

# RANGVĀRTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBER 4 APRIL 1986

The Jatra season in West Bengal is coming to a close. Norwesters and rains have already begun interfering with the schedules. Drawing massive audiences, often running into ten thousand or even more, performed under *shāmiānās* on makeshift platforms, it still remains the most popular performative tradition in this State. The experimental, non-professional theatre that calls itself 'the group theatre' in this State has never quite reached the spread and mobility and natural acceptance that the Jatra has enjoyed for several decades. In a recent article in *Sangeet Natak*, a periodical published by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Rudra Prasad Sengupta, one of the leading figures of the New Theatre in West Bengal, describes the Jatra as 'at best a hybrid—an unholy mixture of urban pollution and what Matthew Arnold calls the "provincial"'. It is not the cup of tea for a man with modern sensibilities; even an orthodox traditionalist fails to identify its folk roots. Yet when the concert starts to play in the presence of a ten-thousand-strong audience, nostalgia does creep into the Bengali soul and one wonders what has gone wrong. Has the process of lumpenization of society at large finally overtaken a folk form also? What such criticism lacks is a sense of history; for the Jatra has long lost its folk character and found in its stead a fascinating popular mix of the urban and the folk, stronger and more expressive and more powerfully moving than

several folk conventions that have degenerated into lifeless ritual and dull orthodoxy. Sengupta as an experimentalist has often produced hybrid works, and quite strangely now harps on the sanctity of folk authenticity and finds hybridism the worst sin. Theatre at its best, from the Elizabethans to Dario Fo, has always taken pride in its hybridism. In its life and death commitment to immediate communication, theatre has always been quite unashamed in its borrowings and combinations. A theatre that does not dare break out of cults and conventions would naturally shy away from the sheer power of a form like the Jatra which holds on to its audience by the sheer virtue of its style, a style that runs through its rich acting code. Over the years the Jatra has shown excellent resilience in its capacity to accommodate acting styles. As I watched two performances by the well known Natta Company recently, in a village and a small town, I admired the Jatra's emotional hold on its audience, its rejection of the old familiar stereotypes for a far richer range of characterization and typology, and the sheer professional mastery of skills in its commingling of the verbal and the musical, the prose and the rhythm of performance. A 'group theatre' fast losing its audience and looking for support from the media for survival and a lift in the eyes of the audience, should learn to be humble enough to watch and study and seek what makes the Jatra go rather than run down those wonderful

The clippings from contemporary reviews and evaluations gathered in the Girishchandra file at the Natya Shodh Sansthan archives provide glimpses of this inadequately documented area of Girishchandra's achievement.

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## THEATRE INSIGHT

### Shuturmurg : A Case Study In Stagecraft

*Shuturmurg* (The Ostrich), written by Gyan-dev Agnihotri and produced by Anamika, Calcutta (first performance 19 July 1967) is the story of a strange land ruled by a frivolous, impractical and irresponsible king. When faced with the naked truth of poverty and hunger, sorrow and suffering, he turns his face away from reality and delves deep into his illusory make-believe world. Surrounded

by sycophants, he pays no heed to the needs of his subjects. His unscrupulous and inept ministers, the Annamantri (Food Minister), Bhashanmantri (Minister for speeches) and Rakshāmantri (Defence Minister) make the situation worse. Virodhial who represents the Opposition, and Mamuliram the representative of the common people in the King's court, are prototypes of the present day politicians ready to sacrifice the interests of the people for personal gain. The poor commoners, fatigued and hungry, can only whisper : *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long live the revolution).

To quote Khaled Chowdhury who had designed the set and costumes for the Anamika production: 'From the very first story session with Shyamanand Jalan, the director of the play, it was clear to me that the play was allegorical. And while I designed the set the parallel between the King



A Scene from *Shuturmurg*. Notice the set and the costumes

and the ostrich became quite evident. Again, as the ostrich is a bird of the desert, the stage-design demanded a desert setting. Another important fact stood out prominently; the story of the play dealt with contemporary problems; in some form or other, we, the twentieth century people, have had an experience of it.

The ultimate stage design carried Egyptian/Mesopotamian associations. In the centre there stood a large wooden structural form of an ostrich with its neck bent down and face hidden under the sand. This served as a backdrop as well as a symbolic defence for the country against its enemy. In front



Khaled Chowdhuri's sketch of the set design

of this stood another smaller structure with a throne fixed on it. This structure with the throne was also shaped like an ostrich in a similar hiding position but it did not have the contours of the former structure. The throne was covered with ox-blood red velvet. This colour was chosen on purpose to establish the boorish character of the king and his insensitive attitude towards his suffering subjects. Moreover, the colour easily attracted the audience towards the ruler of the country. Behind the throne a pole stood out with a small figure of a running ostrich on its top. In the very early phase of the rehearsals this bird was made to chuckle every time it heard *Satyameva Jayate*, but it was later rejected for the comic effect it created which marred the *rasa* of the play.

Beneath the throne, wavy wooden planks were painted yellow and sprinkled with silicon pigments to look like sand-dunes. For the easy movement of the performers, steps were made in the sand-dunes, but, according to Khaled Chowdhury, 'it would have been visually far more interesting and authentic if the steps could have been replaced by natural slopes.'

In the course of the play the King, unwilling to accept the distressing condition of the country, wishes to see not a dead man but a 'dying man' (*marte huye admi*) who could give him first-hand information regarding the suffering of the people. At his instruction, a dying man is brought to him, but *Inquilab Zindabad* is all that can be made out from his gibberish. The appearance of a dying man representing in the grossest visual terms his hunger, suffering, and skeletal figure was deliberately conceived to create a marked discord against the unreal world that the King imagines to be real.

Virodhilal, the leader of the Opposition, is bought off by the King through bribes and subtly renamed 'Subodhilal' (the sensible one) at an oath-taking ceremony where his head and chest are straitjacketed in a golden cage replacing his previous head-gear with jutting horns. Even his dress in gaudy green and red, signifying protest and vigour, becomes subdued in the mellowed blue and white of a tamed man. Mamuliram's grey costume, with his belt and ornaments made of rope symbolizing bondage, becomes symbolic of the common man. The Minister of Broadcasting carries a bugle as part of his costume which easily goes with his profession of propagation. As a general principle, the costumes and stage decor were given an Eastern overtone, to bring it closer to the experience of the audience. Linearity was emphasized in the design to underline the socio-political satire.