

Living with Theatre in the Present: Some Reflections

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I got introduced to the word “fight” early in my childhood when I used to play table tennis. I had learnt to use the word repeatedly to defeat my opponents. It was around the age of 11 or 12, when the struggle to win against a difficult opposition began. Now I am nearing 50. An organisation – a theatre, so many people, friends; the struggle continues. At times you taste success, but one needs to be alert throughout. The opponent is constantly on the prowl, one can't risk being inattentive. When the act itself refers to a “living with”, many things do come. I recall my defeat to one in those days, often in the finals of table tennis tournaments. He was elder to me, experienced. Whenever I had a match with him, I boosted myself up for a win, but would ultimately bow down to his mental patience. He would keep his calm, cash on my errors, and win. Still, practice continued, inquiring why and where I was losing out, reading my opponent, his motive, his play. It went on for a few years till finally, one day, I defeated him – with complete attention, observation, and thought – and left the game. I had let the love affair of 12 long years pass with the love of another – theatre. Not that I had never played ever again, but it was just for the sake of entertainment, for time pass. Throughout those 12 years, the struggle was with myself. Later, when I came to theatre, I understood that it requires a team, and hence, it was formed. The first group was formed at my neighbourhood – Colony No. 1, Anik Sangha, Malda. I was an actor there, but used to devote my time in finding out boys and girls for productions. Even directors used to be brought in – that was a phase. Emotions were involved – perceiving oneself, objectively – to live as a social being and create meaning out of it, to live with that I like, and then come to Calcutta with it and study theatre in Rabindra

Bharati University, to create our own group –Bibhaban– where I was no more just an actor, but an organiser, director.

The other day, a girl was saying that failure in two attempts in the Higher Secondary Board exam has impaired her confidence. She had scored the same marks in both of her attempts. I didn't tell her that I too had gone through a similar experience. I, on the other hand, changed my stream to qualify the exam and later received a Master of Arts degree as well. Actually, “fight”, we shouldn't stop fighting, we have to struggle till we reach our limits – we need to confront. These words gain currency in the present time as the “now” posits newer challenges – the struggle shall continue. It is almost 21 years that we are living with theatre, beyond the mainstream proscenium theatre. We are continuing our work on the streets, rooms, intimately. Intimate theatre is recognised by the government. The state has conducted workshops in order to promote intimate theatre. I do desire love, but how? For, if my first love is table tennis, for which I have devoted my time, to understand the game, to prepare myself for it, as much as possible, I don't know how much of thought had gone into it. As I had found out, when I came to Calcutta from Malda for games, how advanced the players were, I practised after I had returned, bought advanced bats used by the professionals. But it is not just the bat which plays. It enables one to manoeuvre the ball better – that is all. I am the one who is playing, it is my reading of the opponent, my overcoming of fear, of nervousness. Today, 26 years after I have left the game, I feel that the game establishes itself on many dimensions; to be immersed in it, to play with different people, to lose, to perceive, to study the one against whom I am getting defeated. Those who have perceived the game in its totality, not as love or romance but as a reality – have attempted to prove themselves through it – have attained some destination. This is exactly wherein my perception through theatre lies.

Theatre, to me, is not an object of love. It is a reality – a reality beyond today's threat of all-encompassing prescriptive definitionality, beyond the straitjacketing of life. If I wish to live my life my way, and is able to do so, then there is a struggle – a struggle which will remain – not with someone else, but with oneself. I am, hereby, reminded of an incident around 4 years back, it was 2012/13. I had gone to Santiniketan for a workshop, and would stay there for some 10 days. I had conditioned myself, both mentally and physically. Suddenly, in the evening of the third day I got a call from home. My mother was ill and I was required to return. Worried, I took the train next morning and reached home around noon. My mother seemed reasonably fit. I became furious, as I was unnecessarily called up. I got to know that the doctor had informed of a bed sore, which, I did not consider to be anything serious. It was not like getting admitted to the nursing home. For, I was occupied elsewhere. My mother replied that there was no need to raise my voice, and that I would understand her value only when she would be no more. Next day, I went back to Santiniketan for the workshop and returned after it got over. Today, I don't have my mother beside me and it is in consideration of the fact– that I am still living in this theatre – that I am remembering her fondly.

