

Brechtian Adaptations in Bengali Group Theatre: Nuances and Controversies

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Abstract

Adaptations of Foreign plays in the native tongue had been one of the most contentious issues which concerned Bengali theatre during the last half of the previous centuries even though such adaptations have always been an integral part of its colonial legacy. During the last five decades of the previous century, almost all the major plays of Brecht have been performed in Bengal and by and large the Bengali (alternative) theatre spectators have evinced a remarkable interest in the Brechtian productions. But, rather surprisingly, even by the end of the previous century, Bengali theatre practitioners could not evolve a set of workable principles/methodologies which would appeal to the idiosyncratic 'taste' of the native spectators without violating the fundamentals of 'Dialectical/Epic Theatre'. In the following few pages of this article, I would like to devote my attention into exploring the issues and concerns regarding the adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's plays in Bengal.

Keywords : adaptation, Dialectical/Epic theatre, native/foreign, familiarization

It is very difficult to translate Brecht and make him a success in this country, as people have found out repeatedly. It cannot be otherwise...

Utpal Dutt 2009, 24

I think the right approach to adapt Brecht to different peoples of different countries. But to do this, one has to make changes, alteration, even additions to Brecht...

Shekhar Chatterjee 1982, 142

Adaptation of foreign language plays in Bengali theatre is a phenomenon which is inextricably linked with it from the time of its inception. Right from the time of the establishment of native theatre in Calcutta, the practitioners of Bengali theatre have extensively experimented with foreign plays, translated and adapted a great many foreign texts even though theatre critics - such as Dharani Ghosh - often described such attempts as transplantation of "foreign flowers on native soil" (1990, 5). The colonial legacy of modern Western theatre in many parts of the world, including Bengal, had been a crucial determinant in the formation of aesthetic/artistic choices for the 'native' artists. The resultant hybridization has spawned a theatre phenomenon which has till date not been able to convincingly assert its 'native' identity. The greatest challenge for the practitioners of Bengali theatre, in the post-independence period, had been to achieve authentically 'local' theatrical expressions with the help of 'foreign' staging practices and techniques.

But the inherent paradoxes and complexities involved in the process of translation/ adaptation of foreign texts could not deter artists from experimenting with foreign materials or importing alien genres into native tradition. The process of adaptation is complicated because it may involve 'appropriation', taking possession of another's story, filtering it through one's own sensibility, necessity and talent. In *Beginning to Theorize Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon argues that while appreciating a theatre performance many professional reviewers often resort to certain elusive notions like "spirit" or "tone" of a work or of an artist which an adapted text needs to convey if it aspires to be considered as a 'successful' work of art. But all these categories, we must understand, are subjective and as a result "difficult to discuss and much less to theorize" (2006, 10). Works of adaptation can primarily be conceived in two ways - (a) as products and (b) as process. As a product, a work of adaptation (in theatre) can be formally defined but as a process it constantly challenges any attempt to put it under theoretical straightjackets. Whereas a lot of theoreticians and reviewers put down works of adaptation as 'secondary', 'derivative' or culturally inferior but they also use the same "tools that storytellers have always used" through actualizing or concretizing ideas (2006, 3).

Though adaptation was an accepted practice in Bengali theatre right from the days of its inception, this phenomenon received further impetus with the rise of a powerful alternative theatre movement in Bengal during the 1940s. Theatre practitioners associated with Youth Cultural Institute (YCI) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) translated and adapted many foreign plays in order to propagate socialist ideas. Group Theatre Movement which rose from the ruins of IPTA during 1950s sustained and furthered the trend of adaptation of foreign plays. But, unlike its predecessors the practitioners of Group Theatre had to face a series of probing questions from theatre reviewers and critics regarding their choice of foreign plays. For example, theatre reviewer Dharani Ghosh accused Group Theatre directors of attempting to cover "the naked poverty" of Bengali drama with the "fig leaf" of adaptation (1990, 5). He not only questioned their methodology but also the very necessity of adaptation in Group Theatre:

...adaptations dominated Bengali theatre even in the heady 1960s when Bijan Bhattacharya, Badal Sircar and Mohit Chattopadhyay were in their prime. Granted that three playwrights could hardly feed so many talented directors who perforce had recourse to material from overseas, what prevented Sambhu Mitra from staging Ibsen in translation...? (5).

