

Ashis Sengupta, ed. *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 250 pp. ISBN 9781137375131.

The publication of the book, *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka*, edited by Ashis Sengupta, is an important contribution in this field of study. With the ephemeral nature of the theatrical event and the deplorable lack of adequate documentation of performances, this book is a welcome addition to the exploration of both drama (as literature) and theatre (as performance) in the context of contemporary developments in South Asian theatres. South Asian countries have had long histories of forging “national” identities after the process decolonisation began. These histories have been further problematised by the increasing visibility claimed by the several identities already-existing (religious/racial/ethnic/lingual) not only in India, but also in its neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. These multiple identities have clamoured to be heard, and the multiple voices have given new directions that have challenged any monolithic concept of a nation. Moreover, given the recent trends of connecting to other parts of the globe – more so with nations contiguous – the borders have become increasingly porous and the national has often been replaced by the transnational/postnational. This is even more true in the case of these South Asian nations as they share certain common cultural heritage and cannot be kept isolated from one another in insulated socio-politico-cultural cocoons. The theatre has often been the site where these plural identities have gained recognition, and, in turn, the multiple voices have been made audible, with notes of consonance and dissonance both being articulated. Cross-border exchanges have often benefitted the theatres of this region, often venturing beyond mere state-sponsored initiatives. With the focus on South Asian theatres, this volume adds significantly to the series, *Studies in International Performance*, which, as the Series editors point out, set out “to include the comparative study of performances across national, cultural, social, and political borders” (xiii).

The contributors to the present volume attempt precisely to achieve that end. Hailing from different South Asian countries, they offer their valuable analyses, interlaced with interesting observations and insightful commentaries that enrich our understanding of the theatres of South Asia. First, the essays incessantly try to locate these theatres within the spatio-temporal-cultural contexts of their production and reception, which, in turn, have been conditioned by the prevailing social, economic, political and ideological compulsions of each region. Second, in trying to understand the

“contemporary” nature of their theatres, most contributors think of their theatres as postcolonial ventures, that foreground a narrative of disengagement from the colonial experience and attempt to chart out new directions for contemporary articulations. Third, they also suggest that while sharing certain collective memories/experiences as part of a common cultural heritage of this geo-political area – South Asia, the contemporary theatres of this region also attempt to move beyond the mere national/regional/local, making significant departures in trying to carve out their distinctive cultural identities. The emergence of the “contemporary” South Asian theatres, then, are given a firm mooring in the socio-historical contexts of the different regions, while also arguing for a common space of cultural sharing. Many of the theatre-practitioners, therefore, have been seen as moving back and forth between the cultural registers of the national and the trans-national. Aparna Dharwadker, in her “Foreword,” commends the volume for its attempt to “confront the problem of fragmentary approaches, and to think ambitiously and systematically ‘beyond the nation’” (x).

Ashis Sengupta’s “Introduction: Setting the Stage” makes a commendable effort to define the parameters envisaged for this volume: “to examine the course of events in specific geopolitical, geocultural contexts and yet connect them, whenever necessary, with the machinations of power and cultural phenomena outside” (3). Sengupta begins his long introduction by “rethinking” South Asia as “a volatile region embroiled in the ‘twin dialectics’ of nation and state, center and region, region and community, secularism and religious extremism, neoliberalism and the fading idea of welfare state” (1). Interestingly, he also finds place for diasporic South Asian in his account. He goes on to an understanding of the “contemporary” and defines this as “a site of... different and competing temporalities, multiple and alternative modernities, one transecting another” (5-6). In the more immediate context of South Asia, he considers the notion of “contemporary” as “more or less... synonymous with ‘post-independence’” (6). Having set this framework of time and space, he focuses on theatre as a cultural artifact, operating within this spatio-temporal set up. He moves into a broad survey of theatrical practices in the different South Asian countries, pausing here and there to raise certain important questions – whether the status of theatre as presentational or representational affects its relationship with “social and historical reality” (12); whether the social relevance and/or aesthetic appeal of the performance is conditioned by several factors of production and reception, ranging from questions of ideology, “dynamics of representation,” “time and locus of performance,” even the “orientation of the audience” (14); whether political/“engaged” theatre, even if unable to produce immediate or visible changes, can “still influence people’s attitude and change their ways of thinking” (15); whether one needs to concede that in “engaged

theatre,” “aesthetics and politics can very well coexist and complement each other” (16).

