

THEATRE OF THE MARGINALISED BOUNDARY: A CASE STUDY OF THE DRAMAS WRITTEN BY PLAYWRIGHTS OF MALDA DISTRICT

BIPLAB CHAKRABORTY¹, ABHISEK BANERJEE²

¹PH.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF BENGALI, UNIVERSITY OF GOUR BANGA, MALDA, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

²ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GAZOLE MAHAVIDYALAYA, MALDA, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Email - ¹biplabchakraborty403@gmail.com , ²abhisekdgp@gmail.com

Abstract: *The term marginality which is coined from the word marginal is considered to comprehend the different aspects of influence governed by authority, dominance and supremacy in the post-colonial period. Financially or ethnically cornered classes of peoples are called marginal. In addition, rural folks are marginal to urban people as well as women are considered marginal in the male dominated society. If we discuss the matter from the view of arts and culture, then in this era of globalization, theatre is reduced to such extent that it can be considered marginal due to the dominance of electronics media, movies and soaps,. And since we consider Kolkata as the epitome of our culture and literature, then Malda district is also a marginal district. This sector of marginal culture still remains ignored in the popular history of drama in Bengal. Therefore, as a researcher and resident of Malda district, it is important to us to take a measure to emphasize the history of drama of this district. In this context, we will evaluate the different dramas written by dramatists of Malda. So far we have collected 63 copies of manuscripts and printed dramas through thorough field surveys. In the present research paper, the following matters will be discussed – (a) the tendency of the dramatists of Malda in creating dramas; (b) the reflection of contemporary society in folk culture; (c) how the dramas are ended; (d) how prominent their language is and (e) if these dramatists are really marginal or they have been cornered as marginal.*

Key Words: *Malda district, marginal, theatre, drama, playwright.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

‘Marginality’ coined from the term ‘marginal’ is considered to comprehend the different aspects of influence governed by authority, dominance and supremacy in the post-colonial period. Marginality exists in terms of perspectives: thus financially or ethnically cornered people are marginal. Similarly rural folks are marginal to urban people, whereas women are marginal in a male dominated society.

In this era of digital globalization, theatre has been reduced to a marginal sphere in the face of electronic media, soaps, serials and films. Again, since Kolkata is considered to be the epitome of Bengali culture and heritage, then Malda would definitely be a marginalized area. Thus discussing about theatre of Malda district would be discussing about a ‘marginal art’ from a ‘marginal boundary’. Jacques Derrida makes an interesting observation with regard to writing:

“...writing is dangerous from the moment that representation claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself. And there is a fatal necessity, inscribed in the very functioning of the sign, that the substitute make one forget the vicariousness of its own function and make itself pass for the plenitude of a speech whose deficiency and infirmity it nevertheless only supplements.

...

‘The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.’ (1976, 144-145)¹

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Whenever there is a discussion about the history of Bengali theatre, the discussion always restricts to the theatres happening in and around Kolkata. The theatres, the playwrights and their works happening in the different other districts of Bengal go largely unnoticed. Even though this plays portray the socio-cultural ‘revolution’ of the local areas but the witness to such revolutions remain largely ‘marginalised’ as the spectators who are a witness to this movement are also representatives of the same marginal areas. Hence, being residents of the district of Malda, we find it absolutely necessary to portray these suppressed marginal voices from the district and try to find the contributions that the playwrights of this district have made towards the history of theatre in Bengal. Through our research and field study, we have so far come across seventy six plays. In this paper we will restrict our discussion to the contemporary plays and try to focus on the following key areas:

- A) The dramatic tendency of the playwrights of the district.
- B) The influence of the contemporary social movement on the playwright.
- C) The influence of folk-culture on the playwright.

