THE MAKING OF THE AUDIENCE IN COLONIAL BENGALI PUBLIC THEATRE

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Abstract

In the context of the emergence of the diffuse public formed in the course of the commercialisation of cultural production, the proscenium theatre in the second half of the 19th century in Bengal established a potentially and indefinitely expansible constituency. Bengali theatre actively sought to construct its audiences as a new kind of public, different from the personal audiences, meeting only as part of a community celebration. In addressing this expanded public/ audience, the new theatres implicitly assigned to it a certain relationship to spectacle. This paper argues that the audiences in colonial Bengal were a historical product. Western style theatres in the second half of the nineteenth century in Calcutta, as a metropolitan form, addressed an audience that was truly cosmopolitan in its outlook and often transregional. These theatres used both European and Indian conventions and contents, thus pioneering new ways of seeing. The paper discusses the nature of Bengali audience, how it changed with the institutionalisation and economics of entertainment through reading of autobiographies, memoirs and newspaper reviews of contemporary times. The paper argues that the concept of the public/ audience, as a new form of coming together became characteristic of the colonial era. The audience/public addressed was anonymous and undifferentiated who like the new public theatre came to represent the "desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite."

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Introduction

In her book, *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett observed that the fate of a theatre production relied upon a negotiation with its audience more than the animation of words on a page. She noted that the theorisation of audience is concerned with the material conditions of production and reception of theatre as it was and is construed as a cultural practice. She contends that it was the cultural conditions that make theatre and an audience members' experience of it possible.[1] Following Bennett's observation, this paper discusses some aspects of the audience in Bengali colonial theatre of late 19th and early 20th centuries arguing that it was the physical presence of the audience that gave colonial Bengali theatre its cultural status.

The viewing habits of the *public* in the 19th century urban Calcutta were extravagantly reconfigured when the introduction of Western proscenium theatre made possible an assortment of pleasures for the first time. Apart from marking a sort of break from the conventions of pre-modern forms in existence till then, Western proscenium theatre interjected into the *spectator* expectations of visual and sensuous pleasure, put into circulation among other ways, by theatre architecture itself. Commercial theatre heralded the age of spectacular entertainment, melodrama, farce and stage techniques that later became the foundation of an entertainment business and was produced manifestly with the intention of making a profit. Its attributes created *consumers* who were willing to pay for it. The framework within which I seek to position these pleasures is the *Bengali proscenium theatre*, whose heyday was roughly during the 1870s and 1920s, creating new desires and new consumers.

It is and has always been the audience who have the hand in the constitution of the 'meaning' of a performance, text or utterance. It is a collectivity that is variably construed, emergent and continually undergoing redefinition and expansion, but which is nonetheless a powerful and active organising principle in people's experience.[2] While studying audiences in colonial Bengal, I will place them in the context of socio-political life and culture of the time and place. I want to argue that as much as performances (in this case the Western proscenium theatre) the audiences in colonial Bengal were a historical product. The paper will look at how people came together, how they related to each other and to the spectacle or utterance they were attending to, which I consider historically and culturally specific and need to be empirically investigated. This paper discusses the nature of Bengali audience, how it changed with the institutionalisation and economics of entertainment. It argues that performances that

are commercial, to which one gains access by paying for a ticket, convene people on a different basis from performances that are embedded in the ritual year or the domestic cycle. I concur with Richard Bauman that if performance as a mode of spoken, verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence, then the audience is the body of people prepared to grant the performer space and time in which to mount such a display, by suspending or bending the normal patterns of communicative turntaking.[3]

The Making of the Audience

The popularity and demand of the new medium of entertainment, i.e. the proscenium theatre, was intimately connected to extremely important changes that were occurring in the cultural universe of the 19th century Bengali theatregoers. The introduction of Western education and contact with the West had exposed these people to a whole new set of aesthetic sensibilities that found the traditional performance forms like *jatras, jhumur, kobigaan and kheuds* rustic and vulgar.[4] Against this backdrop Western proscenium theatre emerged, responding to the changing tastes and preferences of the audience constituencies of the ever burgeoning metropolitan Calcutta.

