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meet the author

Sombhu Mitra





As if he did not want his reputation as an actor and director to cloud an objective assessment of his writing, Sombhu Mitra published his early plays, articles, and theatre-based stories as Botuk, Suranjan Chattopadhyay, Kshanesh Prasad Dutta, Atanu Lahiri, or Nayanranjan Ray. With only ten printed plays—of them one a fragment, another an adaptation, yet another a translation—and two volumes of essays, besides occasional articles, Sombhu Mitra has left a deep impress on the Bengali literature and influenced the theatre movement all over the country.

There is a rare philosophic unity in all his writings, an attempt to explore the deepest levels of human consciousness and experience. His first published play, *Ulukhagra*, written at the age of twenty-seven, echoes the irony of circumstances, the awareness of time, of ripeness, readiness and defiance that Mitra's epochmaking *Chand Baniker Pala* expresses through a tauter assem-

blage of symbols and metaphors.

His earliest writings have a cynical irony. But one discovers, as the style matures, the intricate, interlocking contradictions that make up life and the individual and leave him with little by way of choice. And yet choice is his only and ultimate freedom. The merchant in *Chand Baniker Pala*, surrounded by the ruin of his life, is left with one defiant pride: his act of individual choice.

In much of Mitra's writing there runs a deep sense of history as an amoral objective force. If the innocent suffers and the wicked prospers, can moral distinctions have any meaning? But neither the myth of progress nor the consolation of afterlife offers any readymade answers. Truth itself is impermanent and relative. In *Ghurni*, three characters have their own views of truth and reality, each valid in its peculiar context. In such a situation all the thinking person can do is choose his path: an act of intellect, an assertion



In Moscow



Prithviraj Kapoor with Tripti and Sombhu Mitra

of his humanity, although the human intellect itself is a cruel burden.

This tangle of experiences and ideas is expressed in a wide stylistic range. There is always a sharp, searing, searching mind at work: an intellect that doesn't slide into ritual ideas. This gives his plays and stories their finely-balanced, dialectical core: the calm, examining eye distills human nature to its very essence and shows it being reinvented by the numerous, elusive brushes it has with the objective world, which again has innumerable complex natures being similarly moulded all the time. It dissects motive, action, speech and weighs, from a distance, opposing points of view.

But the trimmings round this core are varied. A racy, irreverent wit (*Kanchan-ranga*, *Ulukhagra*, Act I) or a dry, wry humour (*Atulaniyo Sambahad* and *Garbhavati Bartamaan*) or a cutting irony (*Ulukhagra*, Acts II and III, *Sangkraman*) or even the romantic's vision of women and nature. Indeed, in some of his works

the terrible, fatal beauty of women (*Ghurni*, *Aranney*, *Kaalidaha*, *Chand Baniker Pala*) comes from a poet, although he has never published poetry.

Much of the style is, of course, the result of experiment with form and language, beginning as early as 1942, *Ulukhagra*, and 1944, *Sangkraman*. By the time of *Ghurni*, 1950, a complex structure is achieved: short scenes, symbolic cameos, the telescoping of time and space, the imagery of darkness and decay.

An altogether different timbre is effected in the two plays written as Suranjan Chattopadhyay. Their stylized speech, comic gestures and terse human models add up to a quite un-Indian black farce.

The most arresting experiments with language are found first in the essays of Suranjan Chattopadhyay. It is a language totally different from what Mitra writes at the same time under his own name. It is prose but has the majestic cadence of epic poetry and words

seem to have been picked and put together with great care towards an internal rhythm with often uneven measures.

The syntactical path-finding is continued in *Chand Baniker Pala* with greater complexity: he makes a mix of Sanskrit, dialect and his own original deviations, to create a language that is both romantic and robust, capable of street-wit, poetry and debate.

For translations and adaptations, Mitra's approach is that of both a critic and a creator as he reshapes the original material.

His study of *Jocasta (Pra-sanga Natya)* helps us to understand this approach. He tries to unravel the dynamics of a play in the context of the author's life and times. Insights and interpretations are woven in subtly: it may be the way a word or dialogue is translated (*Oidipous, Putul Khela*), a movement of the body (as at the end of *Oidipous* which tells us that the truth, however cruel, has given the man new dimensions), or the way a play is edited and rearranged (*Raja*).

In doing the Bengali of *Oedipus*, Mitra achieves a rich, flowing rhythm that is an aural treat and evokes the old world charm of the Greek play. But his re-working of Tagore's *Raja* is the more startling. The sweeping liberties he has taken leave one breathless. The editing and music show a master craftsman at work: Tagore's text is turned into a moving, total theatre experience, a theatre that's Indian in structure, ethos and meaning.

Early in life Sombhu Mitra

had developed an irresistible attraction for acting and was guided by the celebrated actor Manoranjan Bhattacharya. After trying the amateur theatre, he took to the professional stage at the age of twenty-four and worked with actors like Sisir Kumar Bhaduri and Ahindra Chowdhury.

Mitra tried his hand at the cinema: he acted and worked as Associate Director with K.A. Abbas in *Dharti ke Lal*; and in collaboration with Amit Moitra, he wrote and directed *Jagte Raho*, which won the Grand Prix Award in the Karlovy Vary Film Festival. But the celluloid did not hold him for long and he soon returned to his first love, the theatre.

