

## WOMEN IN WESTERN INFLUENCED THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES IN DHAKA CITY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Representing story or fact, from the inception of the history of women participation with song- dance- music- acting, was highly practiced and appreciated in the houses, fields, regions and villages of continual Bangla. But from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a juncture of mediaeval and modern period, in a newly flourished urban culture influenced by British culture, the participation of women characters remained quite opposite. Moreover, the incidents occurred in the eastern countries were extremely resourceful. In 1619, women participation was strongly prohibited in Kabuki dramas in Japan. Many centuries ago from the above mentioned time, these dramas were originated in 'Kioto' by a performer named 'Okuni' who publicly showed an occasional dance. Moreover, in Chinese dramas women characters were strictly prohibited to perform. To Eugenio Barba, gender discrimination plays a very minor role in casting the characters. Barba certainly states that male and female characters are not essential in representing masculinity and femininity. Gender discrimination is not so important in artistic expressions. Because so called masculinity and femininity do not exist. According to Barba, there are physicality and sensuality in every human being. And by these two forces, an artist, in fact, through his /her physical gestures, acts in a role which we see as male/female character. The theatre that is seen today in a room or in an auditorium in the cities and towns of Bangladesh is totally western influenced. Now actresses and female audiences are not a problem in this westernized stage for rehearsing, representing and displaying dramas of the theatre groups and theatrical institutions of Dhaka city. The distinction between the situation of today and that of urban life in Dhaka is great. Though the participation of women in dramas in the smaller regions of the country is still like the situations of the past. This study investigates the sources, references, development and the continuity of the participation of women in western influenced theatres of urban Dhaka.*

**KEYWORDS:** Stage; Performance; Aesthetics; Movement of Women Emancipation.

## INTRODUCTION

Dhaka that is in East Bengal, European tradition influenced theatre was a practice of “by the male, for the male and of the male.” In the male-dominated society, the participation of women in theatre was thought to be indecent. But the fact was, women roles in the dramas were acted by the male characters. Women were expected to be veiled and gentle, meek and affectionate in the male-dominated society. In front of a lot of males, this veiled woman could not stand physically. Entertainment, desire for travelling – everything is reserved for that male-master. Boundary has been defined and moreover, walls of hindrances have been built upon this boundary. Indeed there is a great tradition of women participating in Bangla dramas in the chronicles of history. A descriptive acting with dance-music-instruments, acting in the role model, having dialogues in the first person, absence of climax and in showing harmony, a character of this region, either an actor

or actress, makes his/her presence like a shining star by performing both as a dancer as well as a singer. With this purpose, Syed Jamil Ahmed, in his research, investigates the examples of women characters in Bangla dramas. He said that since Bangla originated from the greater Indian culture, so the ancient culture and literature was also included in it. The literature composed in ancient India in the first century, like: 'Ramayan', 'Mahabharat', 'Kotho Upanishad', 'Oitirio Brahmin', 'Kamasutra' etc. detailed the participation of women characters. According to the economics of 'Koutilya', there was a form of acting named 'Stripekka' by the female characters in Indian sub-continent in the third century B.C. and women were trained by the authorities of the state. In 'Natyashastra', a book discussing the theories and practical acting, written within 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. same opinion was expressed. There were many statues of dancing men and women in the first and last part of 8<sup>th</sup> century on the walls of Maynamati Buddha Bihar. Women belonging to sophisticated families rather were ignored and dejected under the strict principles of Brahminism. Across the whole eastern region, except the domains ruled by the Muslim rulers, the presence of female characters was a very common feature in cultural dramas. The presence of female characters was also mentioned in the 'Charyapad', the ancient relic of Bangla composed within 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century. Medieval Bangla literature consisted of musical dramas full of female characters. It needs no telling that the social status of those female characters was as equal to that of prostitutes. Besides that the elite women also used to practice acting though in the selected family programmes. That was found in Muhammad Khan's "Satyakoli Bibad Sangbad" (1615). It was depicted in Mother Huan's book "Ying Tai Sheng-Lan" where in royal feasts, professional women dancers and singers dressed as men used to perform along with the male performers. When the presence of female characters in medieval representational literature seemed very noticeable, Chaitanya's "Krishnajatra" was surprisingly seen to be performed by the male characters. Because after Chaitanya, the relation between human being and god became as similar as that of Radha-Krishna. Moreover, the women performers were considered as prostitutes during that time. But in the first period of medieval era, (from 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century) a stark change apparently marked the end of female performers. Syed Jamil Ahmed identified three reasons behind this. These are:

1. Muslim reign
2. Practice of Boishnab dance and music
3. Aestheticism, ignoring the social and political impacts of the time, complies with the ruler's aggressive desire for the power.

