

HETEROTOPIC FESTIVITIES: EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF THE GANGA JAMUNA NATYA UTSAV

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One of the abiding consequences of our colonial past is the partition of the once undivided province of Bengal into West Bengal, in India, and Bangladesh (formerly East-Pakistan). This partition and the related communal carnage created a generation traumatised by dislocation, violence, impoverishment and cultural fragmentation which has not only affected post-independence Bengali culture in many ways but has created an existential urge among many Bengalis to culturally bridge an insuperable political divide. Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav, being organised by Aneek since 1998, is an eminent example of such an urge as it brings together Bengali theatre groups from all across West Bengal, Bangladesh and various other states of India to create a transnational platform that establishes a cultural space which transcends the divisive rhetoric of nation-states, international diplomacy, Islamic Terrorism and communal politics of all colours. Interestingly, the festival not only connects the metropolitan centres of Kolkata and Dhaka but includes performers from such districts as Sirajgunj, Barishal, Khulna or Chittagong in Bangladesh as well as the different districts of West Bengal, which continue to nurture a rich and growing theatre culture. The paper will focus on the evolution of the festival, the experiences of artists and spectators and analyse how such a cultural phenomenon contributes towards the growth of a transnational Bengali culture that flows, much like the rivers after which the festival is named, beyond the barbed wires of colonial cartography and postcolonial paraphernalia.

The partition of India continues to haunt the national psyche as one of the worst consequences of the colonial rule and it is in this context that Bill Ashcroft remarked:

The appalling tragedy of partition is only a more obvious, more brutal example of the destructiveness of imperial mapping but it is a story that has been played out again and again in the colonial world with the establishment of boundaries that have been capricious at best, often absurd and in many cases, catastrophic (Ashcroft, 176).

This catastrophe has been experienced by millions of Bengalis who have been dislocated, murdered, maimed, raped, robbed and scarred for life on account of the carnage and mayhem unleashed by several violent factions as the Bengal Presidency was carved into West Bengal. An Indian state and East Pakista. In fact, for Bengalis the trauma was not limited to the period of 1947-48. Rather, the nightmarish experiences were renewed by the War of 1971 when the Indian army marched into East Pakistan to liberate the country from Pakistani terror in favour of the war of liberation being waged by the population under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and ensured the birth of Bangladesh. The decisive victory and liberation notwithstanding, these experiences also sparked a process of violent displacement which led to the influx of a large

number of refugees who remain haunted by the infernal experience of losing their home and hearth.

Quite naturally therefore, countless poems, stories, songs, novels and plays have been written either documenting the catastrophic violence or lamenting the loss of a world of almost utopian plenitude or charting the process of loss and rehabilitation through struggles. In all these artistic representations the focus has often been on the absurdity on the fact that despite sharing the same language and culture, a once united community has been divided into two separate nations, torn from each other with barbed wires, armies and the paraphernalia of immigration and customs. This is evident from the reactions of the bewildered grandmother in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* who asks:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll just be like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (Ghosh 151)

It is important to keep this cultural context in mind as we begin discussing the significance of the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav. Unlike most other popular theatre festivals which revolve around playwrights, directors or actors or are staged to celebrate the foundation of different theatre groups, Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav originated and continues to function primarily as an international festival of Bengali theatre with the thrust being on building a cultural bridge between the two Bengals – West Bengal and Bangladesh. There is no other theatre festival, to my knowledge, in India, that focuses thus on the building of cultural bridges between two countries and thus contributes to the development of a transnational Bengali cultural community that smoothes over the borders, barbed wires and ceaseless diplomatic frictions of one kind or another. In fact, in terms of sheer scale and size there is no other theatre festival in West Bengal that matches the theatrical extravaganza which the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav so regularly offers. A brief statistical glimpse might reveal the exact nature of this expansive enterprise. Beginning in 1998 this festival has been staged in 9-10 different auditoria in Kolkata along with suburban towns like Madhyamgram, Howrah, Halishahar, Maheshtala, Sonarpur etc. Till 2011, 162 theatre groups, including 134 from India, and 28 from abroad, had participated in the festival with 452 shows of 320 plays (Aneek). In 2012, the festival continued simultaneously in Kolkata and Madhyamgram from 23rd December 2012 to 4th January 2013, involving the participation of 30 theatre groups from India and abroad. Most importantly, this was the second phase of the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav in 2012 as the first phase had already been organized in Dacca, Bangladesh from 14th September 2012 to 22nd September 2012, involving 7 theatre groups from Bangladesh and Aneek from Kolkata. This is probably the first example, not only in Bengal, but also in India of a local festival branching out to a different country and thereby creating new grounds of solidarity and cultural exchange.