In his twenties, Sombhu Mitra had created a sensation by reciting Jyotindra Maitra's poem on the Bengal famine, 'Madhu Bangshir Galec'. Thousands of people would gather and listen to his recitation, which took about fifteen minutes. Overnight queues soon became a common occurrence to witness his performances. Even in his seventies, queues would start forming as early as forty hours before the counters opened, and many spent two consecutive nights under the sky for tickets, to see *Dasachakra*, his adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*.

Sombhu Mitra has become a living legend.



With Indra Nath Choudhuri

A Select Bibliography

PLAYS

- AKTA DRISHYA. An incomplete play written sometime in 1944-45, later published in BOHURUPEE magazine in June 1979.
- ATULANIYO SAMBAD. Published in BOHURUPEE under the pseudonym Suranjan Chattopadhyay in September 1965.
- BIBHAB. Published in BOHURUPEE, 1956.
- CHAND BANIKER PALA. Published serially from 1965 in BOHURUPEE under the pseudonym Boiuk, and later in his own name; published in book form in 1978. Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons. p. 154. 22 cm. 2nd impression 1985.
- GARBHAVATI BARTAMAAN. Published in BOHURUPEE under the pseudonym Suranjan Chattopadhyay in January 1964.
- GIJURNI. Written in 1950; published in SAHIYAPATRA, later in BOHURUPEE in September 1965; printed in book form in 1966. Calcutta. Granthapeeth, p. 102. 22 cm.
- KANCHANRANGA. In collaboration with Amit Mitra. Calcutta. Granthapeeth, 1961, 4th impression 1976. p. 95. 22 cm.
- ULUKHAGRA. Written in 1942; published in BOHURUPEE in September 1970. p. 68.

TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- PUTUL KHELA. Adapted from Henrik Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE; Satyabrata Library, 1958. p. 140. 18 cm.
- RAJA OIDIPOUS. Translated from Sophocles's OEDIPUS REX; Calcutta. Nakshatra Prakash. 1969. p. 88. 18 cm.

(The above plays have been published together in January 1988 with the title OIDIPOUS-O-PUTUL KHELA).

SHORT STORIES

- ARANNEY. Written under the pseudonym Kshanesh Prasad Dutta; published in BOHURUPEE in October 1963.

ASAMOYIK. Written under the pseudonym Kshanesh Prasad Dutta; published in BOHURUPEE in September 1962.

KAALDAHA. Published in AMRITA magazine in 1975.

SANGKRAMAN. Published in ARANI literary magazine in March 1944.

TINTALA. Published in ARANI in September-October 1946.

ESSAYS

ABHINAY NAATAK MANCHA. Calcutta. Satyabrata Library, 1957. p. 142. 22 cm.

PRASANGA NATYA. Calcutta. Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1972. p. 245. 22 cm.

Numerous other essays on theatre and society dealing with Indian theatre, the crisis of Bengali theatre, stagecraft, recitation, problems of theatre groups, character studies from different plays, the Other Theatre Movement, personal experiences of foreign theatre and with life and art in general have been published in magazines like BOHURUPEE, VISVA BHARATI NEWS, EKSHAN, NATUN SAHIYA, PARICHAY, SAHIYA PATRA, CHATURANGA, etc.

Some English articles like 'Sense and Nonsense of Theatre', 'Modern Russian Theatre', 'The New Theatre in Bengali', 'The Root of Indian Theatre' were published in LINK, ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY OF INDIA, and HINDUSTAN TIMES WEEKLY respectively.

A LABOUR OF LOVE, broadcast by Akashvani, and FACE TO FACE an interview published in the ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY OF INDIA give his observations on theatre.

Sombhu Mitra had taken up several pseudonyms at different points of time in writing his articles. They are Atanu Lahiri (Mancha-Sajjar Bhumika), Nayanranjan Ray (Quotations from Stanislavsky), Suranjan Chattopadhyay.

He wrote articles titled 'Promiti Prashakta', 'Sanmarga Saparya', 'Naboratyia Andolon', 'E Naamer Shesh Hok' and 'Satyesh Gupta' 'Ibsen Keno?'

A Chronology

- 1915 Birth
1939 On the professional stage
1943 Joined I.P.T.A.
1944 *Jaban bandi; Nabanna*
1945 *Dharti ke Lal*
1948 Left I.P.T.A. and formed his own group, named it Bohurupee - two years later
1950 *Ulukhagra, Chhenra tar*
1951 *Bibhab, Char Adhyay*
1952 *Dasachakra*
1954 *Rakta Karabi*
1957 Karlovy Vary Film Festival Grand Prix for *Jagte Raho*; Visit to USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland
1958 *Putul Khela*
1959 Sangeet Natak Akademi Award
1961 *Kanchanranga, Visarjan*
1964 *Raja Oidipous*
1965 *Raja*; Visit to USA and UK.
1966 Fellow, Sangeet Natak Akademi
1967 Visit to Phillipines, Japan, USA, Canada, and Germany
1970 Padmabhushan
1971 *Pagla Ghoda, Chupt Adalat Chaiche*
1972 Visit to USSR, East Germany and Czechoslovakia
1976 Magsaysay Award; Visit to Phillipines
1977 Visiting Fellow, Visva-Bharati
1980 *Galileo*
1983 Kalidas Samman
1984 D. Litt. from Rani Durgavati University, Jabalpur
1986 D. Litt. from Rabindra Bharati University.



At the inauguration of the 125th Birth Anniversary Celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore, New Delhi, May 1986