What exactly am I trying to see through this theatre? I don't indulge myself in this line of enquiry often, but still if I try to look for an answer then I may compare it with an effort to find out a needle in a dark room. Uncertainty prevails. But, as long as the search continues, it provides the reason to push aside the darkness. To put it in simple terms, I, who did not know that something called theatre would get attached to him, how is he perceiving it? What does it want to say? What is its experience? To see. The perspective that it has. Here lies the fix. That is to say, to write about it, I have to make up things – grandiloquent– but that is not to be. Even so, let me write as it keeps coming. I had come to theatre as an actor. To act in the theatre, one needs no experience,

at least if it is in the neighbourhood amateur theatre. One just needs to do something on the stage. It is the affection of your neighbours that would encourage you to get onto the stage. The quality of the performance comes later. It is fun, a joyous ambience. Even the errors become a part of the fun. But those are the initial moments. If you grow an affection towards this fun, think that you will become an actor, then it requires preparation. For, then, the involvement changes. You need to know the art of acting. You then need to undertake physical exercises, vocal exercises, read books, watch performances. That's a *sadhana*. As a good actor, one needs to tread the path of practice; one has to know the whole, at least, has to have a holistic idea. When I thought of becoming an actor, I had nothing at hand. I had read a Bengali translation (by someone whom I can't recall now) of Stanislavski's (a Russian) treatise on character building. It is not that I could understand it well enough, but had got a fair idea. I bought some cassettes and put some efforts to grasp the musical chords. I didn't have a harmonium at home, so listened to the tapes. Not that I engaged in a great deal of physical training either, but I was quite agile because of my engagement with table tennis. This practice I did in my own way. When I had faced difficulties, the directors under whom I have worked, demonstrated or instructed how to act. I tried to follow them. It was towards the end of 1996 that the responsibility of a thing called a theatre group came to rest on my shoulders. Earlier, I had acted in many groups and organisations but those were groups formed by others. I went there to work in love of acting, in cordiality with the groups. There I had people senior to me, who would rectify my mistakes. But here it was mine, and I had multiple roles – of the director, actor, as well as the organiser. Devoid of any experience of the kind, I went with the flow of emotions. Those who were with me in Bibhaban at that period, being classmates, we all started thinking together. Though my name was there as the director, it was a collective effort, collective thinking; it was a work which drew

its lifeblood from this collectiveness. However, this collectiveness was short lived.

Some people started to consider that their importance in the group was diminishing; they felt that the transparency with which we had begun our work, was reducing. So, those of us who started at the end of 1996, enthused to work as a collective, by mid-1997, broke apart. Some friends moved out. I became the organiser-director, the work cannot stop –“fight”– that expression of childhood resurrected, in a new dimension. New boys joined the group. The group members who had left, were conspicuous by their absence. Nevertheless, it was important to continue the work. Bibhaban, by then, was not just a group to me, it was a being, an existence with theatre, a name. On the one hand I was studying at Rabindra Bharati, while on the other was Bibhaban. I participated in a workshop under Probir Guha and learnt how to perceive and perform beyond the stage.

At Rabindra Bharati, Jora Sanko Campus *thakur dalan*– the holy courtyard, I saw a performance by the dancer Srimati Ranjabati Sircar in 1997. I cannot state with certainty how much I had understood her dance, but it was beyond doubt that she had a thorough knowledge of her art. As students, we had the opportunity of directly approaching her. After her performance I felt like introducing myself to her, following it up with a question regarding a composition. In her work *Cassandra*, she had used the stairs at one place, in the courtyard. I felt that there were some issues regarding the use of it. As the rest of the performance was tightly knit, the move, I supposed, was strikingly out of place. The question that I had asked her, I no longer remember it exactly, but it was like “do you always use these stairs in this work?” to which she replied in the negative and added “the one I use couldn't be used here.” We met later again. While conversing, I informed her about our play *Dreams Now*, which we