This is not just a fortuitous turn of events or an arrangement of convenience. What lies behind such a phenomenon is a deliberate and concerted attempt to build cultural bridges and ameliorate the scars and wounds of partition and everything associated with it. This is evident from the published statements of the conference organizers where these issues of separation and solidarity recurrently emerge. For example, Amal Chakraborty, the Secretary of Aneek, while talking about the dream behind the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav, clearly states:

As part of a historical inevitability, in exchange for freedom, our country was torn apart – east and west. Mine and our beloved land. Gradually, endangering the freedom of the land became such a lucrative business that on both sides of the border, many were rendered uprooted, homeless. Sighs and lamentations – and at the same time, the resolve to struggle back to our feet. (Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsab Parshad; henceforth GJNP)

What is the necessity of such a prelude for talking about a theatre festival? Why must such historical, social and political realities become paramount for the celebration of theatre? The answer is provided by Chakraborty's subsequent statements, which deserve to be quoted at length:

Irrespective of nation, time, language, religion or ethnicity, theatre workers are social creatures, united by their shared commitment to society. Theatre is not an individual art – it is a collective art...it means a dialogue with society. Gathering experience from society to give it back again. It is the yardstick of civilization. In our two Bengals we have the same society – the same sky and breeze. We speak the same language – Amori bangle bhasha. Same culture, same songs. The national anthems are by the same poet – a fact unparalleled in the history of the world. And yet such a desperate attempt to create barriers by people with vested interests!

But Bangladesh's War of Liberation, generally known in history as the Liberation War of '71 is not that of Bangladesh alone but that of the entire Bengali nation. We were also the participants of that war. That victory – the formation of independent Bangladesh – created new possibilities among the cultural workers, especially the theatre workers of the two Bengals. There was a rebirth of theatre in post-independence Bangladesh. Enriched by the indigenous and international languages and forms of theatre, theatre in Bangladesh began its journey. (Ibid) Emphasizing such a pre-history is essential to constitute that cultural matrix within which the organizers seek to locate the festival – a festival that also seeks to preserve and perpetuate this matrix, especially at a time when Yankification confronts us from all quarters.

These convictions are equally shared by the Bangladeshi counterparts of Aneek theatre group, who remain similarly committed to the idea of a transnational celebration of Bengali identity and culture. As Golam Kuddus, the Convenor of the Ganga Jamuna Natyotsab Committee (Bangladesh) explains:

The ever-flowing waters of Ganga and Jamuna unite the people of the two countries. Despite occasional changes in names, the untamed waters of Ganga and Jamuna, embodying our shared history and heritage, plunge the millions of people of both countries into both happiness and agony. Political divisions, the barbed wires of the border or even the innumerable inconsistencies of the Radcliff line have never been able to erase the spiritual bond between the people. (Ibid)

What is even more remarkable is the fact that Kuddus emphasizes the instrumental role played by the theatre in the formation of such bonds and goes on to declare:

The history of mutual understanding between cultural workers of the two countries, especially the theatre workers is quite long. Nothing would be more foolish than to deny that through the exchange of theatre performances there has been a circulation of fresh blood in one's own and in the entire realm of theatre. It would be impossible to deny that post-

independence theatre in Bangladesh was enriched by the flourishing theatre activities of Kolkata.