Group Theatre practitioners, on the other hand, continued to defend their right to adaptation by arguing that certain foreign texts suited their ideological orientation better than straight forward translation. The fact that indigenized adaptations of major foreign plays like Gorky's *Lower Depths* (1901) as *Nicher Mahal* (1957) by Umanath Bhattacharya, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) as *Manjari Amer Manjari* (1964) by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) as *Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhati Charitra* (1961) by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay (it was revived in 1983 by Rudraprasad Sengupta), Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1956) as *Bela Abelar Galpa* (1986) by Ashok

Mukherjee and *Roots* (1958) as *Jakhan Eka* (1966) by Rudraprasad Sengupta etc. have always retained longstanding appeal for Bengali spectators is an important factor behind such adaptations. However, we should also take note of the fact that Group Theatre's dependence on foreign texts and foreign sensibility remained not only limited to selection of plays but also in the very way playwriting and production methodology has evolved in Bengal, especially during the latter half of 20th century.

As far as the performance history of Brecht's plays in Calcutta is concerned, it should be, primarily, viewed in the wider context of the intercultural theatre, the origin of which goes back to native adaptations of Shakespearian plays at the beginning of 18th century. During the last five decades of twentieth century altogether thirty three plays of Brecht were performed under the aegis of Group Theatre in Bengal (and nearly half of them were adaptations). While major Brecht adaptations in Bengali like Bibhash Chakrabarty's *Panchu O Mashi* (1972) and Shekhar Chatterjee's *Pontu Laha* (1975) were appreciated for incorporating "local touches...without obscuring the storyline", a good number of other adaptations failed to maintain the equilibrium (Ghosh 1990, 5). And this is precisely the reason why certain critics came down very heavily on Nandikar's production of *Tin Poisar Pala* (1969). Dharani Ghosh described the production as a "travesty" of Brecht:

Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay deviated so much from Pirandello and Brecht [in *Natyakarer Sandhane Chati Charitra* and *Tin Poisar Pala*] that his versions became originals in a derogatory sense (5).

Ghosh's primary argument is that if the native readership "can appreciate these masters in English translation on the printed page" than "why do they have to see the plays through the eyes of a meddling intermediary?" (1990, 5). Unfortunately, however, it appears that Ghosh did not have the patience to realize that the 'native' theatre practitioners were often compelled to devote much of their energy into reducing the cleavage between two alien sensibilities by familiarizing the content of foreign plays as much as possible to the 'native' spectators. The compulsions and exigencies faced by the alternative theatre artists in cases of adaptation (specifically pertaining to Brecht) have been clearly articulated by Shekhar Chatterjee:

Once we can generate some interest about Brecht, the public will, on their own find the original some day [sic]...apart from the textual resemblance, the problem and message of the play are important. So, from this angle, adaptation is as faithful to the original text as the translation...the next important thing is to generate an interest in the public for Brecht and an adaptation, even an awkward one can reach the uninitiated masses of a country if it is in their familiar art form (1998, 152).

In December 1986, Theatre Unit's production of *Pontu Laha* (an adaptation of Brecht's *Herr Puntill and His Man Matti*) was staged in Hong Kong during a Symposium of International Brecht Society under the direction of Shekhar Chatterjee. It was Chatterjee's second attempt at a Brecht play. His maiden Brecht production *Arturo Ui* (1972) had a dismal production record. In fact, producing

Arturo Ui for spectators of Bengali theatre had been a strange experience for him as he confessed that although the maiden productions of the play were well received by the city spectators but it failed to generate any response among the rural spectators. Chatterjee was profoundly perplexed by this experience and he later recorded in his diary:

I dropped *Ui* because, I thought, it was no use doing it for the city elites who are conscious of these facts but will do nothing. At best they will praise my play, discuss the aesthetics, discuss alienation and snore at home (1982, 141).

Taking lessons from this sour experience, Shekhar Chatterjee resolved to keep the class elements in focus in his future Brechtian productions. During the production of *Pontu Laha* (1975) he attached two stickers behind the costumes of Pontu Laha and Moti captioning them respectively as 'Master' and 'Servant' so that the audience does not lose sight of the difference in their class position. This, apparently, simple improvisation lent a strong ironical twist to those sequences in the play where Pontu Laha and Moti were shown standing side by side, measuring themselves against each other and also protesting on oath that they were equals. The second important concern for Chatterjee was the audience composition as he did not want to repeat his previous misadventure. He wrote in his diary that the experience with *Arturo Ui* had taught him that Brecht's plays were "not meant for all kinds of audience" (1982, 141). Especially keeping the rural spectators in mind, he tried to create a familiar locale and mood on stage in the production of *Pontu Laha*. That Chatterjee succeeded in capturing the basic simplicity of the Brechtian fable can be evidenced from an encomiastic letter written by John Willett on watching the production:

I loved your Puntilla (or Pontu Laha) which I thought much the clearest and most direct of any of the Asian Brecht productions seen at the Hong Kong Brecht Festival. It was very funny, and contained some outstanding performance (1998, 243).

