

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN:2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue - V September 2014



Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

Bohuruppe's *Red Oleanders*: Birth of a Pantheon

Hindol Palit

Ex-Assistant Professor of Humanities
Brainware Group of Institutions

Since its inception, Tagore's "Red Oleanders" fired the imagination of intellectuals. Tagore was very keen to see legendary actor-director Sisir Kumar Bhaduri staging the play. But due to some unavoidable reasons, Tagore's dream remained incomplete. Now, what was left undone by one of the brightest predecessor of modern Bengali theatre was finished by his worthy successor- SambhuMitra and his team Bohuropee in 1954. This production changed the face of Bengali theatre by its unique portrayal of characters, brilliant stage craft and unbelievable acting prowess. In my article I would like to show how the fruit of the collective dream of Bohuropee achieved a cult status which is yet to be surpassed by any other theatre group staging "Red Oleanders"

Genesis

When "Red Oleanders" was finally appeared into print in 1926, it created a huge tremor across Bengal and immediately divided the Bengali intellectual society into two combative camps. One section was ecstatic about this "unprecedented documentation of enormous pain that modern civilization is offering us." The other section, probably the stronger one, strongly refused to consider "Red Oleanders" as a potent, modern play. "The poet here tried to capture too many things and at the end he had mixed up everything to produce a grotesque play which appeared as a labyrinth to the mass".

But Tagore remained nonchalant before the torrent of criticism. Bestowed with great intuitive power, he was well aware of the fact that his creation might face severe derision because contemporary Bengalitheatre, marred by superfluous emotional scenes and bawdy tomfoolery, had not experienced anything of such caliber till then. Tagore immediately took initiative to transport the play on the stage which could be the only effective means to explore the fullest possibilities of a play where abstract and concrete world blended into a remarkable degree.

Now, sitting with the probable names to direct his play, only one name came to poet's mind - Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. "Sisir Kumar stormed the auditorium by his supreme quality of acting," said a rapturous Sachindranath Sengupta describing Bhaduri's magical performance in "Sita" at Manmohan Natyamandir. Incidentally, Tagore was present in the audience along with Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay to witness the veracity of Bhaduri. After watching the show, amused Tagore asked Bhaduri to direct his 'Saktakarabi' (A sharp example of Tagore's self-mocking prowess).

But, despite the earnest desire of the duo, Sisir Bhaduri's "Red Oleanders" did not appear on the stage in poet's life time. Manoranjan Bhattacharya, a close associate of Bhaduri, mentioned in his "Nat and Dehopat" that lack of quality actress to portray the character of Nandini prevented Bhaduri to accomplish the task given by Tagore and this sense failure had been haunting 'Natyacharya' in the rest of his life. On 6 April, 1934 The Tagore Dramatic Group produced

“Red Oleanders” to raise fund for earthquake victims in the presence of Tagore. We do not have any reliable resources to know about poet’s reaction after the show.

Now, what was left undone by one of the brightest predecessor of modern Bengali theatre was finished by his worthy successor- Sambhu Mitra and his team Bohurupee in 1954.

Why Red Oleanders?

“As a result of British imperialism, a colossal distance developed between rural and urban India. Therefore, we were looking for a play that could speak of the eternal agony embedded in human soul regardless of his rural or urban background. The first name soared up in our mind was ‘Red Oleanders’,” said Sambhu Mitra in an issue of Bohurupee. After the huge success of Tagore’s “Four Chapters” and Ibsen’s “An Enemy of the People”, Bohurupee failed to live up to its expectation in Manmatha Roy’s “Strike”. The production was so disastrous and the reaction was so embarrassing that even the genius of Sambhu Mitra did not dare to recreate it after the first night mayhem. Mitra in his later life admitted that at that point of time Bohurupee got too much swayed to cater the need of a small clique of urban audience and therefore, a deep vacuum was created between Bohurupee and its larger audience. Then came “Red Oleanders” with piquant but immensely utilitarian décor and sealed its permanency in the history of modern Bengali theatre.