The emerging theatre audience was substantially different from those of the previous times—being no longer the connectivity united by the multiple filaments of kinship, co-residence or cooperation. This audience formed an indefinitely extensible horizon of anonymous and interchangeable members, to be addressed not as known persons marked by family, rank, class or residents but as persons, not just unknown but in principle not to be known, because individual difference is irrelevant to the purpose for which they have convened. Interesting to note in this connection are the mutations that this audience underwent in the course of evolution of the Bengali proscenium theatre during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The rich body of literature consisting of newspaper reviews, autobiographies, memoirs throws adequate light on the public theatre's capacity of social networking. These private theatres in the second half of the nineteenth century, organised and sponsored by the wealthy and aristocratic families of Calcutta, brought together important sections of the social elite and on occasion the English ruling elite. The ***Hindu Patriot*** of 12 February 1867 thus writes about the quality of audience who came for a particular show, at the Shovabazar Natyashala, one of the earliest theatres owned by one of

the notable aristocratic families of Calcutta:'The indigenous theatre groups of Calcutta are doing well... Few days back we had discussed about the Jorashanko and Pathurighata Natyashalas (theatres). Last Friday, the amateur theatre group at Sakherbazar presented for the first time Michael Madhusudhan Dutta's popular tragedy Krishnakumari before an extremely erudite and selected audience.'[5]

Almost in the similar vein one finds the mention of the quality of audience in Jyotirindranath Tagore's memoirs, *Jyotirindranather Jibansmriti* where the rehearsals and preparations of a particular play and its final production has been described quite elaborately—It thus goes, *the guests included almost the entire gamut of Calcutta intelligentsia.*[6]

The audience in these years were clearly the high profile, elite spectators, much in conformity with the social position of the new thespians. Theatre became the contesting ground of rival Bengali aristocratic, noble families for social status. Theatre at home and theatre in general, points out Himani Bannerji, was beginning to be seen as a natural extension of a lifestyle of the new urban environment. Among a section of the rising classes, this lifestyle not only included the production of culture but was itself generally aestheticised.[7] Certain restrictions were therefore proposed to admit only knowledgeable audience. 'At this many people showed up three or four days before the night of the show with their certificates to prove their knowledgability.'[8]

The restrictions on the quality of audience can be explained in terms of the severe constraints which proscenium theatre imposed on space, an effect of the very architecture of theatre. Developments in theatre building design such as separate entrances, assigned seating, and seats bolted to the ground enabled the physical regulation of spectators. Electric lights gave theatres the ability to literally control the audience's focus: extinguished house lights wrested spectators' attention away from one another and on to the stage, which then achieved clear dominance over the audience.[9]Through its architectural aesthetic, the 18th and 19th centuries playhouse were dominated by the proscenium, playing towards its richest patrons, informs its audience of a class structure, rooted in materialism, giving inevitable rise to realism, insisting bridges be engineered, not imagined, on stage. Actions took place safely behind the proscenium arch and politely allowed the audience to storm out in protest, or go to sleep, or watch from a distance, an aesthetic distance. It did not attempt to reach its audience physically but cerebrally. The stage rewarded this newly focused audience by creating elaborate and dynamic spectacles. While the plot seemed obfuscated, words remained more important than spectacle.[10] Noted actor Ahindra

Choudhury in his autobiography has very sensitively described this particular aspect of limited space, while juxtaposing it with the abiding popularity of traditional performances like *jatras,* when theatre was the usual vogue. Ahindra Choudhury recounts:

> During those days jatras were very popular during festivals. The household head would prefer a jatra to theatre… if theatre were organised during the Pujas it would require chairs for the guests to be seated. This would naturally limit the number of invitees. Hardly a chosen few could be called for the show, while it was neither fashionable nor desirable on the part of the household lord to watch theatre with a handful of friends and relatives.
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> These considerations prompted the household head decide on the jatra. In jatras the audience sat encircling the performance area. An indigenous carpet was spread all through; the doors remained open for anyone to join the show. There was no need for ticket—a ticket would have become unavoidable in case of a theatre; otherwise how could one control the enthusiasm of the people who came for the pujas.[11]

