

Performing Alternative *Ramayana*: A study of the (re)presentation and (re)reading of the Epic in Modern Bengali Theatre

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Indian theatre is extremely complex in its relation to modernity as well as tradition and it has become more so in the present postcolonial scenario. Playwrights have often fused traditional folk forms with western influences in an attempt of answering various new questions that crops up in a postcolonial nation. The shift in the tradition of theatre practices in India was noticed, most prominently, post 1960s with the advent of the Progressive Theatre movement which had a zeal for exploring the possibilities of an experimental theatre. "These new experiments", as Bishnupriya Dutt writes in her essay, "Theatre and subaltern Histories: Chekov adaptation in Post-Colonial India", "demanded a reverence for the text, a close reading, analysis, understanding and consistent interpretation of the lines through dramatic action conceived in terms of a "total" theatre, that is to say, theatre as a balance of acting, sound and music, scenic design, and illumination, with the director committed to the text and its inherent values, in perfect control over an ensemble of performers and technicians". (Clayton & Meerzon, 2013, p.146) The works were often an attempt of getting back to the mass bases of India as they believed performance can change its receivers' beliefs and attitudes and hence their behavioral pattern. The playwrights often chose to stage and re-tell the epics thereby implicitly invoking the nation which was still adjusting to its new found independence. The re-presentation of the epics on stage invoked a past that would help to deal with the various emerging issues of the modern stage.

This paper will try to briefly analyze one such work of modern Bengali theatre: *Mareech Sambad* by Arun Mukherjee, first staged in 1973 by the theatre group named *Chetana* that dealt considerably with the ethical and moral ramifications of the *Ramayana* story. The play uses the trope of *Ramayana* and redefines it to address the issues of class struggle, oppression and plight of the subaltern at the hands of the elites of the society. It attempt to show how the voice of the historical margins of the society gets subsumed under the narrative constructed by the biased upper classes. Therefore, the play intervenes the grand narrative and with the help of textual nuances and subtleties attempts to interrogate and deconstruct the popular belief propagated and disseminated by it.

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (2005) in her book *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance*, writes extensively on the re-telling of myths on the Indian stage in the post-independence era. Albeit, speaking in the context of *Mahabharata* adaptations, she discusses the history that leads to the re-telling of the epics on Indian stage which becomes significant in the postcolonial scenario. She writes:

The coincidence of colonialism, orientalist recuperations, and a protonationalist renaissance around the mid-nineteenth century, however, inaugurates a new self-reflexive

phase of cultural appropriation in which the epic becomes strongly identified with the cultural history and identity of “India” as an imagined community and gives rise to new modes of commentary, exposition, fictionalization, and theatrical representation. (Dharwadker, 2005, p. 175)

Although modernist approach of a nation state does not give much importance to mythmaking, the epics served as essential cultural resources that fed the nationalist sentiments and the sense of belonging. Dharwadker quotes Smith’s idea of historical ethno-symbolism where he says that the concept emerges from:

the theoretical critique of modernist approaches, as well as from a different reading of the historical record. For ethno-symbolists, what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular *living past* has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges. (Dharwadker, 2005, p. 169)

The re-reading and re-telling of the epics in the modern Indian theatre is a marker of the “development of the nation as a political and cultural entity” (217). Various episodes from the epics are taken up to critically engage with the concept of gender, race, class, caste that are plaguing human existence in postcolonial India. The play *Mareech Sambad* brings to the focus the almost forgotten marginal character of the epic and tries to analyze the grand narrative in a new way, thereby challenging the myth of a monolithic and homogenous Indian culture that is created at the cost of exploiting the lower castes and the tribal. The narrator of the play Ustad introduces it to the audience with the following lines:

Ustad: Religion, I mean Dharam humara sharir moner sathe mishe ache, dharamei hamar tradition—Babura sob Ramayan, Mahabharat poriyechhen to? Ram-Sitar goppo Shuniyechhen to? Ora Ramayan ko hero aur heroine ase—to hami oder baad diye ektho Ordinary admi – nahi ek Rakshasko Kahani shunabe, uska naam hau Mareech—Ha babu ohi Mareechka Story lekar ajka khila Mareech Sambad. (Religion, I mean faith has been infused in our mind and body, religion is our tradition—Babu you must have read Ramayana, Mahabharata, right? Must have heard the story of Ram-Sita? They are the hero and heroine of Ramayana—but instead of them I will narrate the story of an Ordinary man—nay actually of a demon, his name is Mareech—Yes Babu, today’s play is about the story of that Mareech, Mareech Sambad) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 3)

Drawing attention to the non-unitary character of Indian politics, the play focuses on the “another domain” as says Ranajit Guha, which the dominant discourse in the past saw as of no importance or even altogether non-existent. This theatrical presentation infuses a new powerfully expressive dimension in the epic and thereby tries to show how these subaltern characters have been unhesitatingly excluded from the mainstream narrative of the nation which hegemonized the response towards the marginalized “other” and have given them a distorted demonic appearance to justify their exclusion.

Nationalist histories often replicate opposition between the local ruling elite and “the people” or the larger subaltern class. A “subaltern” is not just the one who is oppressed and victimized by a dominant group, he is someone who lacks agency in the social power relations and is regarded as the other of the dominant social groups who have an access to the hegemonic discourse and can make use of it. Thus a “subaltern” is the one who lacks the capacity to speak as it lacks the

position in the hegemonic power structure from where it can speak. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian philosopher, used the word in his *Prison Notebook* to refer to those people who were subordinated in the hegemonic structure and were never considered meaningful in the regime of power. But the term has attained an interesting place in the modern historiography and criticism and much speculation has been made regarding the figure of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, (1985) in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, explores the agency of the subaltern in terms of their capacity of speaking. She problematises the idea of representation and representation and concludes that in the dominant elitist political structure the subaltern has absolutely no space to speak for themselves and make their experience and interest heard. (p. 272-280)

The word “subaltern” has come to be associated more with the postcolonial criticism given the conditions prevailing in the postcolonial nations of the world. The relationship between post colonialism and historiography has contributed immensely in the development of both the idea and the figure of the subaltern. Since history writing was considered essential in the formation of the modern nation state after independence in the postcolonial nations, there arose many debates about it. Any non-western nation inevitably attains subalternity to the master narrative generated by the history of the Europe. The Third World historians find it essential to refer back to the works in European history for validity and authenticity and also because they cannot take the risk of being ignorant and outdated. Their attempt of defining their condition largely borrows from the vocabulary developed by the western philosophers and academia. But the European historians never feel the need of reciprocating the behaviour and hence the works they produced were criticized of being completely ignorant about the existence of the Third World.¹

The two main types of history writing that was prevalent in India was one, that took an imperialist inclination and praised the colonial rule for bringing modernism in the country and secondly, the history produced by the nationalist historians who thought that the colonial rule did no good to the country, instead it led to the draining of the resources of the country. However, the nationalist history too did not go uncriticized. Nationalist leaders who initiated the anti-imperialist project were blamed to have suppressed all those protests that came from the groups of the lower rung of the society. They were prevented from exceeding the self-imposed limits of the nationalist political agenda. In reality the colonial institutions brought by the English rule percolated in the Indian society to the extent that it created a set of elites who were Indian in blood and origin but were no less opportunistic than the foreign rulers. They not only separated themselves from their fellow countrymen belonging to different social strata, but also created a “vertical line of patronage” for power and privilege. It was in this situation that a group of historians came up to challenge the master narrative produced by “unhistorical elitist historiography” of colonialist historians and the nationalist historians. They brought to the limelight “another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people.” (Guha, 2000, p. xiii-xiv) These historians formed the Subaltern Studies Group.