‘Theatre must not speak in difficult languages’

“Bohurupee players can demand special credits that none of Tagore’s poetic and profound lines seemed unreal on the lips gold diggers. They trooped in and out of the stage with the natural abandon of disillusioned mining labours and voiced their words in the most natural wok-a-day manner, with the gesticulations and emphasis that seemed real.” (Hindustan Times, 22 December, 1954)

It always remained an uphill task for any director to blend the world of ideas (represented by Nandini, Bishu Pagol and Raja) and the real world (represented by Fagual, governor, foreman, tunnel-diggers, and policemen) into a two-hours-long play. Sambhu Mitra’s brilliance recovered the play from the dusty shelf of the scholar and offered it to a much wider section of art-loving people for their edification and enlightenment. Once Gordon Creig commented “The theatre was for people, and always for the people. The poets would make theatre for the select dilettante. They would put difficult psychological thoughts before the public expressed in difficult words. Whereas the theatre must show them sights, show them life, show them beauty, and not speak in difficult sentences.” The huge popularity of Bohurupee’s “Red Oleanders” across the country echoed the authenticity of Gordon’s words.

“I don't paint things. I only paint the difference between things.”

In an intimate conversation with Sankha Ghosh, Sambhu Mitra said that the arrival of Khaled Choudhury to Bohurupee had encouraged him to think about “Red Oleanders”. “I have never come across such a versatile personality before who can draw pictures, compose music, design sets with equal tenacity and perfection.” Interestingly, Choudhury had a past affair with “Red Oleanders”. He was the set designer of “Red Oleanders” produced by West Bengal Women Self-Difference Committee back in 1949. “Georgeda (legendary singer Debabrata Biswas) asked me to read the text and design a set. I have gone through the text several times and noticed that

Tagore emphasized on the intricacy of ‘net’ though I had hardly realized the true significance of the ‘net’ at that point of time,” said a candid Choudhury.

When he was again assigned to design the set of Yaksha town for Bohuruppe, he came up with a unique stage plan. The whole stage was stratified into several levels just to create an imagery of a stratified society. The power of the town was embodied in an angular door behind which the king sat; this was balanced by a platform and stairs on the other side of the stage. The king’s presence in his chamber was indicated by two red lights above his window, an intelligent device to portray power and fear. Choudhry’s king was clad in a cloak emblazoned with a picture of wheels, a poignant symbol of modern mechanical civilization. The soiled work-a-dress of the underground workers, the khaki and beret of the guard, the sherwani and churidars of the sardars (which evoked huge controversies as some audience found resemblance between Sardars and Congress leaders) played a pivotal role to construe the precarious existence of modern human soul in an oppressive world.

“Ah just act the way ah feel.”

“Tripti Mitra gave a warmly intimate study of Nandini, and the great actress as she is; Rabindranath’s priceless dialogues seemed to gain a new grandeur and significance in her mouth.” (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 13 July, 1954)

“No appreciation of the show, however, can be complete without a mention of Tripti Mitrawho, as Nandini, was on the stage nearly through the entire play without giving the impression that she was repeating herself. In her movements, expressiveness and modulation of her well-cultivated voice she commanded an abiding interest in the unfolding of the forceful, and yet ever so puzzling role of the unusual character she portrayed.” (Hindustan Times, 22 December, 1954)

“In a uniformly good cast it is difficult to single out names but surely the most outstanding performance of the evening was by Tripti Mitra who as Nandini showed herself to be an actress of highest order. She gave expression to the bewilderingly varied moods of Nandini most effectively and Tagore could not have wished for a better representation of his creation a poem of loveliness” (The Statesman, 22 December, 1954).

Three almost identical reviews published in three different newspapers provided ample glimpses to Tripti Mitra’s acting prowess and justified Sisir Bhaduri’s ‘inability’ to stage “Red Oleanders” due to absence of a potent actress in Nandini’s role. In the play, Nandini, a vivacious girl who is embodiment of nature, disenchant a king, paralyzed in morbid lust and deprived of human emotions. Only Sambhu Mitra’s resonant voice could epitomize the agony of the ruler confiscated in his own net of greed and lasciviousness. There were others, especially Arati Mitra who made an admirable miner’s wife, Gangapada Basu; the incapacitated professor and Soven Majumder who acted an amicable Bishu. Amar Ganguly’s shrewd governor and Kumar Roy’s cunning Gosai were convincing enough to portray a tyrannical city.