The paragraph captures the changes in performative practices of the two generations. It hints at the same time the popularity of the new genre of entertainment as well as the limitations the new form brought forth—limitation of space leading to limitation of number of viewers and also the importance of tickets as the limiting factor. The restraint or limit can be interpreted as symptomatic of the changed times and changing preferences that the Western education or modernity had enforced. The shift from participation to alienation may be partly explained using Victor Turner's (1982) theory of evolution from liminal to liminoid: from the experience in agricultural or tribal society, where labour and leisure exist as a single process of cause and effect, to the 'leisure genres' of complex, industrial societies, where labour and leisure are separated into their respective domains[12].

Yet despite its urban bias, restrictive character in space and capacity the new theatre held great charm for the new middle class of the metropolis. Amateur/sakher theatres had already made the new medium popular. There was thus a huge clamour for a public theatre, which would put up regularly crafted plays to an ever increasing body of enthusiasts. The lacuna created by the absence of the public theatre has been repeatedly brought up in Bengali papers. The *Somprakash* of 12 March 1862, states:

> …let us revive the old theatrical activities. We had hoped after watching such performances like Ratnavali, Sarmistha, etc. that this old habit would be rejuvenated. But sadly enough there is no such indication.

> Babu Radhamaturnerdhav Haldar and others wanted to set up a public theatre. Lack of enthusiasm did not help it materialise. They should once again try in right earnest…

In a similar vein, the *Nabaprabandha* of 1868 states:

> Such entertainments are far better than the akhdai and panchali tradition of yesterdays. But sadly, some inexperienced young men have denigrated theatre to an even lower standard than the jatras. These young lads had maligned this wonderful art through objectionable practices. It is irrelevant here to pinpoint at those groups…. There has been no theatre in the city after the staging of plays like Ratnavali, Sarmishta, etc
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> …there is no guarantee that love for theatre would flourish in this land. We have personally gone to the theatres and found out that most of the actors who participate in the plays are amateurs. Unless their requirements are properly taken care of, they refuse to wholeheartedly render their performance. Some would right away leave the stage condemning it as 'Damn Theatre', never to come back again. We have even seen that if for some reason the theatre-owner had failed to arrange for the proper refreshments, the amateur babus indignant at the lack of arrangements would at once dump the script and leave, caring little for the fate of the theatre. The theatre owner aghast at such behaviour had to abandon his whole project as recruiting new men and getting them trained at that point was a near impossible affair. The helpless owner in such circumstance pleaded with the actors to stay on, promising all the facilities. The actors would then agree because a true theatre called for all these entitlements.
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> It is quite evident that the cause of theatre could not be taken far with such breed of actors.We make an earnest plea to the directors of the plays—let them unite and set up a permanent theatre, where paid actors would be recruited. The expenses of the theatre would be borne from the proceeds of the sale of tickets and the increased sale could be duly utilised for the betterment of theatre. Monetary incentive would lure the actors to perform better and entertain the viewers more.[13].

The inauguration of the National Theatre in 1872 filled in this vacuity. Bengali theatre journeyed away from the clutches of the *babus* to the more democratic level of the ticketed theatre which soon became professional under the leadership of the likes of Girish Chandra Ghosh. What was still then a *babu* affair was not an exclusive territory of the urban rich, but also that of the middle class and expanding beyond, who in spite of being familiar with it, hitherto had little or no access to it.