Carl Weber (1925-), a veteran director associated with Berliner Ensemble, noted that:

...the production is swift, entertaining, and brings off many of Brecht's intentions. Chatterjee's direction employs very obvious "V-effects", such as signs hung around the actor's necks (SERVANT for Moti, at times) or the little red cap with earflaps Pontu Laha puts on whenever we are to understand he is drunk...[both] Chatterjee's music, based on popular forms, and his use of three folk singers, accompanied by percussion and accordion, who sing the introduction to each scene with remarkably strong and piercing voices, was definitely effective and stirring (1989, 40).

There was a problem with 'faithful' emulations of Ensemblesque productions of Brecht's plays. Since most such plays used to be performed by the Group Theatre artists or practitioners, the practitioners of which are exceptionally proud of its vibrant political legacy, so the directors were expected to 'adapt' the tone of their productions upto a 'communicable' level. We should not lose sight of the fact that many Group Theatre practitioners liked to identify themselves primarily

as theatre activists and not as theatre artists since they associated the socialist orientations of non-profit Group Theatre with welfare of the society in general. It is hardly surprising then that many of these artists questioned the necessity to create “replicas” of Ensemble productions of Bertolt Brecht for the ‘uninitiated’ spectators of Bengali alternative theatre. Some of them might have appreciated certain ‘dialectical’ elements like “nonillusionistic [sic] mode of dramaturgy” and “avoidance of stereotypes” in ‘faithful’ productions but still others believed that such model-book adaptations/productions remained “essentially remote from the exigencies of Bengali life” (Bharucha 1983, 198). In a highly ignominious manner Shekhar Chatterjee’s *Pontu Laha* was described as a production which was detrimental to the “ideals of Group Theatre” or rather as “betrayal” to the cause of a theatre of commitment by a prominent theatre historian (198).

The encomiums and criticisms with which Shekhar Chatterjee’s adaptations of Brecht’s plays were received by the Bengali literati, critics and the spectators of alternative theatre clearly outline the arduousness involved in the task of adaptation of major foreign plays for native spectators. For many of these directors adapting a Brecht play into the native theatrical tradition necessitated something more than ‘audience-pleasing’ tactics. Adaptation involved a de-alienation of the source text so that it could achieve comprehensive de-familiarization from the original and at the same time the performances of such plays needed to be brought close to the ‘experiences’ of the targeted spectators.

It is important to note that Bengali alternative theatre directors have displayed more ingenuity and artistry in their Brechtian dramas and Brechtian style productions of indigenous plays than with the adaptations or translations Brecht’s plays. The most visible outcome of this encounter surfaced in the form of a number of plays and productions since the early 1970s. While a continuous exposure to the Brechtian oeuvre for more than five decades has sensitized and sharpened the dramaturgical skill of Bengali theatre artists but more importantly it has also provided a much needed ideological incentive to ‘committed’ theatre artists. For example, Arun Mukherjee stated during an interview with *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*:

All my plays – whether adaptations or original – have not been directly political. But the more experience I have accumulated, the more I have realized that a rich political insight is an essential condition for a good play. How the political dimension will come through is of course another matter. Brecht brings it in, in a certain manner, Chekhov in a different manner (2001, 102).

Among the first generation of post-independence Bengali theatre artists, Utpal Dutt assumes the position of privilege as far as writing plays after a typical Brechtian fashion is concerned. He has authored a series of plays like *Surya Shikar* (1971) *Barricade* (1972), *Duswapner Nagari* (1974) and *Mukti Dikkha* (1977) all of which either presents the plot from an ‘Epic/Dialectical’ perspective or employs certain ‘Brechtian’ features in production. Arun Mukherjee’s *Mareech Sambad* (1973), *Jagannath* (1977) and Asit Bose’s *Kolkatar Hamlet* (1973) are some other important plays which borrow heavily from Brecht.