During Muslim dominion, though dance becomes a major part of entertainment, non-Muslim mythologies remain ignored or transformed due to a lack of patronage from the state. In consequence, within 16<sup>th</sup> century women characters became extinct from the performances based on royal palaces and temples. From mid-18<sup>th</sup> to British Imperialism, the economic and political powers gave rise to picture frame proscenium theatre imitated from European ideals which set aside the domestic dramas. Till the earlier 1789, the entry of the female characters was prohibited in order to stop the moral decay of people even though in England, actresses appeared on stage in 1750. Gerasim Labedev, in 1795, became successful in mingling male-female performers in Jodrel's "kalponik Sangbadal" that was produced on stage by him. The next example stood for Nabin Chandra Basu's "Bidyasundor". And the two productions came in Dhaka in 1880 (conversely in 1893/94). After two consecutive patriarchal hierarchies; one was Muslim in 13<sup>th</sup> century and the other was Boishnab in 16<sup>th</sup> century, the matriarchy becomes weaker in Bangla

region. At the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a tremendous social upheaval in the development of patriarchy in Bangla. As a result, male-dominance became stronger and females were thrown into the inmost corner. But this sort of distinction and physical tortures gradually started to decline, though in the beginning, the process was very slow. But the process started growing and increasing gradually with the advanced gallant steps of one or two females in public theatre.

At the very beginning of the British rule in India, the British people took many steps to establish their business, entertainment and culture. One of these steps was to direct dramas creating a stage in a room. On one side of a room, the audience used to sit and on the other side, the artists used to perform. Long ago, this spatial distance between audiences and actors was introduced in Europe. The English made that form of stage widespread by colonization. When in 1795, Gerasim Lebedev translated two dramas from English to Bangla and adapted these two on stage using that way, it had great impact on the urbanized Bengali babus and later the common people started practicing that way.

Though Westernized Bangla theatre was born, nurtured and flourished in Kolkata in 19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre was not confined only to Kolkata from the mid-1850. This sort of theatre was spread all over from Dhaka to the suburban areas. As in Kolkata, the theatre houses were built around the quarters of the British civilian and non-civilian high officials in East Bengal and the foreign dramas were staged in English language. In fact, that was detached from the local lives of common people. Along with the English dramas, the theatre – concerned groups were noticeably staging dramas where the lives of the local people were portrayed.

On March 30, 1872, ‘Purbobongo Natya Somaj’ directed Manmohon Basu’s ‘Purbobongo Rongobhumi’ and ‘Ramavishek’ in Dhaka city, and on the basis of this information, examples of the above mentioned form of dramas were found in Bangladesh (then East Bengal). The historians opined that ‘Purbabanga Rangabhumi’ was the first theatre of East Bengal.

### **The role of women in theatre during British rule**

The practice of Europeanized theatre emerged in Dhaka in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century or a while later in Kolkata. In this course, Zamindar Brajagopal Das’s comment may be referred. “Kolkata is the birthplace of a theatre which is a copy of western theatre. And theatres in Dhaka are just an imitation of Kolkata theatre. There is nothing like basic in here. Imitation without knowing or realizing, planning, constructing stage – do not have any meaning for them. Family life is the prime concern and that is merely a copy. “...there are actresses and enormous use of songs. There is no reflection of social responsibilities, while family life is the prime theme of the plays. ...value of entertainment is the key word. The audiences identify themselves with the plays if the production is good” (Satyen Sen, 2006).