This group argued that this domain of politics that existed parallel to the elitist domain was completely autonomous and independent. In spite of all their endeavours, the Indian bourgeoisie could not assimilate these voices into their own historiography and thus failed to “speak for the nation” which was their actual attempt. There existed in the nation a section of people whose consent was never earned; “they could never be integrated into their hegemony”. These groups of people, mostly peasants, labourers, workers were affected by the colonial rule and protested in

their own way. They had their own agency and were the subjects of their own history. Their reactions were more violent and were centrally based on the notion of resistance to the elite domain. Their rebellion included the inversion of the symbols of the socially superior- their language, behaviour. As Ranajit Guha puts it, “It was a fight for prestige which was at the heart of insurgency. Inversion was its principal modality.” (Chakrabarty, 2006, p. 9) The major point of difference between the subaltern politics and that of the dominant ones in India is that the political mobilizations was based on horizontal affiliation of kinship or territoriality as against the vertical structure of the dominant politics largely based on the model of the British parliament.

The split in the domain of politics had another important impact. The question of power no more rested only with the elitist discourse. The power politics in India so far rested on the hierarchy and oppression of the subordinate by the dominant. The domination and subordination of the less powerful was by means of coercion or the application of brutal physical force. The rule of the elites was not achieved by the consent of these sections of the society. It was as Guha named it “dominance without hegemony”; “a dominance in which the movement of persuasion outweighed that of coercion without, however, eliminating it altogether”. (Guha, 2000, p. xviii) The dominant politics not only failed to incorporate these voices into the larger campaigns launched by them, but the records of the agitations during the colonial period shows that the initiative of the various movement passed on from the elite leadership to the subaltern masses who made the struggles their own by defying the command of the headquarters and framed them according to their own codes “specific to the tradition of the popular resistance and phrasing them in idioms derived from the communitarian experience of working and living together”. (Guha, 2000, p. xviii)

The history of colonial modernity, thus, created in India a domain of politics which was plural in structure- where the elements interacted with each other but failed to create an unified whole. The separation of domain endows the figure of the subaltern with power and a meaningful role in the history. This intervention made by these historians gave the colonial history another protagonist who will make his presence felt wherever his being was eclipsed by the dominant discourse. All political transaction henceforth will see a new face from the other domain and consider their implications on them.

The progressive theatre movement was closely related to the growth of support for the left and the radicalization of the Bengal countryside and much like the historians brought to the limelight,

another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people. (Guha, 2000, p. xviii)

The socialist rhetoric of the characters would strike a chord with the politically indoctrinated audience of the then Bengal and the plays were regarded as an attack on the monistic view of our history and the idea circulated by the state of “the people’s consent to the rule of ‘their own’ bourgeoisie.” (Clayton & Meerzon, 2013, p.157)

The play *Mareech Sambad* brings to the limelight one such subaltern character from *Ramayana*—Mareech and along with him other two Mareech figures, Ishwar and Gregory, to show how the same policy of hegemony is applied irrespective of time and place. Ravana persuades Mareech to lure Ram away from Sita so that he can abduct her easily. Mareech knew the art of disguising himself—*Maya* and was instructed by Ravana to take the shape of a golden stag. But Mareech is unwilling. He now lives a life of ascetic in the forest and admires Ram. But Ravana keeps on pressing him. He is reminded of his ancestors who were but Rakshasas and his life was therefore

meant to serve the Rakshasa lot. Mareech here represents those unfortunate classes of people who are utilised by those in power and were compelled to do what their ancestors did without questioning their position. They were supposed to serve as the instruments through which power perpetuates and continues to remain stagnant. Ranajit Guha while analysing the idioms of domination and subordination remarks that in case of persuasion, the Indian feudal lords stress the concept of *dharma* in order to exercise moral hegemony.ⁱⁱ The same is done to Mareech and Iswar, the zamindar's strongman. When ideology fails, the authority switches on to repression through violence and threatens them. The same is met by Gregory who is a man from the other part of the globe. The democracy represented by Williams, the American senator says that one cannot possibly ignore the order of the authority and if he does so he will have to face dangerous consequences. Thus if a subaltern tries to raise his voice against the policy of the authority or tries to act according to his own independent will, the authority knows well how to crush the voice with a heavy hand. The only option left for the oppressed subaltern is to break down and cry as does Iswar at first or to commit suicide as is done by Gregory.