However, the real breakthrough in Bengali theatre occurred when in December 1880, Pratap Chand Johuree, a Marwari jeweller, bought off the National Theatre from its Bengali owner, when it was

almost on the verge of closing down. This is a landmark event in the history of Bengali theatre as this heralded the beginning of the entry of business people in the entertainment industry as also the beginning of a permanent theatre.Unlike the former proprietors, most of whom suffered from insolvency, Johuree conducted the theatre on strictly business lines and with him as an example Girish Ghosh proved how a theatre could really be a source of profitable income.The process of democratisation of Bengali theatre came to a full circle.

Almost overnight theatre was turned into a *consumer* item with the theatregoers and their likes and dislikes receiving the supreme attention. The theatre-owners on their part did everything to keep the viewers on their side. Catering to an audience in transition, the plays ranged from plots dealing with mythical themes to topical issues or events. The diversity of plays explains the intense pressure under which the managements of different theatre companies worked to produce new items, designed to appeal to all tastes. An interesting observation here will be the decline in the number of reform-oriented plays which characterised print and production of plays from mid-1850s to the mid-1870s.The success of Amarendranath Dutta's *Classic Theatre* is a very potent instance of the deciding power of the audience. The actor-director Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay has discussed at length the reasons of the success of the Classic Theatre vis-a-vis some of the leading theatres of the time. While admitting the personal efforts of Amarendranath in making the theatre a success he also points out that it was the discretionary power of the audience that further helped Amarendranath. He recounts that the audience had been too overburdened with the depiction of roles by the same cast in different garbs in the long span of 25 years. Despite the fact that these years had seen the rise and fall of several theatres, there was no change in the cast and it were the same faces that played different roles at different times. This made the audience tired who now demanded a change but there was hardly anybody who could actually take the rein. The appearance of Amarendranath at this juncture came as a great relief. The audience was captivated by his full-throated delivery and his handsome appearance. The ennui of the stage was suddenly swept away by a gust of fresh air for which the audience had long been waiting. It was not that the older generation failed in its purpose of providing entertainment but the viewers had been so used to watching them on the stage that they yearned for the new. The element of predictability that had come to be associated with the stage began to be loathed by them. There was, thus, no

problem in accepting Amarendranath and the audience gladly welcomed this new entrant into the world of Bengali theatre.[14]

Apareshchandra and Ahindra Choudhury touched upon another very significant point where they compared the quality of the audience coming to watch plays at Star Theatre and Classic Theatre. Both of them noted that the legacy of the Star Theatre was more of a burden than an asset for the theatergoers and the rigours at Star was really asphyxiating. Both the writers mentioned that the Star Theatre came to resemble a high school rather than a venue for entertainment. Apareshchandra described the Star Theatre as serious, austere, restrained and disciplined, which kind of became synonymous with Bengali theatrical production. In comparison, the general atmosphere prevailing at Classic was extremely free. It had a more democratic character and it soon outwitted Star in terms of popularity. The entire credit for this metamorphosis, noted Apareshchandra, went to Amarendranath Dutta, who liberated theatre from the shackles of discipline and made it a full-fledged venue of entertainment. Ahindra Choudhury's account gives a more detailed description of the behaviour of the crowd. What is striking about both the presentations is the implicit assumption that such good behaviour did not come naturally but had been cultivated by activities which serve to suppress more natural, less savoury impulses. As it has been remarked:

Amarendranath Dutta was then acting at Star Theatre—the play was written by Bhupendranath Bandopadhyay, Saudagar, an adaptation from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. I longed to watch this performance. Generally boys of my age would not like to go to the Star Theatre. For them Theatres at Beadon Street like Minerva, Kohinoor held greater attraction. It was a usual practice to flock to these theatres in group with the usual fun and frolic accompanying it. They would shout, revel and take delight from repeated "encores" or "No–more", thereby generating a mock competition. At times, even invectives were directed; inebriated viewers were not unlikely. There was a veritable listlessness and ribaldry inside the auditorium. The soberer among the audience sometimes identified the miscreants. However, the first night's show would not generate such explosiveness when the audience watched with rapt attention the celebrated actors taking the stage. The din and furore would follow from the subsequent shows.