It is evident from the discussion that the above referred quotation is partly right though not as a whole. In the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the greater part of East Bengal or today’s Bangladesh was covered with canals or forests and the forests were full of wild animals. From the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cultivators started to set up many villages by cleaning up these areas. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cultivators had to struggle with the grown-up

jungles and the wild beasts. There was a very few towns scattered here and there like outcast islands during 1850. Except river ways, there was no established communication system in these small towns and no means of entertainment for the people. Government employees, professionals and businessmen of urban areas took that Europeanized dramas not merely as “morally acceptable”, “of high standard” and “civilized” sort of entertainment in this prosaic and dull life but they considered that sort of dramas as means of social development. It was patronized by the local towns from the very inception and that made a characteristic difference between the plays of East Bengal and Kolkata. For these local patronizing and initiative, European influenced dramas in East Bengal flourished in three special genres:

1. Particular group – who performed in dramas staged on particular occasions.
2. Groups inspired by social oaths – who organized dramas in terms of making a show.
3. Professional theatre

Muntasir Mamun, in his recent research, exemplified the practices in Dhaka theatre from 1960 into the following manner.

1. English theatre
2. Garden House Theatre
3. Particular Theatre
4. Group Theatre
5. Professional Theatre and
6. Others (Muntasir Mamun, 1893)

The first Bangla drama, staged in European fashion in East Bengal, is “Swarnasrinkhal” by Durgadas Kar. The drama was written in 1855 and first performed in Barisal in 1856/57 (again staged in July, 1869). It was published as a book in 1863 from Dhaka. The first stage show in Dhaka is “Nil Darpan” (1861) by Dinabondhu Mitra. In 1870 when the Particular Theatre Group appeared with Michael Madhusudan Datta’s “Ekei Ki Bole Shobbhota” as well as other dramas, it was welcomed with a huge applause and admiration. East Bengal society of theatre, all of a sudden, got effective in 1873 in Dhaka and after that, some members of that theatre group formed “Dhaka Theatre Company”. The name of that company was not mentioned anywhere after the play “Nobonatok” was staged. Muntasir Mamun, after taken references from the newspapers like; Dhaka Prakash and Anandabazar, considered East Bengal Society of Theatre and Dhaka Theatre Company as same organization.

In 1890 “Purbobongo Rongobhumi” was shattered down and “Crown Theatre” took the place. Earlier than that, ‘Shonatan Natya Shomaj’ got lost forever by the natural calamities. Then at the end of 1890, “Crown Theatre” was founded by the initiatives of all the organizations. The major success of ‘Crown Theatre’ was supposed to stage a drama in Dhaka by making the local women perform as actresses for the first time. In 1893 (conversely in 1894), the “Purnachandra” by Girish Ghosh made this incredible incident happen. In that drama, Duniya cast the role of the actress and the role of actor was cast by Lalit Chandra Das. Duniya was indeed a whore. Because it really was hard to find a female performer in any other way. Moreover, the whores in Dhaka, very traditionally, were very good at dance and music. The use of actresses on stage made a huge cry in Dhaka during that time.

Through several newspapers, the voices were raised against that chaos not because of their passionate outburst for theatre, but for attacking the Brahmin society who was against that exposure of the whores. In “Shohorer Itikotha”, Satyen Sen mentioned the names of popular actors and actresses of “Crown Theatre”. The performers were: Haripada Dey, Binu Babu, Binod Babu, Nutu Roy, Radha Madhab Chakraborty, Goura Chandra Das, queen of Bardhawan (pseudonym), Kanak Sarojini and Sarala. Kanak Sarojini was a kept of Rakhhal Das (Rakhhal Das was one of the owners of Crown Theatre) and Rani was a girl from Bardhawan. Crown Theatre, in necessity, hired actors and actresses from Kolkata too (Satyen Sen, 2006). Later the organization staged Girish Ghosh’s dramas like: Choitanya Lila, Nodomoyonti, Kapalkundola, Mrinalini, Jona etc.

In exchange of tickets, the crown theatre used to stage dramas the whole night of every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Since Mr. Mondi, the principal of Dhaka College and East Bengal’s Brahmin society objected, the time for acting was confined till 11 at night by the authority. Crown Theatre showed performances professionally. In 1897, Kishori Lal Roy Chowdhury, the Zamindar of Baliati, set up ‘Diamond Jubilee Theatre’ taking away some actors and actresses from Crown Theatre.