- D) Whether the language of the playwright true portray the voice of protest.
- E) Whether marginality influences the voice of the dramas.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

The history of theatre of the district of Malda is more than century old. From the available recorded documents in different journals and books it is evident that the first drama was enacted in and around 1895-1896 in a place (beside the now existing Rangmahal Lane) by some youths in a stage constructed of bamboos. The first play to be enacted was *Bajirao*². This set up the first proscenium theatre in Malda. The only available manuscript from any playwright of the district is Reboti Moitra's *Mayer Puja*, dating back before the Independence. No other manuscripts have been deciphered so far. Reboti Moitra's play had a patriotic tone. It was staged in Abhirampur around 1933-34. Since the play contained several patriotic elements, the British Government stopped the play and seized the manuscript³. Since independence, we have come across the names of several playwrights, but none of the manuscripts of their plays were available. The only manuscript we could get our hands on is Nripendra Krishna Maity's play *Horof*, based on Manik Bandyopadhyay's story.⁴

Our discussion in this paper would be on the plays published and enacted in the period between 1990 and 2016. Back in 1985, in a place called Chari Anantapur in Kaliachak, about 30 Km from Malda town, a new theatre group was formed named "*Agnishikha*". One of the founder members of the group was Sri Parimal Tribedi. His play *Lajja* is one of the true exponents of contemporary theatre in the district of Malda. It was first produced in 22nd December 1991. In a personal interview, Parimal Tribedi expressed the idea which inspired him to write the play. According to him, the place where his team used to practice suddenly became a cauldron of political struggle. A few miscreants broke the idol of Ma Saraswati and falsely implicated the Muslims for the incident. This event thus disturbed the communal harmony of the region. Tribedi strongly protested against this incident and wrote the play *Lajja* to condemn the incident. But as soon as the play was put on stage, there was protest from different political parties. On 23rd April 1992, the playwright was attacked by a mob and he received serious head injuries.⁵ This event finds mention in the magazine 'Anonayudh' on 13th June 1992 titled "*Agnishikhar Biponnotar Abedon*".⁶ Sri Parimal Tribedi left his native place and settled in Malda town after the incident and formed "*Malda Malancha*" in 1993. Sri Tribedi's writing and production from "*Malda Malancha*" have established a distinct identity about theatre of Malda in West Bengal as well as in India. The folk culture, its people and language of the district have been a recurrent theme in Sri Tribedi's plays. Besides this his plays on various on political discourses have also enriched the theater of Malda district. One of the most distinctive features of this group is that almost all the productions are by Sri Parimal Tribedi. We will now discuss some of the plays produced by Sri Tribedi.

One of the most significant plays produced by *Malda Malancha* is *Udas Puja*. It was first produced on 21st October 1995.⁷ The theme of the play centers on how religion and politics are intertwined. The play shows how a couple from a very poor economic background uses kerosene and folidol (a type of poison) to slowly dry up the branches of the big trees. Then they sell those dried up branches to the owners of the brick kiln that in turn is used as fuel. In the process the poor couple do not hesitate to cut down the tree from the altar of the goddess *Udas Ma*. But accidentally when they fall down from the branch of that tree, the local head of the village uses this opportunity to malign the poor couple and instigate the religiously blindfolded villagers to beat up the couple. The local *purohit* too uses this opportunity and make the villagers believe that *Udas Ma* is angry by this incident. He instructs that a temple is to be erected at that place during Ram Navami and a Puja needs to be performed at that place with great pomp and show accompanied by the beating of 108 drums. A new temple is immediately constructed at that place and a local fair is also set up. The local village head and the *purohit* use this fair as an opportunity to earn quick profit. The fair includes all sorts of illegal activities like gambling, sale of illegal liquor and notch girl shows- which exposes the true identity of this whole event. At the end when the poor couple who instigates the whole event, come back and protest against the false religiosity of the *purohit* and the local village head, they are beaten to death.⁸ Till 2005, this play has completed fifty one shows.⁹

Another production of the *Malda Malancha*, *Bhalo Manush* was produced in 2009. This play is a direct commentary on the corruption that plagued the Left Front government during the period. The play focuses on the various political hooliganisms happening during the time. The play entirely contrasts between the politically right and the politically corrupted individuals and the tension arising in between them. It is shown that how the politically faithful group is kept inactive and how the corrupt, manipulative and unfaithful group usurps the power and reaches the position of political supremacy. This trend is still prevalent is shown in Sri Tribedi's play. However the play ends in a positive note where it shows that a mass protest against this system will eventually rise. In spite of the hardships imposed on the true and the faithful followers of the party, they still fight and try to bring about a better future.¹⁰

Parimal Tribedi wrote, directed and produced another play *Gambhira Gambhira* which was financed by the Government of India's Department of Culture and Information. The play was first staged on 20th July 2013.¹¹ The play is about Bhuvan, who is a Gambhira artist. The play shows the existential crisis of the art of Gambhira and the decline in the quality of this art. The Gambhira songs which had once played an important role in India's freedom movement were severely affected because of the government's indifference during 1971-72 to 1976-77. The artist who once sang

about the social malice is now used as preachers for various political parties. The offerings that were once dedicated to Lord Shiva have now been directed to the offerings towards various political leaders. Standing at this juncture, the protagonist Bhuvan feels that this is not the true purpose of the ancient art of Gambhira. The other members leave his team and make themselves instruments of political propagandists. Hence these lines:

“Na na urchis akashe guddi, hoeya
Porer hate latai ta diya”

(You are flying very high in the sky but the control is with somebody else.)