The first essay in the volume, “Dispatches from the Margins: Theatre in India since the 1990s,” is a contribution from Shayoni Mitra. Somewhat veering away from the position adopted in the Introduction, Mitra tries to interpret the “contemporary” in terms of more recent developments in India since the 1990s, particularly in the context of “neoliberal globalizing cultural landscape” (65). To put things into their proper perspective, she evokes the trajectory of theatre in India post-1947, but with the destabilising of the centre, she finds an increase in the “conversations between various fragments of the margins” rather than the earlier confrontation with the centre (65-66). Even the “Theatre of Roots,” spearheaded by the likes of Suresh Awasthi, has been critiqued for its “fetish for the folk [that] had been completely absorbed by the neoliberal mechanisms of producing cultural commodities to be consumed in an increasingly globalized market” (69). Mitra recalls not only the role of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the setting up of the National School of Drama as instances of state sponsorship of theatrical enterprises, but also refers to the 1956 “Drama Seminar” and the 1971 “Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre,” both held under the aegis of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. She plays these off against the more recent “Not the Drama Seminar,” held by the India Theatre Forum in 2008 (?)¹ which redefined the contours of theatres in India, contesting the earlier version of an Indian/national theatre. Mitra’s primary focus is on post-1990 theatre that spawned in India, negating the earlier assumptions; so, the “Not the Drama Seminar,” in any ways, underscored this oppositional “Not” available in what, for Mitra, constitutes the “aspirational identities of twenty-first century Indian theatre,” which enables the “emphatic series of negations” to point towards a “heterogeneous, and perhaps utopic futurity”:

It is not in Delhi, the nation’s capital, it is not attempting a singular historiography for Indian theatre, it is not concerned with a Sanskritized classical past, it is not positing Hindi (and by extension a version of militant Hinduism) as key, it is not limited to the very elite of the field. (72)

Mitra’s chief concern, then, seems to be the alternative theatres, which till now have remained in the margins and only lately have started to become visible. This also connects with the rise in the search for alternative ludic spaces, beyond state initiatives. In this context, Mitra refers to the practices of Ninasam or Jana Natya Manch or Badal Sircar, and even invokes the experiments of the IPTA to locate the roots of the political street theatre, which she sees as

¹ There is a problem with the date of this seminar; three different years have been mentioned in three different places in the essay: 2006 (69); 2007 (72); and 2008 (69).

“protest performances” (76). These street theatres were distinct from “itinerant, seasonal, folk performances” and emerged as “a political genre, a tool for conscientization” (77). Responding to Geeta Kapur, Mitra also sees the “alternative avant-gardes” arriving in India, in reaction to the hegemonising presence of America (81), and invokes the cause of the women’s theatre, which had been kept marginalised. She mentions the arrival of women theatre workers, not only as actors but also as directors, who, in their avant-garde productions, not only stress the female subjectivity but also the integration of technology “as a participant in the action”; the effect produces a “pastiche approach,” which, by upsetting the cohesion of a linear narrative, dislodges “(r)ationality and logocentricism” (83).

Mitra devotes a section to “English theatre as marginal” which she considers as “paradox of the national” (85-92); the English language theatre has been relegated to the margins, even as other forms have gained access to the “national” scenario. She mentions the efforts of Mahesh Dattani, in particular, who does not allude to mythology or history (like the contemporary Indian masters Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar or Girish Karnad) to talk about immediate contemporary issues but deals with them directly. But to gloss over any discussion of the output of a predecessor like Asif Currimbhoy or a female contemporary like Manjula Padmanavan does not help, as they, in their own ways, have also contributed to the building up of Indian English drama/theatre.

Mitra’s final section is devoted to yet another form of marginalised theatre, the Dalit theatre. Even as the “marginal body literally takes centerstage” this theatre explores the “mechanisms of othering bodies” (93). Though there was an initial preponderance of non-realist, folk-inflected form of performance, later authors from the later decades of the twentieth century have consciously taken to writing realist plays that problematise the dalit identity.

Mitra’s essay ends by admitting that the theatre in India today is “temporary,” which also implies that it is “impermanent” and “unstable.” But she also acknowledges its ability to destabilise the centre and, at least, provide a “deferral of crisis” (95). In her final assessment, she infers that “theatre produced at the margins... is not only temporary but also more popular than theatre produced at the center” (95).

The second essay, by Asma Mundrawala, “Theatre Chronicles: Framing Narratives in Pakistan’s Sociopolitical Context,” anchors the theatre of Pakistan within the larger religio-socio-political context. On the one hand, the Islamist tradition was opposed to the representation of the body, particularly in the performing arts. On the other, the shared cultural memory inherited in the post-partition scenario was inscribed with the secular, if not downright Hindu, elements of an undivided India. Moreover, the militarist/dictatorial political atmosphere that swept over Pakistan through decades after Partition was openly

intolerant towards a volatile and indeterminate cultural articulation like the theatre.