The first performance of the local women of Dhaka and the first stage acting in theatre by the sole efforts of the women was “Indra Sobha” organized by three sisters - Gunnu Bai, Annu Bai and Nayaban who used to sing and dance under payment in the royal court of Nobab Abdul Gani. The news got a full expression in Muntasir Mamun’s ‘Dhaka Prokash’ in accordance with Shishir Kumar Boshak. Mainly professional drama organizations brought women in stage acting and maintained the consistency. Besides Crown Theatre and Diamond Jubilee Theatre, two other theatres like; ‘Sultan Hafezian Muslim Company’ and ‘Prince Alfred Theatre Company’ under Muslim owners have been found. The well-known Kadir Box, Mir Doula and Lali were thought to act with these groups during that time.

When the practice of acting was thus overspread throughout East Bengal, the professional theatre groups of Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai started coming and staging their dramas not only in Dhaka but in different areas of East Bengal. They came here being invited by different drama groups, wealthy men and the nobabs of Dhaka. People received them with a lot of hesitations and criticisms. Nobab Ahsanullah used to hire the professional theatre groups of Kolkata to recreate his family members and managed to stage those dramas on family stage. He even used to write short plays in Urdu. Many people thought that it was because of the drama-loving people of nobab’s family, that no controversy regarding any issue was established.

In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mirza Abdul Kader renamed the Diamond Jubilee Theatre as Lion Theatre. The farces, produced by the local Bengali dramatists, along with the Urdu dramas where Bengali Hindu actresses were prominent, were also shown. The dramas prevalent from 19<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century differed noticeably in quality. The professional theatre groups added some good quality songs and dances to their dramas. Lion theatre became very popular then. It had a great impact on the students of Dhaka city.

Theatre groups or clubs started to be formed by the names of the local areas from the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Dhaka city, like: Lalmohon Shahar Thakurbarir Shokher Dol, Sabji Mohol Dramatic Club, Vari Drama Club, Tikatuli Drama Club, Armanitula Drama Club, Gorja

Drama Club, Songoto Tola Drama Club, Farashgonj Drama Club, and Postal Dramatic Club. Among these groups, only the Postal Dramatic Club went ahead to post the local women in acting. But the attempt failed. Then Nokuleshwar Das, an actor and protagonist of Postal Dramatic Club set up a group named Dhakeshwari Theatre where with 5/6 local actresses, he managed to stage a drama in consecutive three days. Among these actresses, one was Sarajini. Needless to say, none of them belonged to any well-off family. All their attempts proved failure due to the lack of public support. Women, belonging to sophisticated families, still were not coming out to stand on the stage. On July 1, 1921, Dhaka University started its journey with the three halls or student's residence-Jagannath Hall, Dhaka Hall and Muslim hall. Since then, university based acting played an important role in modifying the quality of acting in Dhaka. Though the halls of Dhaka University got a scanty opportunity to stage a drama, they absolutely put forth their attention on the artistic part of a drama. The veracity of that fact was found in the various newspapers published from the related halls of university.

Theatre has a very long tradition of commitment and sincerity. Despite being a simple woman of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the actress, "Kamala's Mother", has set up a good example of having interest and commitment to theatre. In 1932, an Urdu play 'Anjuman Ara' was staged by the initiative and patronization of the actress 'kamala's mother' in the Lion Cinema Hall of Mirza Abdul Kader Sardar. A crisis occurred from the very beginning of that performance. The hall was hired at 130 taka for the night it was supposed to be staged on but the tickets were sold only for taka 32. At that time Mr. Mirza was present. He declared that if the required money for renting hall was not received, the drama could not be staged. He did not listen to any requests. The actors and actresses were ready, impatient audiences were shouting – in fact everything became chaotic. Finding no other ways, kamala's mother kept her gold necklace bondage to Mr. Mirza and started acting.

From the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century to that of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a great number of plays was written, published and staged. The plays focused on the contemporary social-life-miseries and gave a hint to get rid of these miseries. The concept of the emancipation of women was found in a farce named "Tajjab Byapar". Women participation was significant in those dramas.