were staging, and asked her if she would be able to come to watch it. She, rather, acceded to come and see our rehearsal. On the evening she came, we had put up a performance in lieu of a rehearsal. After the show, we asked her for feedback. She didn't comment but instead said that she wanted to conduct a workshop for us. We were ready to participate. It was of 7 days and we had learnt many things. One thing that she never did was to impose on us the feeling that she was a world famous dancer. Whenever we met or did talk, I felt that a person who wholesomely belongs to the realm of art, is graceful not only from the outside but is in possession of a beautiful mind. A true artist thinks beyond the sphere of one's own art form and tries to connect to other forms of art. One day she said, "You like the work of Grotowski. Abani Biswas and his wife Elnara Biswas have established the Theatre House in Santiniketan. They work with Grotowski's idea. You may consider going." She gave us the address and we reached the Theatre House of Abani da. It was March/April 1999. Following the introduction, he informed that they conduct a workshop in November/December and invited us to consider being a part of it. Over the following years, I attended quite a few workshops conducted by him; understood theatre in a different way. In 2008 I went to Poland to attend a workshop in the Grotowski Institute. People from various countries had come to participate. In 2009 I attended a workshop in Kolkata by the renowned actress Rena Mirecka of the Laboratory Theatre. I am putting down these things to clarify that my perception has been changing. What I understood, I tried to apply in the works of Bibhaban. What is my mode of work at present? In what manner do I want to perceive an actor/ actress and what, to me, is her/his mode of teaching? What do I teach? How do I teach? I haven't written much on these. Let's try and see.

How, as a director, do I want to visualise an actor/ actress? At the outset it must be stated who, according to me, is a good director? It must be clarified. What's the role of the director? The people with whom I have worked, I can speak out

of those experiences. It was under director Sridhar Bhattacharya that I had started working. As an actor, the first thing that I had learnt from him was to study my character from the perspective of a director. He demonstrated how the dialogues would sound better. I memorized them. Later, when I asked him the meaning, he asked me to think. He said that I could understand. Prior to this, I had little experience acting. So, I did not know how to express. Even so, following what he had advised, I continued to think. Later he instructed me on how to pronounce, where and how to stand – something which I had not considered till then. I imitated him, and after the play was staged, understood that the director did indeed have a role to play on its staging. The director is the one who makes the actors understand what is to be done and, simultaneously, arranges the production; s/he is one who creates a play using music, costumes, actors, scenes, script. When I started performing on stage, this is the work that I have seen the directors to engage in. Maybe one director would differ from another in their mode of instructions, but all were concerned regarding the aforementioned. When I started directing plays on stage, I too had taken up these issues, albeit in my own way, the way I had understood them. Later, when I left the stage and took my plays onto the streets, there came about a shift in the content. Along with the previous concerns, it also gained importance that the actor now has to make her/himself audible amidst the noise around. Previously, on stage, where it was enough to speak at a much lower voice, now the throw had to be louder. The actor (sic) no longer remained in the darkness, s/he could be seen. The level of communication became obvious, the mistakes glared. On the streets, the role of the actor was not just to perform, but to be aware of the surrounding. The actor, in a more direct manner, brings her/his own social existence into the people, s/he undergoes a transformation, as a human being.

Personally, I have never driven any actor towards vocal or physical training, maybe because I don't know it myself. At times, people from outside have come

and taught. Then the question that necessarily follows is, what do I teach an actor? That it is almost 21 years now in this December of 2017, that I have directed so many plays, some of which were liked by the people, how did the actors/actresses perform, how did or do I teach them? If I say I don't teach anything? It won't be an overstatement if I say that they try to put it up on their own. Even then, there must be something that, as a director, I need to do. What is it? Maybe I can put it in this way that as a director, I want to see her/his "living". Now, what is this "living"? It is to investigate this determined and patterned present time and to make an attempt to live with one's own desire. That is what I wish to locate in an actor/actress – how long does s/he wish to continue living with her/his desire. Also, I try to figure out if the desire is internal to the person, an attempt to introspect, or is it an external enactment and a mere show. The work that we do, the way that we work, it is necessary to look at the light emanating of that torch which enlightens the way to the future. The mode of this work depends on who is joining the work and how. The perception of one who is an actor and has acting as her/his sole concern would have a very different take of our enterprise from the one who has come from a position of fondness towards the work. The perceptions create two different meanings. So, it can't be conclusively stated that such and such is the work and this is the method of it. It cannot be expressed in words from outside. One has to live it. And this living is with that which one believes in. It is a space where I have to decide how much I would compromise and where I shall draw the limit to that compromise. It is a struggle with oneself, and also with time. To call something "my theatre" is not an easy expression. In these 21 years of Bibhaban and the 15 years of open theatre, both in our native and foreign lands, many people could connect through this language while many had failed to grasp, leading to disengagement, dishonour. However, it is from these that we trace out new ways, confess to see the present time within the scope of theatre and with the people.

Notes

1. Translated from the original by Sandip Debnath. Though not a verbatim translation, the attempt of the translator, at large, has been to follow the original as closely as rendered practical.

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