Mundrawala demonstrates that though theatrical events promoting national integration were available in West Pakistan immediately after Partition, Dhaka, in the 1950s, saw the emergence of political theatre, which had definite links with the Communist Party in East Pakistan. Yet this fact was largely erased from the national memory – a classic case of “selective national amnesia” (107). Though there were early experiments from theatre practitioners like Khwaja Moenuddin (Drama Guild) or Ali Ahmed (NATAK), Pakistani theatre may be said to have come of age when political activism, and women’s movement, gave shape to the political theatre voicing protests against the autocratic rule of Zia-ul-Huq and his enforcement of the Martial Law (1977). This precipitated the emergence of theatre groups like DASTAK (directed by Aslam Azhar), Tehrik-e-Niswan (founded by Sheema Kermani) and Ajoka (founded by Madeeha Gauhar). All of them believed in the potential of theatre as “a medium of mass influence” (111) and used their theatres as an articulation against socio-political repressions. They combined their ideological commitment with aesthetic finesse drawing upon a vast repository ranging from “indigenous forms” to “Western realism” and “Brechtian tradition” (116). They even looked to the Indian theatre for inspiration; so, Ajoka’s *Jaloos* (1984) was a re-working of Badal Sircar’s Third Theatre play *Micchil*, and, in performance privileged the physical over the verbal, following Third Theatre conventions of staging. An incisive observation of Madeeha Gauhar has been cited by Mundrawala:

The audience had got a taste of subversive, meaningful but entertaining theatre and the actors realized that doing theatre without a stage, lights, costumes, sound system, props, and most importantly the censorship certificate, was possible. (117)

With the dawn of a neoliberalism and the onslaught of open market economy, the political theatre declined in Pakistan. The sponsorship of theatres passed increasingly into the hands of the NGOs, resulting in “agenda-specific plays” (122). So, the nature of such funding, and the terms for performance generated thereby, “commodified the very nature of theatre” (123). While, this encouraged the rise of different theatrical genres (like the English-language theatre, Urdu slapstick commercial theatre, Punjabi popular theatre), it diluted the political agenda of the more radical groups like Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka and threatened to bring their events within the ambit of this commodification of culture. It is of some comfort that despite these odds, these groups have been able to show their tenacity to battle against this challenge and continue to do ideologically-inflected theatre. It is also reassuring to know that performance of a more radical brand (in the form of public protests and sit-ins) have

continued beyond the peripheries of theatrical performance in contemporary Pakistan.

“Designs of Living in the Contemporary Theatre of Bangladesh” by Syed Jamil Ahmed is the third essay in this volume. The essay begins by recalling Victor Turner’s postulation of how elements of “indeterminacy” challenge the “modes of determination” (the normative structures of society); while this happens in our social living, it takes on special significance in the theatre. Ahmed’s critiquing of the contemporary situation in the theatre of Bangladesh explores the socio-cultural context within which the theatre operates as “an insidious and invisible politico-aesthetic tool” (135). For him, the “contemporary” ranges from a few years prior to 1971 (when modern-day Bangladesh came into existence) to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Narrating the nation, subaltern resistance and performance of gender constitute the three principal coordinates of his analysis.

Narrating the nation locates important signposts in Bangladesh theatre – Munier Chowdhury’s *Kabar* (1953) done as prison theatre; Syed Shamsul Haq’s *Payer Awaj Pawa Jay* (1976) performed in Dhaka; and Salim Al-Deen’s dramaturgical attempts to reclaim the “epic struggle of the rural population, etched in terms of distinct cultural ‘roots’ of the Bengali people” (140). In this context, he invokes the figure of Rabindranath Tagore, who has been a perennial inspiration for Bangladesh people, and whose theatre has been invoked regularly either through revisiting his notions of an alternative theatre semiology, or through actual performances of his plays (as done by Nagorik), or even both. Again, the cultural nationalists, often having to face the ire of Islamist fundamentalists, went on to devise strategies to resist fundamentalism, for instance improvising for the performance of *Kainya* (2001) “a presentational mode of performance that incorporates music, song and frenzied dance leading to a trance-state” (142). After the assassination of Mujibur Rahman and the coming to power of militarist regimes, the middle-class Group Theatre workers resisted the nexus between the military and fundamentalist powers.

At the same time, contemporary Bangladeshi theatre also tried to accommodate the presences of the different ethnic groups. The subaltern voices were being articulated, problematising the roots of “nationalist” identity. Narrating the nation, then, has veered from the earlier majoritarian nationalist perspective towards a more inclusive and pluralist notion that makes room for the ethnic presences. Similarly, an awareness of gender issues has also been brought within the ambit of performance. Ahmed critiques *Payer Awaj* for its somewhat unproblematic representation of the gender issue. By contrast, experiments like *Irsa* (1991) or *Kokilara* (1989) grapple with the woman question more adequately. Ahmed concludes his

study arguing that in more recent times Bangladeshi theatre has moved from “the nationalist ‘roots’ of identity derived from the majoritarian norm to postnational ‘routes’ to a pluralist process of becoming” (167).

