

<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2022.v4n2.01>

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## Colonial Encounters, Nationalism and the Public Theatre in Calcutta

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**Dr Samipendra Banerjee**

Associate Professor of English

University of Gour Banga,

Malda, West Bengal, India

### **Abstract**

This research article examines the intersections of colonial encounters, nationalism, and the public theatre in Calcutta during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Focusing on the dynamic cultural and political landscape of colonial Bengal, the study investigates how the emergence of public theatre served as a crucial site for negotiating and expressing nationalist sentiments in response to British colonial rule. The article begins by contextualizing Calcutta's theatrical milieu within the broader framework of colonialism's impact on Indian society and culture. It explores how European-style theatres, initially introduced by colonial authorities, became arenas where Indian intellectuals and artists strategically engaged with and contested colonial ideologies. Through a detailed analysis of key theatrical productions, performances, and debates of the time, the article elucidates how theatre evolved as a platform for articulating diverse nationalist discourses, ranging from cultural revivalism to political resistance. Moreover, the article critically examines the role of prominent playwrights, actors, and theatre groups in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support for nationalist movements. It highlights significant theatrical works that challenged colonial representations and celebrated indigenous cultural heritage, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity and solidarity among Bengali audiences. By drawing on archival materials, contemporary newspapers, and theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between colonial hegemony, cultural production, and nationalist aspirations in Bengal's public sphere. Ultimately, this study underscores the pivotal role of theatre as a site of cultural and political contestation during a transformative period in India's colonial history,

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illuminating the enduring legacy of these performances in shaping modern Indian identity and resistance movements.

**Keywords:** Colonial encounters, Nationalism, Public theatre, Cultural resistance, Political identity

In the twenty-first century, there has been a notable surge in scholarships focusing on a comprehensive historiography of Indian theatre, reflecting a shift in Indian theatre studies towards integrating recent theoretical advancements with colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial concerns. This paper explores the emergence of 'Public Theatre' in Calcutta during the late nineteenth century and its complex engagement with nationalism and modernity, despite its colonial origins. It also examines the significant entry of women into Indian Theatre during this period.

The term 'public theatre' traditionally denotes a theatre accessible to the general public, a concept that gained prominence after 1872 with the establishment of Calcutta's First Public Theatre by enthusiastic young intellectuals from Baghbazar Amateur Theatre. These individuals, educated in modern thought, sought to create a theatre that catered to native audiences amidst the binary divide of British and Indian identities in Calcutta. This regional Bengali identity aligned with broader nationalistic aspirations.

Inspired by their successful private performances, the Baghbazar youths founded the National Theatre, initially named "The Calcutta National Theatrical Society" by Nabagopal Mitra, a pivotal member. This marked a significant shift towards democratizing theatre through the introduction of ticketed admissions, making theatre accessible across social classes and promoting a nationalistic ethos of inclusivity.

Initially utilizing spaces like Bhuban Mohan Neogi's house for rehearsals and Madhusudhan Sanyal's residence in Sovabazar for performances, the National Theatre's innovative approach quickly garnered public attention even before its inaugural show. *The Englishman*, a British newspaper appreciated the initiative. On 20 November 1872, *The Englishman* reported about 'A Native Theatrical Society', where:

A few native gentlemen of Baghbazar have established a Theatrical society, named the Calcutta National Theatrical Society, their object being to improve the stage, as also encourage native youths in the composition of new Bengali dramas from the proceeds of sales of tickets.

The attempt is a laudable one, and is the first of its kind... (qtd in Mukherjee 33)

Thus, the first public theatre opened on 7 December, 1872, with Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Nildarpan*.