And it is this faith that makes him assert, “Every single festival goes on to become a carnival of unity for the young and old theatre workers of both countries. Mahila Samity Milanyatan [an auditorium in Bangladesh], the National Theatre, Rabindrasadan or Madhusudan Mancha, transcending the barriers of time and space, become a carnival of unity for theatre workers and theatre lovers alike. (Ibid)

This, in fact brings me to the crux of my argument. What I am trying to assert is that owing to the strong socio-political convictions with which organizers on both sides of the border organize this festival, transform the venues, whether in Kolkata or Dacca or in suburban towns and district headquarters of West Bengal, into heterotopic sites that follow the logic of postcolonial transformation and bustle with utopian hopes that work in opposition to colonial ruptures. As Michel Foucault explained, in his article in 1967,

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 3-4)

These heterotopias may be of many kinds and Foucault does speak of six different features of heterotopias. I shall focus on three of these features and seek to relate them to the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav. While speaking of the third principle of heterotopias, Foucault says The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space...(Foucault 6)

This is equally applicable to the venues where the theatre festival takes place. For example, as the performers and spectators of both countries gather together in different venues and watch performances in which the setting is both India and Bangladesh, they indeed find the real space of their own country or the auditorium where they are seated, juxtaposed with the projection of a three-dimensional space of another country – a juxtaposition which has been rendered historically incompatible, however deep the cultural bond may be.

At the same time, these heterotopias are also associated with what Foucault calls “heterochronies” (Foucault 7). Such heterochronies, he explains, are of two types – those associated with infinite accumulation of time, such as museums and archives, and those associated with “time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect”. This latter tendency is exemplified by the space of fairground festivals which “teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclit objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth” (Foucault 7). Something similar happens in case of the Theatre Festival as well. For the brief span of a week or so, the venues are lit up with bright lights and decorations and photographs and mascots and so on and all of it together contributes to that element of transcultural and transnational

conviviality which is created by the mingling of theatre workers and theatre lovers from both sides of the border. In the process, these flowing ephemeral places also open a window back in time as former refuges and partition survivors momentarily go back to that unscathed time when the plains and rivers of Bengal had not been divided into separate states on the basis of religious politics. As conversations flow and the spaces bustle with the mingling of Bengali and 'Bangaal', the musical dialectical version of Bengali, popular in Bangladesh, the premises of Rabindrasadan in Kolkata or the Shilpokola Academy of Dacca become uncanny ephemeral re-enactments of a lost unity. It is these precise significations that also bring us to the final feature of a heterotopias. As Foucault says

The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory...Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation...(Foucault 8)

Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav indeed serves as a compensatory heterotopia as seeks to temporarily ameliorate the trauma of Partition and exposes the partitioned reality of the subcontinent to indeed an illusory cartography, demarcated by shadow lines of politics and religion that however cannot confound our underlying similarity. Even if we are not willing to concede such significance to the festival and its proceedings, we must at least acknowledge the hope of illusory unity which it holds forth. In fact, as we again over the strong assertions of cultural unity put forth by the organizers from both sides of the border, we also realize that at the back of all such attempts kindles the seemingly unreal hope that the jumbled, post-partitioned lot of the Bengalis may eventually be overcome by a resurrection of lost unity, a restoration of a sepia-toned perfection. It is with such hope that Meer Zahid Hassan writes,

We dream and we love to dream as our dreams come alive on our stages. They walk, talk and move with songs and dances on stage. Then evaporate. The dream of Ganga-Jamuna will be successfully realized. New dreams will throng and we will be busy organizing festivals of different flavours and productions of new dramatic ideas. Because the worldview of Bengalis' thousand years of struggle stresses on the shared and received enjoyment of unalloyed fun amidst all odds, struggle for the fulfillment of rights and the attempt to make oneself at one with the multitude through the saturation of social commitment. We are walking along those paths and thus we will continue. (GJNP)

Such dream-driven walks are precisely those enterprises which substantiate the logic of postcolonial transformation with which the formerly colonized struggle to emerge out of the catastrophes of colonial conquest, domination and division. The spatial redefinition offered by the heterotopic features of the venues of the Ganga Jamuna Natya Utsav follows the logic of postcolonial transformation and highlights those utopian possibilities that urge us onward.

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