“If it matters, it produces controversy”

The first show of “Red Oleanders” was held on 10 May, 1954 at E.R.B. Mansion Institute, Sealdah and the next show was at Mahajati Sadan, just three days later. Interestingly, the production suffered the same birth pangs as did the original text. Both the political analysts and Biswabharati pundits found serious act of violation of the original text which, they opined, was

done intentionally to radiate certain political beliefs. In the penultimate scene of the play, Bishu yelled “Let’s go to the battle field” and all hell was let loose. The cultural clan of Congress condemned this scene for being ‘overtly political and provocative’. Biswabharati had multiple objections regarding the use of ‘superfluous set’, presentation of sardars in the sherwani and churidars and especially, the eviction of Bishu’s songs.

The decision of omission of Bishu’s songs, which became almost identical with his character, was not an easy decision to take. But what appeared so poignant in reading became too obtrusive against the flow of the play. Sambhu Mitra, Khaled Choudhury and Amar Ganguly travelled all the way to Santiniketan to discuss with Ramkinkor Beige, a legendary sculptor and Tagore’s close associate. Beige realized their problem and advised them to use the first line of each song to create the theatrical ambience.

Despite all the bizarre criticisms and the constant threat from Biswabharati, Bohuruppe was running their shows in the packed auditoriums. A huge chunk of Bengali intellectuals – Annadashankar Roy, Hiron Kumar Sanyal, Narendradeb, and Atulchandra Gupta- openly supported Bohuruppe in their writings. They invited Biswabharati Music Board to sit with Bohuruppe for a reasonable solution. “Sometimes in the winds of change we find our true direction.”

“Success is a journey, not a destination”

“We considered this the best production in the festival. The producer had extracted the maximum effect from Tagore’s fantasy and the effect of the whole play was very striking.” This was the reaction of the judges of National Theatre Festival (1954) when Sambhu Mitra appeared on the stage to collect the best play award from the hands of President Rajendra Prasad. This national acclamation silenced the critics back at home. Next year Bohuruppe was sent to Pakistan as cultural delegation by Neheru government. In 1957 Bohuruppe got the opportunity to unveil ‘Red Oleanders’ before international audience at UNESCO National Theatre Institute. Beside this, “Red Oleanders” was running in full swing all over the country for long three decades. The curtain fell on this historical production on 26 November, 1976.

Culmination

“The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.” ~William Faulkner

Now, 34 years after the production, a definite question pops out in our mind: What was Bohuruppe’s serious contribution to Bengali theatre beyond the initial fame and success? “They restored Bengali theatre from the narrow alley of mediocrity and the dangerous tendency of playing the conscientious role,” wrote Sameek Bandopadhyay in an essay, “another serious contribution of this production was to influence the next generation of theatre workers in the likes of Bivas Chakravorty, Arun Mukhopadhyay, Soumitro Basu, Romaprasad Banik and many others.” Sanka Ghosh believed that Bohuruppe gave flesh and blood to the idyllic characters of Tagore and bailed them out from the ‘dungeon of self-proclaimed watch-dogs of Tagore’.

Bengali theatre has witnessed at least half-a-dozen productions of “Red Oleanders” since 1976. Every time a new production comes in, a parallel is drawn in comparison with Bohuruppe’s

creation. “Bohuruppe’s production came as a ‘light through the cracked wall’ and nothing can come at par with it,” said Shekhar Sammadar. Suman Mukhophadhay, who tried his hand on “Red Oleanders” few years back, seemed to hit the right chord: “Bohuruppe’s production was like our old myths, old gods, old heroes who are sleeping at the bottom of our mind, waiting for our call.”

Works Cited:

1. Edited by Roy Kumar, Special Edition on the production of “Red Oleanders” by Bohuropee.
2. Mitra Sambhu, Nabya Natyar Bichar, December 1971.
3. Clurman Harold, The So-called Non-commercial Theatre, International Theatre, Ed. John Andrews and Ossia Trilling, Samson Low, 1949.
4. Tagore Rabindranath, Sacrifice and Other Plays, Macmillann Co Limited, 1962/