Such natural, less savoury impulses were not permitted in the Star. Even the slightest misdemeanour was treated with great strictness. If any form of indecency were noticed, the miscreant would be immediately sent out of the hall with a full refund of the ticket. This

immensely helped the genteel audience. In fact, there was no ripple among them when such a drive was taken, they rather encouraged this practice. Naturally people with a polite background and behaviour would throng the Star. The discipline that prevailed at the Star made us compare it with a school.

> 'This was the first time I visited the Star after growing up. Amar babu was then the lessee…Among the four proprietors, Hariprasad Basu was the most important. When we sat in his office it seemed along with the task of account keeping, he was also conscious about maintaining the great legacy of the Star Theatre.'[15]

This can be defined using Darko Suvin as the unspoken theatre contract, a two-way relationship between spectators and performers (1985:9)[16]. In return for practitioners' physical imaginative and emotional labour, theatre-goers implicitly agree to assist in the creation of the onstage world. The audience's job is to support the performance: to sit in silence, let the actors do their work and suspend disbelief in the necessary ways. Diane Paules argues that not just in traditional theatre, even in radical forms of performances similar expectations extend: 'Essentially the audience is expected to quietly receive the event, only making noise at solicited moments. The audience is governed by an unspoken code of behaviour: pay attention, don't talk to the person sitting next to you, don't even think about whipping out something to eat (unless food is served as part of the event). Silence is a premium… These rules govern the entire spectrum of theatre from what is considered the most radical to the most mainstream' (Paulus 2006: 334-5)[17]. Audiences divert their own labour to make the intersubjective demands of the theatre visible, by insisting loudly on the silence of others. To quote Dominique Pasquier, '[b]eing an audience in a traditional theatre, spectators often see restrictions to their behaviour as an enjoyable necessity for the emotional build-up of a play. The audience by its physical presence as a group is bound to the institution which produces theatre.There is a genuine desire for communality, a wish for theatre to remain a space in which performer and audience can positively join together in acts of transformative communion. Sometimes distractions become unavoidable, physical necessity but the line beyond which 'acceptable behaviour becomes unacceptable is drawn by relations of power'[18].

While these surely form the rules of conduct inside the theatre premises, whether mainstream, popular or non-mainstream, radical performances, there are alternative forms of involvement of audiences. This takes place outside the cultural auditorium

where audiences are engaged in non-seated, non-static, non-representational and otherwise non-traditional ways. As Sedgman suggested that quiet receptivity should be seen not as something done to audiences, not even as something that audiences allow a performance to do to them. She emphasises on the need to analyse the invitations that theatre makers make to audiences as also how audiences offer invitations to performers: not simply consenting but actively albeit usually implicitly inviting theatre to do things for them.[19]

The curious demographic mix of the theatres transcended the gender, class and age division, which was otherwise so visible in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Calcutta. Watching theatre was very much a family event. Theatre historians as well as thespians of the time repeatedly point out that theatre viewing formed an important occasion in itself and social family functions, like marriage, sacred thread ceremony, success in public examinations, etc, called for watching a theatre. The social character of the theatre, therefore, necessitated employing various means to draw the viewers. Careful attention was therefore paid to such things like the performance times, advertisements, seating arrangements, etc. Performance time in the theatres was flexible but in general spanned the duration of one five-act play and assorted fillers. Shows began around six or eight in the evening. The Concert was used as a warm-up until the house was sufficiently full; it also played for considerable lengths of time in between acts, between different pieces and of course during performance itself. Increasingly, a substantial part of the theatre-going audience in Calcutta came from the provinces and it was to cater to this audience that shows went on till the early hours of the morning (3:00 a.m.).

The bulk of the audience consisted primarily of the lower middle class and the middle class—petty shopkeepers and traders, clerks and the rest comprised of the upper and upper middle class patrons. Women and children started coming during the phase of the *bhakti* plays. There was a separate seating enclosure for them in the balcony, usually advertised as '*Zenana Seats'* In later years actor Ahindra Choudhury recounted that during the staging of Girish Ghosh's Sitar Banobas, many women were drawn to theatre, in fact many women from the conservative families of Calcutta were also attracted. Choudhury also mentions that women spectators frequently swooned when Meera or Sri Chaitanya was performed.