The inner meaning of this song becomes very significant with the state of the Gambhira artists. Bhuvan becomes lonely and suffers from existential crisis while those who engage themselves with political parties stay alive.¹² In the International Drama Festival organized by National School of Drama during 1st– 18th February 2015, this drama was staged. It was again staged on 5th February 2015 at LTG in Delhi and on 8th February at Dr. Ambedkar Marathwada University at Aurangabad in Maharashtra.¹³ This was the first time when any dramatist from Malda or North Bengal received this rare distinction. This play was also aired on Doordarshan.

Table -1 The following are a list of some of the other plays by Sri Parimal Tribedi which have received appreciation and positive responses from the audiences:¹⁴

Sl. No.	Name of the Play	Playwright	First Staged on	Comments
1.	Lotun Jebon	Parimal Tribedi	27/10/1993	Play against child labour
2.	Swasti	Parimal Tribedi	13/5/1994	Play on the event of the demolition of Babri Masjid. Sri Tribedi received an award from the Natya Academy
3.	Osomoyer Bhabna	Parimal Tribedi	13/11/1999	Political hooliganism
4.	Amulya Ratan	Parimal Tribedi	26/2/2000	Street play
5.	Lakshmikanta	Parimal Tribedi	25/12/2014	Political hooliganism
6.	Alkap Maya	Parimal Tribedi	30/3/2016	Life of the Alkap artist

The other most influential playwright in the district of Malda is late Prashanta Mishra. Manuscripts of ten of his plays have been collected by us from his wife Smt. Iva Mishra.¹⁵ The titles of the plays are: 1) *Atha! Durmush Katha* (2000), 2) *Sabar Upar Manush Satya* (2001), 3) *Nachan, Dilli ka Ladoo* (2003-04), 4) *Aka Noy, Sobai Mile* (2003), 5) *Desh Janani* (2005), 6) *Das Bazar* (2005), 7) *Do Tara* (2006), 8) *Nishan* (2007), 9) *Khokababu*- based on Rabindra Nath Tagore’s poem *Birpurush*, 10) *Borokattar Kajkarbar*.

One of the most distinct productions among these plays is *Das Baazar* (Slave Market), written and produced in 2005.¹⁶ It speaks of the illegal market of slavery still existing in the 21st century. Parents from the poor family are forced to sell off their children due to poverty. In the play it is shown that four or five children are bound in a post like animals and are whipped periodically by the goon Nera Mastan while he is calling for perspective customers. Local leader Nata Gosai is seen in the beginning of the play, canvassing against child labour in a public gathering. But it is later seen that Nata Gosai too is involved in the nexus of child labour and slavery. Thus the circle where the ‘savior becomes the spoiler’ is evident here. But the play ends with a ray of hope where the children bound in slavery find way to come out of their situation.

Another prominent playwright of the Malda district is Sri Prabhas Chaudhury. Manuscripts from two of his plays- *Sidho-Kanu’r Katha* (1987-88) and *Jeeban Ibar Boidle Zyabe He* (2009) are in our possession. The play *Jeeban Ibar Boidle Zyabe He* uses the Gambhira song to highlight the malice of the society. Due to acute poverty, many people from the district of Malda move to different parts of the country like Delhi and Mumbai to act as labourers. Many of them fall sick and are affected with AIDS or die of Kala-azar. The labourers are urged not to move outside the district but rather participate in the government project which ensures 100 days of labour every year. The song also urges this poor laboured class community to educate their girl child and stop their early marriages:

Suno sob kajer katha sono kaj kamer katha
Sokol sishu school e jyabe, shikkha peibe gyan peibe nana
Anander r seema nai nana.