Arun Mukherjee, in this play, tries to capture the ethos of the 1970s, the decade which saw political unrest gripping the whole world. Vietnam War, communist uprising in the larger context and Naxalite movement in Bengal were making a vast difference in the way people thought about the world. Mukherjee attempts to encapsulate the socialist ideas, the optimism, the urge of living and protesting against the dominating class that were influencing the young minds. Mukherjee uses myth as the foundation on which the edifice of a new political consciousness has been erected.

Mukherjee's Mareech becomes an iconic figure that represents the dominated class across spatial and temporal boundaries. The confusions caused on stage by various characters, like their untimely entry, one character speaking the dialogue of the other, are intentional performative nuances to show how the conditions are same in every society and that only the names vary and that suppression occurs at various levels combining the Ideological State Apparatuses and the Repressive State Apparatus. The merging of the two apparatuses are well through the characters of Palbabu, the Zamindar and his secretary. When their policy of persuasion fails with Iswar, they themselves become the policeman wearing a cap and taking a revolver in their hands on the stage. He says that, "*amrai tor hate lathi tule diyechhila abar amrai kere nebo*" (It's we, who put the baton in your hand and we will snatch it from you) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 43). Here the baton is the symbol of power that the state granted to Ishwar. The democracy apparently allows its people to play within a limit, but there is limit to the limit as well and once one tries to transcend it, "*dashanan khomibe na tare*" (The ten-headed Ravana will not pardon him) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 27). This "*dashanan*", needless to mention is the state power. One cannot possibly ignore the order of the authority or question it. That is why Gregory's inquisitiveness and his stance against American democracy and foreign policy are considered as treachery by Williams. Gregory thinks American democracy is nothing but a sham; he is against the idea of waging war and is compassionate towards nations that are fighting for their independence. But an individual's voice against the state's policy is nipped at the bud. The US senator Williams says:

"Yes—it is nothing but treachery—Gregory jodi bhebe thake je amader order ke ignore kore se tar swadhin chintadhara niye cholbe tahole tar consequence-o take bhog korte hobe."
(Yes—it is nothing but treachery—if Gregory have thought that ignoring our orders he will continue with his independent thoughts, then he will have to face the consequences)
[my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 31).

The state machinery functions as an overarching panopticon that keeps record of every singular detail of every individual to track the deviant. Williams says Gregory, “*Ekta rashtra jara chalai, protiti nagoriker moner goponotomo chintar hadisho take pete hoi Gregory*” (Those who run a state, they have to be informed even about the secretive thoughts budding the depths of every citizen’s mind Gregory) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 35).

At one point in the play the Ustad, one who controls the characters and the stage becomes a representative of the state power who utilizes the characters according to his own needs. He feels aghast at the fact that Iswar refuses to die. It is a game of Mareech and every Mareech has to die for the game to come to an end. He can never allow a subaltern figure to speak, neither is he allowed to go out of the convention. Mareech is an oppressed figure and has to remain so. When Iswar thinks otherwise, the Ustad reminds him that it is not Iswar’s job to think, he says, “*bhabbo ami ar bhabbe amar jadukathi*” (Only I am allowed to think along with my magic wand) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 32) and they must act accordingly.

But resistance from the subaltern position is possible and this is what perhaps Arun Mukherjee tries to suggest. Against this stagnant scenario, the subaltern figure challenges his positioning, questions the authority which leads to a clash of doubts and self-doubt, interrogation and response between generations. He refuses to submit. Mareech, a representative of the dominated and oppressed class gathers courage enough to question his position. He not only speaks but also makes himself heard. His rebelling mind questions his creator about his character and we find Valmiki on stage dealing with an untamable character. Mareech asks:

“*Probhu! Amar mone ekta shangshoi! Oi bhabe mora chhara ki amar onyo kono poth chhilo na?... Amake morteo holo—Sita horoner jonyo ami dayi holam... loke to amar naamei dosh dei... Kintu Sita horoner sahajyo na kore ami to badha hoyeo darate partam*” (My Lord! I have a doubt in my mind! Was there no other way for me but to die like that?... I had to die—again I was made responsible for Sita’s abduction... People blame me for that... But instead of helping in Sita’s abduction, I could have resisted it and stood like an obstacle) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 51).