### **The role of women at Pakistan reign in Dhaka:**

The British rule in the sub-continent ended in 1947 with the emergence of two independent nations India and Pakistan. For this state division, which created Pakistan, a lot of expatriates had to suffer tremendously and in history this has been named as the greatest humanitarian tragedy. Earlier in 1947, Hindu businessmen and land-owners had a great impact in the cultural practice in East Bengal. After the state division, the Bengali Hindus started to leave East Bengal at an increasing rate. So the local Muslims started to occupy the place and establish themselves. The politics of newly emerging Pakistan then got divided into two contradictory streams: one was Conservative Islamic Fundamentalists and the other was Liberal and Democratic Humanitarian Power.

Sukumar Biswas, in his research, divided the practice of drama prevalent in the entire East Bengal from 1947 to 1951 into two parts: such as; one part that was dominant in the urban areas outside Dhaka, based their plays on Islamic history. The other part that professed to be liberal was centered on, Dhaka City and was linked to Dhaka University. At that time dramas were staged often by the

central students' center and different halls of DU. Though Dhaka city was advanced in learning about the culture and intellectual practices, the participation of women was still restricted by the socio-political structure and rules. Drama was gradually emerging as an existing art to achieve the desired rights of deliverance of the liberal person and group. Shawkat Osman, Nurul Momen, Askar Ibne Shaikh, Abul Fazal, Jasimuddin, Munir Chowdhury, Obaidul Haque Sarkar and Syed Ali Ahsan were also involved in the theatre practice of DU. But no female playwright came into scene until that time. But in a very short time, a ray of hope was seen to overcome that crisis. Everybody knew that to bring perfection in staging a drama, it was very necessary to make males and females perform together and create a lively progress. In this regard, women revolution started against the fact 'Female role performed by male' for keeping the female out of the stage. The first step toward this revolution, after 1947, was the performance of a baby – girl on stage. At any time between '47-48, 'Kamal Pasha' and 'Tipu Sultan' were staged in consecutive two nights ignoring the eyes of the orthodox social system. It goes without saying, male actors performed in female roles in those two plays. Only two baby girls were cast in the roles of two kids of Tipu Sultan" (Jahanara Imam, 1992) "Uncertainties were still there in co-acting. Though the country got its independence, the women of the country did not earn so. Though women were the citizens of an independent country, they could not move freely. They were encaged inside. If they had to go out by chance, the horse-cart or rickshaw was used to be covered in such a way so that they remained veiled all the time. The fact that Women moving freely on stage in Dhaka, was quite unimaginable." (Obaidul Haque Sarkar, 1992)

Pathak Mujibur Rahaman Khan tried to practice that type of dramas where baby-girl took part by forming a drama group in the area of the quarters for public service holders in Palashi Barrack of Dhaka. And in 1948, after overseeing 'Kamlapur Dramatic Association', 'Tipu Sultan' was again staged. In that drama, male actors performed in the roles of women too. Only in the role of teenage Sofia, a teen-aged girl named Shabitri Chottopadhyay acted. Then she was in class seven. Later she became popular in the films of Kolkata. It has been found in the discussion that the conservative audiences of Dhaka did not criticize because Sabitri performed in a pathetic scene. The theatre groups played a trick on the spectators by putting the little girls in onto the stage.

According to Pathak Mujibur Rahaman Khan, the organizers brought a character of a baby-girl either in 1948 or '49, in a dance organized in Ahsanullah Engineering School, where there was no existence of such a character in the manuscripts of the drama. During that time, the aim of every theatre group in Dhaka was to stage dramas by making both male and female performers participate. In 1949, 'Udaynala' directed by Abdul Jabbar Khan, was staged in 'New Theatre'. Male actors performed in the role of women in that play. Only in a female character, a living female was seen on stage. She was Shirin Chowdhury, married and a mother of several kids. In that play, there were three female roles for which female artists were searched but the guardians of Dhaka's contemporary society did not agree at all to send their daughters to perform on stage. Shirin Chowdhury and of course, her husband were very bold indeed. She performed ignoring the blood-eye of the society. She can be called the pioneer of female acting in Bangla drama of Dhaka. Obaidul Haque Sarkar, too, called her the first actress in the dramas of Bangladesh. She along with her husband and her family had to suffer a lot for that daring act (Obaidul Haque Sarkar, 1992). "Being encouraged by her husband, Shirin Chowdhury, a woman of an aristocratic Muslim family of Chandpur, came forward to act and that actually worked as a turning point in our theatre

movement. Following her, there came some more progressive Muslim women“(Obaidul Haque Sarkar, 1992). Among them there were Meena (Chowdhury) Bahauddin, Husne Ara, Muminunnesa, Ayesha Akter, Laila Samad, Ferdousi Rahaman, Rokeya Rahaman Kabir, Nurzahan Murshed, Mariam Begum, Bilkis Bari, Halima Haq, Razia Khan Amin etc. The spontaneous participation of women undoubtedly became a significant matter in the future progress of theatre movement.