There is however, a whole series of interesting facts around the nomenclatures associated with the new public theatre. Nabagopal Mitra, who had suggested the name "The Calcutta National Theatrical Society", was also the editor of a newspaper, *National Paper*. In fact, Nabagopal was often jeered at for his insistence on the use of the tag 'national' with any enterprise that he was associated with, so much so that he was nicknamed 'National Nabagopal'. However, Girish Chandra Ghosh, who had other and grander ideas about a truly 'National Theatre' soon dissociated himself from the group because the group didn't even have their own playhouse. Girish objected to the idea because it was not fitting that the something named as grandiose as National Theatre wouldn't even have its own playhouse. The National Theatre is followed by

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several other public theatres, all of whose titles use the word 'national'. The "Hindu National Theatre" comes up in 1873 to compete against National Theatre and "The Indian National Theatre" comes up in 1875, led by Krishnasadhan Banerjee and Mohendralal Basu. The National and the Hindu National both were offshoots of the Baghbazar amateur youths and after a few combined performances, often for charity, they decided to merge and was renamed, "The Great National Theatre". This time the theatre was managed and led by Girish Chandra Ghosh, the leading thespian of the period. In December 1873, The Great National Theatre performed from its own building at Beadon Street, where the Minerva Theatre stands now.

Hence, the later half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the Public theatre and the modern Indian Theatre and it was new in its involvement of larger and larger common people as audiences. Moreover, the plays became overtly political and satirized contemporary social realities. On the other hand, Theatre emerged as a site of anti-colonial resistance with the seeds of an emerging nationalism.

The National Theatre opened with *Nildarpan*, a play written earlier by Dinabandhu Mitra, in 1860. The play was a blatant exposure of the oppression of the British indigo planters on the lamentable condition of the poor Bengali peasants. The *National Paper* on its edition of 11 December 1872 described the play as "an event of national importance". *The Englishman* in its editorial of 20 December 1872, however, vehemently opposed the staging of the play as it was against the prestige of the British government, calling it a libel on the Europeans, and suggested government intervention. *Nildarpan* became immediately popular and the play was invited to perform at "Hindu Mela", an important nineteenth century event in the trajectory of Indian nationalism because it sought to encourage national industries and nationalism amongst people.

Meanwhile National Theatre also toured to far off places like Dacca, Murshidabad, Varanasi. Later Great National toured north India including Delhi, Lahore and Lucknow. A particularly interesting incident took place at Lucknow during the performance of *Nildarpan*. Binodini in her memoir *Amar Katha* recollects the incident where the performance was interrupted in the middle when British officers went up on the stage and confronted the actors who were enacting the scene of an Indigo ryot overpowering a British Indigo planter. The performance had to be called off, but the news travelled.

According to Nandi Bhatia, "not only did the Great National establish *Nildarpan* as the first nationalist drama ; it also inaugurated the theater as a powerful weapon of resistance in the struggle for independence from colonial rule" (22) The impact that *Nildarpan* had also owes a lot to a British missionary, Reverend James Long. Rev. James Long widely circulated copies of *Nildarpan*, which had been translated into English by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and it was because of Long that *Nildarpan* reached out to a wider audience. The infuriated British government set up a mock trial and imprisoned James Long. Kaliprasanna Singha had to step in with the payment of the fine of Rs. 1,000 for Long's bail. Dutt's translation, with the help of James Long, reached all the way to England, and the English were shocked to find out the atrocities done by their fellow countrymen. General Protests followed. An interesting reaction is found in the English newspaper in London, *The Saturday Review*, which is typical of the orientalist approach of the English press. While dismissing the artistic merit of *Nildarpan*, the *Saturday Review* treated the play as a valuable sociological document nevertheless: "To us in England the drama has no interest except so far as it enables us to conjecture what are the misdeeds of which the natives accuse the planters, and what is the truth of the accusation." (Bhatia 34)

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After *Nildarpan*, numbers of anti-colonial theatre were on the rise, often based on topical subjects rather than elevated nationalist concerns initially. Some examples are *Gajadananda and Yuvaraj*, a comedy staged by Great National Theatre in 1876 which satirized the slavishness of Jagadananda Mukherjee. After the censorship the play was revived later as *Hanuman Charitra*. *The Police of Pig and Sheep* was also a caricature of Stuart Hogg, commissioner, and Mr. Lamb, Superintendent of Police.