Although Mareech and Gregory had to die in the given condition, Ishwar stand out and resists domination. His body language and confident gestures on stage marks him to be that minority who will not submit anymore. Now, it is time for Iswar to revolt. He breaks the conventional concept that a helpless subaltern figure has to die. He refuses to submit and wants to live on. He says:

“*keno morbo ami? Amar aponjonere khunje peyechhi ami. Tai ami beiche achhi. Aj ami lathi hathe chasider pashe dariyechhi—dorkar holi chasider jonyo jan debo. Mortei Jodi hoi, lorai kore morbo. Oder sathe eksone*” (Why shall I die? I have found my own folks. That is why I am alive. Today I have stood with the peasants—if needed I will give my life for them. If at all I have to die, I will die fighting with them, together) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 42).

Ishwar will merge with the men of his class. When the zamindar tries to use violent means to teach him a lesson, he runs to gather his stick to hit back. All the three characters are brought on stage and even though Mareech and Gregory die succumbing to oppression, they come forward and save Iswar when the Zamindar tries to kill him. To quote Guha once again,

one historic occasion after another and in region after region the initiatives of such campaigns which passed from the elite leaderships to the mass of subaltern participants, who defied high command and headquarters to make these struggles their own by

framing them in codes specific to traditions of popular resistance and phrasing them in idioms derived from the communitarian experience and living together. (Guha, 2000, p. xviii)

Gregory and Mareech had to die because they could not unite with their class but Iswar has recognized his people. He now knows whom to support and thus no longer remains a singular entity. He merges with his class in such a way that he could not be killed anymore. Valmiki when appears in the play says, “*gota dol take nishchinho korte na parle or mora to sampurno hobe na*” (If the entire party is not destroyed, his death will not be complete) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 52). Thus the state authority could not suppress his voice anymore as he liberates himself breaking the convention so much so that neither ISAs nor RSA could function on him anymore. The Ustad regrets, “*khelar niyom bhenge Iswar beriye gelo, hamar jadubhi fail kore gelo*” (Breaking the rules of the game, Ishwar moved out, my magic also failed miserably) [my translation] (Mukhopadhyay, 1992, p. 55).

Mukherjee, through the character of Ishwar immortalizes the concept of Mareech. He seemed to believe that Mareech may have died physically but the concept lives on and has become an important representative in the present political scenario. Breaking away from the conventional concept of being a helpless individual who gives in to the oppression of the elites, he stands out as an icon of the subaltern who can speak out.

The hegemonic imperial trope leaves out a greater section of the society as unwanted to valorize the elitist race. This play is an attempt on the part of the subaltern to challenge the state power and the misrepresented history. They claim a share in history to make its subject matter more representative of the society as a whole. The play show that resistance from the subaltern is possible and that the performance allows their voice a space which by combining with the visual and aural signifiers helps in countering the privilege of written words. In the play time and location seems unspecified and even fluid. It is a deliberate attempt so that it creates the illusion of a continuous historical time. In an attempt of countering the discourse of hegemonic democracy, the play contributes to revitalization and deepening of democracy. In these antagonistic ideas lay an alternative vision of the nation and at the time when civil society was still being conceptualized and developed theatre’s illusionistic world opened up a number of such visions. Thus the trope of the epic serves not as a medium of praise and glorification of the mythological characters but a literary dimension that can question the structure of power that exists in the nation. The epic provided the playwrights with irresistible themes that could be understood afresh with the modern postcolonial mindset.

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Notes

ⁱ See Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay titled "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for "Indian" past?", *Representations*, p. 1-26. This concept has been taken from this essay.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928652> Accessed: 31/07/2012 17:18

ⁱⁱ See Ranajit Guha's *Dominance without Hegemony* for a detailed discussion.