life*] (1873), Mir Musharraf Hossain's *Jamidar Darpan* [*The Landowner's Mirror*] (1873), Jogendra Ghose's *Kerani Darpan* [*The Clerk's Mirror*] (1874), Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyay's *Chakar Durpan* [*The Tea-Planters' Mirror*] (1875) and *Jail Darpan* [Mirror of the Prison] (1876), Nagendra Nath Bandopadhyaya's *Gaekwar Durpan* [*The Mirror of Baroda*] (1875), Gopalkrishna Bandhopadhyaya's *Banga Darpan* (1885), and so on. "A class of dramatists was perhaps coming into existence which considered that a play should hold the mirror to social conditions" (Rangacharya 1971, 100).

The British Government was not much concerned with *Nildarpan*'s stage performance as the indigo problem was almost non-existent by the time of its enactment. However, Bengali drama at this time assumed a political tone and produced plays like *Gaekwar Durpan* and *Chakar Durpan* (that lashed out against the vindictive treatment meted out by the

British government over their colonial subjects, be it Maharaja Mulhar Rao Gaekwar of Baroda or the tea planters of Assam). "Alarmed by the two plays at a time when British justice was being questioned, the lieutenant-governor of Bengal, Sir Richard Temple, urged the immediate passage of the Censorship Act, expressing his fears that it would be *bad and unwise* to permit the British name to be publicly vilified, evening after evening, in the presence of a susceptible, quick-witted and impressionable race like the Bengallees" (Bhatia 2004, 38). These plays generated a sense of paranoia and the British administration felt a sudden urge to prohibit undesirable theatrical performances through legislation and to solicit for its assent from the Marquis of Salisbury, the Secretary of State for India (who approved it on September 30, 1875). However, "the developments in the arena of Bengali theatre were progressing so rapidly that the Government could not wait till the proposed bill, routed through all necessary legislative processes, was enacted" (Das 2004, 7).

These developments mainly came in the form of two plays by Upendranath Das[4]: *Sharat-Sarojini* and *Surendra-Binodini*. Both were "peopled with adventurous heroes and sensational events," but "were, nevertheless, always permeated with a sense of patriotism that does not rest merely on the laurels of the past or cultural regeneration of a Hindu India but looks towards direct political action in the horizons of the future" (Chatterjee 2007, 243–4). Apart from these two plays, in 1875 the Great National Theatre also staged a farce titled *Gajadananda O Jubaraj* (on February 19, 1876, allegedly by Upendranath Das), which was performed along with Jyotindra Nath Tagore's patriotic play *Sarojini*. This farce was a satirical account of the Prince of Wales' (later King Edward VII) visit to Jagadananda Mukherjee's (a member of Bengal Legislative council) *antormahal* at his Bhowanipore residence, where the women members of his family gave the prince a traditional Bengali welcome. "Many Bengalis viewed the prince's glimpse into the zenana of a *respectable* Bengali as a great dishonour and expressed their outrage by attacking the prince's action, and by severely condemning Mukherjee for encouraging his visit" (Bhatia 2004, 41). After the second week, the police intervened and the play was charged with an attempt to defame the British royalty, and promptly banned. "On the preceding day, i.e. on 29th of February, 1876, Lord Northbrooke, the then Viceroy, had promulgated an ordinance from Simla in exercise of the power conferred upon him by section 23 of the Indian Councils Act 1861, empowering the Government of Bengal with the authority to control dramatic performances" (Das 2004, 8).

The Great National Theatre, in protest, staged another satirical burlesque on March 1, 1876—*The Police of Pig and Sheep*—lampooning two high-

ranking officials: Calcutta Police Commissioner Sir Stuart Hogg and Superintendent Mr. Lamb. Three nights later, on March 4, the Deputy Commissioner of Police interrupted the play *Sati ki Kalankini* and arrested the director Upendranath Das, manager Amritalal Basu, and six others on the charge of promulgating "obscenity" in *Surendra-Binodini* (performed three nights earlier).[5] The charge against *Surendra-Binodini* "was challenged in a police court and the magistrate sentenced Das and Basu to one month's imprisonment. An appeal challenging the sentence was made to the High Court the very next day. After 10 days, the judges ruled that *Surendra-Binodini* was not obscene and Das was released" (Chatterjee 2007, 246).

Though obscenity was the main charge against this play, it was basically a pretext. The British Government was least worried about public morality or licentiousness in literature and was more concerned with the emergent nationalism that crept into the Bengali stage and drama. The British policy of surveillance and censoring the seditious plays became very apparent in the case of Girish Chandra Ghosh. Discussing his play *Canda* (1890), Derek Jones reveals:

> [It] contained the lines, "If your Excellency would order it so, the citizens of Chittone/ Would all rise up in flames; young and old/ Boys and women, all would take up arms to finish off/ The oppressive enemy of the land," [which] escaped censorship by analysing a past dictatorship, and leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions on its present relevance. When however, Ghosh was more direct—examining how the British had come to rule Bengal, in *Siraj Ud-Daula* (1905) and *Mir-Qasim* (1906)—the plays were swiftly banned. (2005, 2412)

So, during the early years of the Swadeshi movement, Bengali theatre was able to stage only the officially approved versions of plays like Ghosh's *Siraj Ud-Daula* and *Mir-Qasim* or Kshirodprasad's *Nandakumar* and *Palasir Pyayaschitta*.