During the last phase of Brecht's encounter with Bengali theatre, a few prominent theatre personalities like Fritz Bennewitz, Carl Weber, Gunter Grass, Martin Wuttke, performed Brecht's plays (as well as plays on Brecht) in Calcutta. The most significant of these productions were *Biplaber Mahada* (1987) under the direction of Gunter Grass, and Good Company's production of *I Bertolt Brecht* (1992) under the direction of Sue Pomeroy. While such productions infused necessary zeal and confidence in the minds of a new generation of theatre practitioners to investigate Brecht, the man and his theatre from a wholly new perspective, at the same time, it also helped in providing the insight that one could look at Brecht's even without using the tinted glass of leftist politics. Nilakantha Sengupta's *Julius Caeser Sesh Sat Din* (1983) can be cited as one such ingenious experimentation. This play owes its origin to a short story of Brecht titled *Caesar und Sein Legioner* (1947). Sengupta scurried through Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Plutarch's *Lives*, F.R. Cowell's *Cicero and the Roman Republic* and a good many other sources including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and considerably transformed the account of Caesar provided by Brecht. By his own admission, Sengupta wanted to make *Julius Caeser Sesh Sat Din* "a curious amalgamation" of disparate elements which he thought would be a prerequisite to enhance the element of 'distance' in Caser's character (2001, 210):

...no matter how hard I tried to bring the element of historical distanciation in Ceasar's character, no matter how I de-glamourized him, made him wear contemporary clothes and make him out to be a derelict hero - I had tried to maintain the hiistorical distance in his character. I knew that distance would add grandeur (210).

Julius Caeser Sesh Sat Din is completely unlike a conventional Bengali history play. In this play, the playwright attempted to conform to the fundamental notion of Epic theatre. In a typical Brechtian fashion Sengupta used commentary, drum beats and hand-held posters to indicate the difference between shifting scenes. The production also appeared quite Brechtian in essence in its avoidance of elaborate lights, music and stagecraft and most importantly in its "naked simplicity". But, very interestingly, Sengupta considerably departed from Brecht in creating an atmosphere full of dramatic intensity which set the movement of the play in order leading up to Caesar's assassination.

On 27 July 1997, Nandikar produced a play titled *Brechter Khonje* (literally meaning in search of Brecht) in Kolkata as a part of its Brecht centenary celebration. It was a documentary drama on Brecht, the man and his works. The production was structured in three cohesive segments concentrating on different phases in the development of Brecht's career as a theatre artist. Nandikar's artists exhibited remarkable professionalism in depicting the most crucial artistic, philosophical and political issues which concerned Brecht during his prolonged career (spanning across four decades). Elaborating the objective behind this production, author/director Rudraprasad Sengupta stated that in *Brechter Khonje*, Nandikar tried to "discover the organic and wholesome Brecht instead of continuing to perpetuate the myth of a threesome Brecht consisting an anarchist, a Marxist and a Mellow [sic] humanist" (1998, 12). The production manifesto of *Brechter Khonje*

further declared that the play “encapsulate historically, humanistically [sic] and dramatically” the theatrical journey of one of the most ingenious artists of world theatre. But in remaining faithful to this declaration by condensing the phenomenon of Brecht’s life and art within a couple of hours was a remarkable achievement for Nandikar. The performance began with Arun Mukherjee singing the signature song ‘Lakho pader gun kirtan’ from Arun Mukherjee’s production of *Maa* (1982) but the momentum of the play was built around the enactment of a series of excerpts from other famous Bengali productions of Brecht’s plays like *Tin Poisar Pala* (1969), *Galileor Jiban* (1980), *Sankhapurer Sukanya* (1990) etc., as well as recitation/reading of excerpts from Brecht’s poems, letter and diaries (intermittently punctuated by suitable commentaries by Sengupta, the director). The montagesque structure of the play was literally very Brechtian in essence. The constant shifting of perspectives, interweaving movements of actors, change of locations indicated through exchange of screens created an evocative ambiance in the theatre hall. Sengupta mingled the conventional paraphernalia of Epic theatre like slide projections, and songs interspersed with sounds of musical instruments with autobiographical narration, and a multifocal vision for challenging the frontiers of proscenium stage.

However, the most interesting aspect of Nandikar’s *Brechter Khonje* was its excellent dramatization of the famous inquisition of Bertolt Brecht by the officials of House Un-American Activities Committee. In fact, it was this ‘inquisition’ episode which situated the production into its proper socio-political context. In a perceptive review on this production for *The Statesman*, Maitreyi Chatterjee opined that *Brechter Khonje* was an “excellent introduction for the new generation of theatre goers” (28 Aug, 1998). For a generation of theatre spectators which was born after the War and whose ideas about Nazi extremism, the socialist reconstruction of Europe, the Cold War (and nearer at home about the volatile Naxalite Movement of the 1970s) were formed largely through reading of books, the dramatic representation of Brecht’s ‘inquisition’ had been a stark reminder of the volatile socio-political circumstance in which Brecht lived and practiced his art. But more importantly, *Brechter Khonje* was also an elaborate reminder to the spectators of Group Theatre of the circumstance in which Brecht appeared so relevant to Bengali theatre.