While the various advertisements published in the newspapers, journals and distribution of handbills were the commonest methods adopted to woo the youth and the male audience, a novel method was

employed to publicise about the new plays among the women, who formed a significant part of the audience. There was an arrangement to distribute the theatre handbills at houses by women, referred to in theatre literature as *theatererjhi (maid)* who were specifically hired for this purpose. Even though they were not welcome inside respectable households, these maids competently carried out their job by throwing the handbills inside the rooms through the open windows. Since the theatres in those days had separate seating arrangements for men and women, these women not only excelled in baby-sitting for the few hours when their mothers were captivated in the scenes from the plays but also acted as liaisons between the husbands and the wives, before and during the performance, along with the usual errands that entailed such viewing. The convenience thus generated outweighed the tips/commission that they received at the end of the show. Such an arrangement speaks highly about the care and attention that were given to the comfort of the viewers.[20]The same sources recount the different sitting arrangements for the female audience. As we have seen when children accompanied the elders to a theatre they sat with their mothers. Ahindra Chowdhury described in his autobiography the special arrangements which were made for the female audiences. This is how he reminisces:

> I was then nine to ten years of age. My seat was allotted in the women's enclave. It was like a cage! The front side, which faced the stage, had an ironnet surrounding it. Not just the net, there was thick curtain above it. From the dome in the middle of the theatre hung a chandelier—bright lights from it lit up the whole area. But how much could be viewed? Not much was visible through that iron net and the curtain. And whatever little could be seen it was palpable that down below was brimming with people… I was trying to get a sense of everything from behind the curtain; there were a whole lot of questions flooding my young mind. But in the ensuing confusion and the spectacle created by the bright light, I forgot to ask anything—I was thoroughly captivated. Repeated hawking of beetle leaves and cigarettes filled my ears.
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> Then suddenly just as the bells go off in our school, almost in the same manner I heard the bells ringing. But the hawking went on unabated. Once again the bells rang. The concert started. This was nothing new to me; I have often heard the local concert while going to sleep at night. Even the tune was familiar; it seemed I had heard of a similar tune earlier. At one time the concert ended. Another bell rang…
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> This time I saw that the chandelier which hung from the middle was being gradually lifted up. Once that was drawn up, the lights dimmed. I now realize that in those days the lights were not totally put off in the auditorium, a pale glow would be omnipresent. In the meantime the theatre maids had become busy—they were swiftly removing the curtains

that were before us. Only the iron net remained but everything was clearly visible through them![21]

Pasupati Nath Chattopadhyay recalled that as a child he was seated with the women and was cradled in his mother's lap behind the thick veil. It was the famous Star Theatre of Hatibagan. Pasupati babu describes it as a three-storied building, unlike the double-storied ones of the current times. He remembers that 'the ground floor was reserved for men, the second floor was the box and the box which was right in the middle and most spacious, facing the stage was referred to as the Royal Box. To the left and right there were either five to six or ten to twelve boxes. The third floor was entirely reserved for the women. It was an enclosed quarter, thickly veiled. Women usually came by car— either family cars or hired first, second and third class horse-drawn carriages. On disembarking from the car they would straight head towards the staircase that led upstairs as instructed by their male companion. There, attendants or 'theatrerjhi' as they were popularly called waited to show them the seats. During interval men would send some light refreshments and betel leaves for the women through the attendants who loudly called out the names of the respective families these women belonged to and handed over the packets. Once through with the rituals, third act of the play would begin.'[22]