Boyos hoil atharo
Myaka ke biya dite paro
Shishur maran mayer maran ruikhte hobe aksathe sob nana
Anander r seema nai nana.

Meya hoile garbhabati
Tokhoni jotno libo oti
Prosob hoibe sastha kendre sustho sishu asbe ghare nana
Anander r seema nai nana.

Sishu janmer pore hamra
Tika polio dibo niyom koirya
Sustho ma r sustho sishu amader ar chaina kichu nana
Anander r seema nai nana.

*(The song very beautifully urges the people to send their children to school. They should get their girls married only when they attain eighteen years of age. Once the girls are pregnant, they should get their babies delivered only from the government health homes and after the birth of their children they should be given proper vaccination. Only then life will be full of boundless joys.)*¹⁷

Another pioneer from the field of drama from the district of Malda is Sri Subrata Roy. From the late eighties, he has been associated with various houses and have written and produced for them. The fame of his plays has reached Kolkata as well. In Halishahar, a group **Unity Malancha** is still staging his play *Ganesh Gambhira*. We have so far collected manuscripts of eleven of his plays: 1) *Amra Kothay?* (1989), 2) *Uttoran* (1995), 3) *Majdoor Shilpi* (2002-03), 4) *Abartan* (2002), 5) *Alor Nishana* (2003), 6) *Nanar Joy* (2007), 7) *Damama* (2007), 8) *PatlarSwargadarshan* (2007), 9) *Chena Gopaler Golpo* (2010), 10) *Achena Juddha* (2011), 11) *Umesh Bandana/ Ganesh Gambhira* (2012-13).¹⁸

Subrata Roy's play *Majdoor Shilpi* has been produced by the drama group **Pratiksha**. The play is about the life of Gambhira artists living in the district of Malda. It shows how some people mislead the Gambhira artists living in the district of Malda. It shows how some people mislead the Gambhira artists and their struggle to live their life on their own rights. A twenty four hour long drama festival organized by the drama group **Miunas** of Kolkata on 12th June 2008, staged Subrata Roy's play *Nanar Joy* and produced by **Srijan**. It was greatly appreciated by the audience. The play too brought forward the condition of Gambhira artist in Malda.¹⁹

One of the leading members of the Kaliyachak Natyadip Drama Group, established in 2012 with the view of spreading social awareness, is Sri Kallol Kumar Roy. His plays focus on the evils of the society and the steps to eradicate them. His play on the evils of child marriage, named *Ektu Jodi Bhaben* (2012), the play on the awareness campaign for the 'Kanyashree Prakalpa' named *Kelodar Kirti* (2014) or his play on the health awareness program *Ful Fotar Pala* (2015) are worth mentioning.²⁰

4. CONCLUSIONS:

In this paper, we have briefly discussed on the five playwrights of Malda district. Parimal Tribedi's plays bring about political issues, the fight against the evils of blind religiosity as well as the message to maintain communal harmony. He has also successfully applied the local folk culture in his plays. Prashanta Mishra's plays bring out the evils existing in the contemporary society in the form of child labour. Prabhas Chaudhury and Kallol Kumar Roy bring out through their plays the different facets of social awareness. On the other hand the plays of Subrata Roy bring out the plights of the Gambhira artists in the district of Malda. Thus we can say that these five dramatists have very successfully showcased the various myriads of the society through their plays.

Now the question arises as to whether these dramatists are truly marginal? One analysis shows that these dramatists are marginal because they represent a marginal geographical area. Otherwise, the content and expression of their drama are equivalent, if not more, than most of the mainstream dramatist from the cultural heartland. Among the dramatists' of the district, only Sri Parimal Tribedi have earned some limelight, which is still due for most of the other dramatist. In fact, Sri Tribedi is the only playwright whose plays have been published. This is another feat which is yet to be achieved by the other playwrights of the district. Since the media focus is always on the mainstream areas, dramatists of these far flung places have not always received even their minimum dues. But with their limited opportunities, they have been able to highlight all the relevant areas for the people of the district of Malda. The lack of publicity did not deter them from the task they have taken up – the task of presenting the people of the "marginal" areas "a slice of their life".

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY:



Biplab Chakraborty is a Ph.D. Candidate (Bengali) from University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, India.



Abhisek Banerjee is an Assistant Professor (English) from Gazole Mahavidyalaya, Malda, West Bengal, India.