However, as a result of the judicial defeat (in the case of *Surendra-Binodini*) and the expiration of the ordinance that was promulgated in February (on May 31), a law member, Mr. Hobhouse, pushed a bill "for the better control of dramatic performances," and within a year the Vice Regal Council passed the Dramatic Performances Control Act (on December 26, 1876). With the passing of this act, the public theatre was effectively barred from propagating overtly subversive anticolonial messages.

After the *Surendra-Binodini* incident, a rapid disintegration can be observed among the leading figures of the "rebel theatre" (as theatre historian Pulin Das terms it), and soon the Bengali theatre "came to terms

with the changed situation and began to put up safe operatic or mythological plays with an emphasis mostly on the visual properties in the production" (Das 2004, 11). The main reason behind this change in attitude was the reluctance of the theatre owners to take commercial risks and also to avoid the wrath of the law. "Even though the act did not give the police specific powers to examine and censor them before they were performed on stage, *the moral effect* of the legislation had legitimized this practice. The commissioner of police reported in 1910 that he requires the production before him of the manuscript of all newly published plays, and he has not found any difficulty in inducing managers and authors to do what he wants" (Chatterjee 2013, 261).

However, the proscription of theatre failed to demolish the spirit and nationalistic zeal, and with the rise of the Swadeshi movement the idea of using the stage for political purposes permeated beyond the realms of the public theatre in Calcutta and reached the suburbs and rural areas through local troupes, amateur groups, and enthusiasts. This idea of spreading anticolonial nationalism among the common masses also gave a vent to the emergence of a lot of performative spaces like the political 'jatras' and the historical dramas (which carried seditious doctrines within their apparently simplistic structures), which could not properly be controlled through surveillance and persecution. Surprisingly, "The Dramatic Performances Control Act 1876 remained on the statute book even after independence, and all plays for performance in a public hall had to get a prior police sanction. It has been abolished only recently [1962] as a result of persistent agitation" (Mukherjee 1982, 46).

III

Though the colonial Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 has now become obsolete since independence, various states amended and modified this act in such a way that it empowered the state governments to have more control over the theatrical medium. However, the act of controlling and censoring the liberty of the creative mediums of expression has not diminished with the emergence of a new digital era and the fading away of the old disciplinary societies. The eternal act of control has only changed its mechanisms. Now, the modes of control, instead of being centralized, are being dispersed. They flow through a network of open circuits, which instead of being hierarchical have become rhizomatic (in Deleuzean terms). Unlike the old disciplinary societies where subjects were separated, excluded, and hurled into certain institutions (mostly through legal means), now, in societies of control, individuals are being included

within the ambit of control (by luring them into it with a false notion of free space). So, regardless of whether it is the performance of *Surendra-Binodini* or the release of *Udta Punjab*, in both cases the individuals or the groups operate under the surveillance of an alien gaze, which always remains at the privileged end of the power structure. But despite being located within the power structure, the creative space remains an open site for contestation between the practices of control (which often presents itself as moral, ethical, and reformative) and the struggle for freedom of expression.

Notes

1. Mill, in his book *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, offers four arguments that make censorship highly undesirable for him. For him, the, "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right" (Mill 1954, 81).
2. The nineteenth century state, by the process of modernization, has considerably modified itself. Self-organized capitalism is developing new techniques of reproduction and theorists like Deleuze and Virilio are more interested in analysing how this politics operates, affects, and alters life in this digital era. I think this newly emergent techno-biopolitics is becoming a more monstrous mode of control, as its target is shifting from the power of sovereignty to power over individual life, and by generating an illusion of subjective freedom through digital empowerment we are being constantly drawn into a world of modulation.
3. Bacon's "Of Seditions and Troubles" is one of the new essays published in the third edition of his *Essays* in 1625. This edition included some essays that reflect his experience of politics under Queen Elizabeth and later King James (and can be read as a warning about the impending political turmoil).
4. As these plays (*Sharat-Sarojini* and *Surendra-Binodini*) were politically sensitive, Upendranath Das (1848–95) published them under the pseudonym of the late Durga Das. Playing the role of a friend of this recently dead author, Das even wrote a foreword to *Sharat-Sarojini*.
5. In order to downplay the exposition of sexual atrocities against the native women by the colonial officials, as represented in various plays like *Nildarpan* and *Surendra-Binodini*, the British government started banning a number of plays on the pretext that the image of women was being maligned through them. *Surendra-Binodini* was marked as libellous and obscene due to the fact that it represented a woman having her sari stained with blood, which indicated an outrageous act committed by the European magistrate against the woman.

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