Despite the popularity, theatres were nothing more than thinly disguised commercial ventures, the educational aspects of which were highly suspect. The discussion about the moral and aesthetic efficacy of the theatres were further complicated by the fact that the theatre troupe (performers) as well as the audience comprised of potentially restive members of the society of a very complex demographic mix. Notwithstanding such negative approach, theatre as a spectacle continued to draw audiences in multitude. The student community not only enjoyed viewing theatre but even started nurturing ambitions of pursuing theatre as a career, which was definitely not looked upon favourably since huge uncertainties shrouded that as well. That theatres left its enduring charm on the audience becomes evident from the reference to several theatre groups locally in colonial Calcutta. These were mostly amateurish, surreptitious efforts high school students and youths little elder to them, who sincerely wanted to harness their skills through such mock practices. The prejudices and inhibitions surrounding theatre were somewhat broken with Sishir Kumar Bhaduri, declining his extremely honourable profession as university teacher took up acting as a permanent career. It had the effect on an already agitated

and divided mind about the respectability of theatre.

However enthusiastic audiences were towards watching a play in the theatre, there existed enormous reservation towards buying tickets for the same. A free pass was more encouraging than purchasing the ticket out of their own pockets.An article that came out in *Nachghar,* a theatre journal, strongly opposed the idea of giving free passes to publicise about the plays. While the article points out the need for giving passes to the sponsors, it also attacks the tendency to watch theatre free of cost thereby depriving the theatre of the revenues.[23]

Conclusion

To understand the transformation in the character of the audience it cannot be lost sight of the fact that the theatres that were now set up, were in stark contrast with older but still prevalent forms of jatra or other indigenous performance genres. Jatra or other indigenous performances took place in an arena constituted in the act of performance itself, through the interaction of the audience and performers. The troupe took up a position in an open site, with the audience gathering around, forming a circle right round the troupe. The performers used the entire area thus established and for special dramatic effects they broke right out of it. Here while the performers and the audience shared the same plane in space, the audience was treated as internally differentiated, with its own foci or centres of attention, which the performers acknowledged and addressed. In modern theatre, the audience/public addressed as anonymous and undifferentiated, did not really function like that for the actors felt that that theatre allowed them to become ' publicly known to many people'. The concept of the public/ audience, as a new form of coming together became characteristic of the colonial era.

The new commercial public theatre made itself accessible to an indefinitely large and undifferentiated audience (accessible in public, to those who can pay).The emergence of the diffuse public formed in the course of the commercialisation of cultural production established a potentially indefinitely expansible constituency. The concept of an extended and homogenous public imagined a market coterminus with a new cultural nationalist category of the population. The theatre, thus, actively sought to construct its audiences as a new kind of public, different from the personal audiences, meeting only as part of a community celebration. In addressing this expanded public/audience, the new theatres implicitly assigned to it a certain relationship to spectacle. It did so by offering involvement in and

distance from the dramatic action: by presenting themes on the proscenium stage, framed as in a picture, it offered distance but when characters spoke to the audience, it offered them a concrete though fictitious involvement.

The role of the audience in the-19th-and-the-early 20th century Bengali theatre can best be described as giving legitimacy, meaning, authority, credibility and respect to others who control the institution (the theatre). This legitimacy was necessary to achieve credibility within and beyond the institution. Through encounter with the audience, the various personnel in the institution learned rules of the game and came to realise that they must conform to the norms set by the dominants of the field. By the turn of the 19th century, it was clear that the theatre managers/performers had laid claim to the mantle of art and the logic of rational recreation helped them to do so better. The social hierarchy of performance had been established, with theatre on top and other local performance genres following on the heels. The theatre could be instruments used in the service of instruction and improvement, for the betterment of the commonweal and for the promotion of middle-class goals. The entertainments in the halls were at best a mindless diversion, and at worst an insidious wasteland of aesthetic and moral corruption.[24] The theatrical space was neither entirely moral nor entirely moribund, but an ethical puzzle by drawing people together and engaging them in a transformative experienc;, theatre works to promote more ethical forms of coexistence within public space, while at the same time producing unethical exclusions from public space. There was a genuine wish for theatre to remain a space in which performer and audience can positively join together in acts of transformative communion.[25]

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