The phenomenon of Brecht adaptation in Bengal would only reveal the cultural complexities involved in the process of adaptation of foreign plays for the native spectators if we look at the phenomenon in its entirety. Whereas all the plays and productions I have discussed in the preceding sections of this article point out the complexities involved in adaptation of ‘foreign’ plays, it also exposes, simultaneously, the helpless condition of ‘native’ theatre practitioners who are compelled to opt for such plays in the absence suitable scripts at home. The fact remains that the plays of Pirandello, Gorki, Brecht (and many other ‘foreign’ dramatists) continue to cater to the spectators of Bengali alternative theatre and this is a clear indicator of the fact that the praxis of adaptation of such texts has its own relevance. Articulating the challenges faced by ‘native’ theatre practitioners in adapting major foreign plays, Bibhash Chakraborty (1937-) states:

Adaptations do not work every time. They do not fit perfectly in every case... [whatever] values the foreign sense and sensibility, their modernity and their intellection may have, we have to reach our own audience, located in our space and time. To reach them we have to take into consideration what they are accustomed to, what traditions they carry with them, what modes of expression they can respond to and what they are likely to reject (2001, 137).

Theatre reviewer Dharani Ghosh has warned us that the "tendency to Indianize foreign plays is alarming" in modern Bengali theatre and more importantly, he sees no end to this tendency amongst the present generation of theatre practitioners. His biggest concern is that our 'native' "theatre will lose all its dignity" unless "some check is applied" to this tendency (Gunawardena 1971, 242). I would rather like to believe that the situation is not certainly as bleak as Ghosh would like us to believe. Rather, as we have seen (especially in the previous section of this article) that in recent times a good number of playwrights like Arun Mukherjee, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Nilkantha Sengupta, Anjan Dutta and others have come up with a considerably long list of original plays in the Brechtian tradition which would have simply been unthinkable if they would not have got the opportunity to hone their skills with adaptation.

Performance theoretician Linda Hutcheon once stated, rather provocatively, that there is a wider tendency among spectators, reviewers and above all among theatre theoreticians to look at a work of adaptation as a 'palimpsestuous' work - "haunted at all times" by the shadow of the "prior text" (6). The complexity partially arises from the fact that when we are already familiar with the "prior text", the adapted text would always be haunted by its presence:

When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works. It is...a text in the "second degree", created and then received in relation to a prior text (2006, 6).

But we should also keep in mind the fact that all acts of adaptation (and I am primarily thinking of theatre in this context) as a process of creation involves both reinterpretation and recreation. There is a perfect possibility that such 'reinterpretation' and 'recreation' can be an act of 'appropriation' and 'salvaging', depending on the perspective of the spectator or audience. Whereas during the earliest few decades of twentieth century, Brecht's plays - according to Michael Bodden - were performed in "too abstract and a schematic" manner, the "politics" of which was "too simplistic" (and also rather narrowly ideological), the latter generation of Bengali theatre practitioners often interpolated dramatic elements and conventions like emotional identification, unified spectacle in their Brechtian productions which their predecessors would have never approved (1997, 104). Most theatre practitioners belonging to the present generation regard adaptation as an unavoidable reality than their predecessors as Suman Mukherjee (1966-) states in Nema Ghosh's *Dramatic Moments* :

I can do adaptations of foreign plays all my life if I feel that's the need of our times. If I do Indian plays, I'll work only with contemporary playwrights - as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter whether the play is original or an adaptation...it is extremely important for me to say something relevant to the

present context through my kind of theatre...the statement is important, the form is not (2000, 173).

In the opinion of theatre historian Samik Bandyopadhyay, it is the lack of enough politically 'relevant' plays in Bengali or other vernacular languages in India, which would appropriately reflect the socio-political sentiments of the time that leaves little option for the native theatre practitioners but to look for adaptations of major foreign plays. However, unlike Dharani Ghosh, he is assured of the fact that at length the 'native' spectators would become more 'receptive' which would provide the opportunity to the 'native' playwrights to freely experiment with their subject and style.

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