All of these led to the Dramatic Performances Control Act, 1876, the first direct censure of Indian theatre by the British colonial administration with the aim to curb nationalistic sentiments among Indians. The text of the Act noted, that it was being introduced to “prohibit dramatic performances which [were] seditious or obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interests.” Extending to the whole of British India, the act authorized local governments to prohibit any performance “likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India,” or “likely to deprave and corrupt persons present at the performance” (Bhatia 19). The emergence of the public theatre in Calcutta, and its democratic nature of performance involving the masses as audience thus was an important element in the spread of Indian nationalism.

## The Entry of the Woman: The Actress in Public Theatre

In the final section of my paper, I wish to take a quick closer look at the ‘dramatic’ entry of the woman in the Bengali stage. This was the time when Bengal was passing through a phase of extreme debate as to whether women should be included as performers in the theatre. The emergence of the public theatre gave momentum to the debate and soon women were brought in. We had our first women actresses. However, this was not the first time it had happened. The theatre in Nabin Chandra Basu’s house in Shyambazar had first used the woman as actress in *Bidyasundar* in 1835 and even Gerasim Lebedev had introduced women in his Bengally theatre in 1795. But both were occasional and did not become a sustained practice. The first public theatre to introduce women was Bengal Theatre and not the Great National. On 16 August 1873, Bengal Theatre introduced four women —Jagattarini, Golap, Elokeshi and Shyama as actresses to perform Michael Madhusudhan Dutt’s new Bengali play *Sarmistha*. It was a pity that Dutt, who had been a strong advocate for inclusion of women in theatre did not live to see it happen. The Great National had been conservative in its approach initially, but following the tremendous success of Bengal Theatre, they also introduced Kadambini, Khetromoni, Jadumoni and Haridasi to perform in *Sati ki Kalankini* in August 1874. In 1876, the public theatre saw the entry of another great actress to be, Binodini. She initially joined Bengal Theatre but later would shift to the Great National Theatre and grow up into a renowned actress under the tutelage of Girish Chandra Ghosh.

The immediate social reaction however was extremely negative because of moral obligations. The actresses were uneducated women and mostly prostitutes. The *Hindu Patriot* noted that the stage managers should be careful not to “stoop down to the level of the Jatrawalas” while *Sadharani* remarked that “It was a tragedy that gentlemen were being seen with prostitutes” A particularly interesting case was when the headmaster of a school wrote a letter to the editor of *Rangalay* accusing Girish Ghosh and theatre in general because the prostitutes were apparently seducing the young boys, leering at them from the stage, and luring them away from studies. The social acceptance of women on the stage was still a far cry. However, with recent focus on Feminist theatres, theatre and feminist scholarship is re-examining the immense

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contributions of our earliest women actresses, and the huge social stigma they had to withstand for their love of a newly emerged public theatre.

## Conclusion: Nationalism and Public Theatre

Recent scholarly inquiries have increasingly identified the role of nationalism across various domains, yet the realm of theatre remains relatively underexplored. The advent of Public Theatre in Calcutta stands out as a pivotal event of national significance, as it democratically opened theatrical experiences to the general public. This development can be interpreted as a significant stride in nationalism from two distinct perspectives:

Firstly, theatre's potential to mobilize masses towards anti-colonial resistance and liberation movements. The accessibility of theatre to a broader audience facilitated the dissemination of nationalist ideas and sentiments, galvanizing collective action against colonial oppression.

Secondly, the nuanced introduction of modernity and enlightenment through theatre, particularly in its inclusive approach towards women. By embracing female participation and representation on stage, public theatre in colonial Calcutta not only challenged traditional norms but also fostered a modern, progressive ethos that contributed to the burgeoning nationalist discourse.

Therefore, the emergence of public theatre in colonial Calcutta warrants a critical reevaluation in light of new insights on nationalism. These perspectives offer fertile ground for further investigation into the historical and historiographical dimensions of Indian theatre. By examining theatre's role as a catalyst for nationalist sentiment and its transformative impact on societal norms, this study aims to uncover fresh avenues of exploration that enrich our understanding of cultural resistance and the evolution of Indian national identity.

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