“Towards an Engaged stage: Nepali Theatre in Uncertain Times” is Carol C. Davis’s exploration of contemporary Nepali theatre and she locates the emergence of Nepali modernism in King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah’s decision to rid Nepal of the despotic rule of the Ranas (the Prime Ministers). Her survey takes her through the reigns of the successive monarchs, Mahendra, Birendra and Gyanendra, culminating in a democratic but problem-riddled socio-political scenario now prevailing in Nepal. It is against this backdrop that she recounts the arrival of early theatre stalwarts like Ashesh Malla (launching his career in theatre from around 1979, pioneering Nepali street theatre, and forming his group “Sarwanam” in 1981) or Sunil Pokharel and his Aarohan Theatre (in 1982). However, with the coming of democracy, problems were not resolved and there was a growing disappointment, as reflected in the pessimism to be found in the later works of Malla.

Search for new directions were initiated. If Abhi Subedi invoked an indigenous non-realist tradition in his *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* (2000), Anup Baral, performing with his group Actors’ Studio at proscenium and alternative venues, tried to engage with immediate socio-political concerns. Some of the more prominent groups went on to build their own theatres – so, Malla’s Sarwanam built Dramatic Art Center, and Pokharel’s Aarohan established its Gurukul. At some of these venues adaptations of world classics were also performed. Again, Nepal’s rich tradition of a performative culture – facing depletion for various reasons – has, in its own way, often sustained these theatres.

The final chapter is on Sri Lankan theatre, “From Narratives of National Origin to Bloodied Streets: Contemporary Sinhala and Tamil Theatre in Sri Lanka,” by Kanchuka Dharmasiri. As the very title indicates, the contemporary theatre in Sri Lanka includes the Sinhala and the Tamil theatres, growing parallel with each other, though often the former has been prioritised over the latter. She notes that though earlier, in the context of Sinhala theatre, the term usually used was *desheeya*, connoting “local/indigenous,” which was, from the 1970s replaced by the more ideologically inscribed *jaathika*, meaning “national”; the Tamil equivalent, *thesiya*, pointed at once to the national and the indigenous (209). This theatre(s) straddle the worlds of the colonial and postcolonial, the local and the national.

Perceptible changes were discernible as the theatre in Sri Lanka moved towards a more “contemporary” situation. The 1960s saw experimentations with plays, Sinhala and Tamil, that attracted audiences from both

communities. However, because these were in the urban centres, questions have been raised as to whether they addressed the issues of the nation at large. This problem was further compounded with the outbreak of the bloody civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka for decades. The history of Sri Lanka became increasingly gory as the internecine ethnic conflict threatened to tear the nation apart, with the leadership adopting a partisan role. This history was critiqued in several Sinhalese plays, and, though perhaps less than with other forms of media, even theatre was subjected to censorship. The Tamil population, feeling discriminated against by the administration, resorted to youth movements, which, in turn, unleashed anti-Tamil riots. In this violent climate of “ethnonationalist politics” (219), Tamil theatre disappeared from Colombo, but continued in other regions, often at alternative venues, maybe at community spaces. In fact, this made this theatre come closer to the people in a way that eluded the mainstream practitioners.

The other factor that affected Sri Lankan theatre – as theatres of other regions as well – was the influx of market economy. Though most of the theatres were giving in to the demands of the market, there were a few who sought to critically engage with this problem and alert their audiences through productions that were often staged in alternative spaces (as with the Wayside and Open Theatre, founded in 1974). Several plays, both Sinhalese and Tamil, openly question the effects of the widespread consumerism due to the neoliberal policies and the disappearance of the welfare state. This problem, one may reiterate, plagues not only the theatre of Sri Lanka but of other regions too.

Dharmasiri, of course, ends her study on a more optimistic note hoping for “new directions” in Sri Lankan theatre. Resuming of cultural transactions between the North and the South – the staging of a Tamil play, *Ravanesan*, in Colombo in 2010, for instance – leaves one hoping for a brighter future for the war-ravaged island-nation.

The volume, as a whole, makes an important contribution in mapping the contours of the theatres of the South Asian nations. All the essays record the urge for articulations in the theatres, produced and received often under volatile circumstances. Yet the theatre practitioners have doggedly pursued with their objective in using the theatre to lend a voice to the people. The politically engaged theatres, then, have often made a dent in the socio-politico-cultural status quo, with street theatres often taking a leading role in this regard. Also, the ways in which these theatres have engaged with the situation post-neoliberalism have been considered in the studies of all the contributors, each speaking for the specific situation of his/her region. Further, they have also stressed how the theatres of their regions have addressed the issues of the regional, the national and the transnational. In

brief, this comprehensive study of the theatres of South Asia has been a distinctive addition to recent theatre studies.

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