Another victory in the our theatre movement was achieved in 1951 when Sharat Chandra's 'Bijoya' was staged in 'Mahabub Ali Institute' under the assistance of Doctor's Club. The female artists performed in all the female roles of the play 'Bijoya'. Except one woman, there were no other actresses in all the female roles of the play 'Udaynala'. In this regard, 'Bijoya' was the first joint-effort of male and female performers in dramas. Dr. Rafiqul Islam, in his research 'Purba Pakistaner Somokalin Moncho o Ovinoy' (The Contemporary Stage and Acting in East Pakistan) mentioned that the first co-acting started in Dhaka by the play 'Meghomukti' of Habib Productions which was formed after the name of Habibul Haque, director-producer and drama instructor. After that drama, Monmoyi Girls' School of medical college and 'Nildarpan' of journalists' Union drew everybody's attention, by 'using co-actors' (Dr. Rafiqul Islam, 1365 Bangla).

Annual drama programmes were held in different residential halls of Dhaka University. Dhaka Hall (Shahidullah Hall), Jagannath Hall, Fazlul Haque Hall, Salimullah Muslim Hall weresome of them. But in those dramas, males used to perform in female roles. In spite of being university students, the female students were not allowed to act in a play. About it, Askar Ibne Shaikh said that the forms brought into dramas, immediately after 1947, were not very congenial to female performance. In dramas, the participation of women of any standard was unimaginable. So it can easily be assumed what attitude the society held towards acting. ... after the state division, drama continued to be staged in rural and urban areas of Dhaka city, as it was before the state division. These were recreational dramas of Kolkata. But within a very short time, a new spirit was added to the existing traditional practices of drama (Askar Ibne Shaikh, 1992). At the same time, a search for women's participation in acting began.

In 1952 the language movement reached its peak. It had a profound effect on the theater arena and there was a rise in political awareness among the theatre activists. The upheaval that started in 1952 continued to shake East Pakistan, afterwards and drama became the medium of protest, either subtly or boldly, against West Pakistan's suppressive rule. The movement played a vital role in drawing a political stability between the Conservative Fundamentalists and the Democratic Humanitarians. That was perfectly reflected on stage. A year after the language movement, on 21 February 1953, 'Kabar', a play by Munir Chowdhury who was then imprisoned at Dhaka central Jail, was staged inside the jail with the help of other prisoners. Women got involved in drama rehearsal of DU. From mid-1950's, women started appearing as women in the theatre. It was known from the course of discussion that the women, who were found for acting, were flawed. The reason for that can easily be assumed. The acting of those artists was irregularly rehearsed. Our family daughters like: Farida Bari Mallick, Masuma Khatun, kamrunnahar Laily, Syed Rowshan Ara, Jahanara Laizu, and some others were found for the dramas in DU, but they came irregularly indrama programs and specially in university dramas. It was not like regular and devoted drama

practice of today's. "Most of the dramas staged in university were based on social issues and those dramas were either composed or made dramas from novels of the writers like Rabindra Nath, Sharat Chandra, Tara Sangkar, Nurul Momen, Ashkar Ibne Shaikh, and Munir Chowdhury etc. The dramas shown outside the university were based on both social and historical issues" (Syed Jamil Ahmed, 1994). On September 4, 1951, the students of DU staged 'Jabanbandi' of Bijon Bhattacharjee in Mahabub Ali Institute under the direction and encouragement of Habibul Haque from 'Sangskriti Sangsad'.

Sukumar Biswas, taking information from the different newspapers of Dhaka has elaborately discussed about this in his book 'Bangladesh er Natyacharcha o Natoker Dhara' (The practice and form of theatre in Bangladesh). During that time when women deliberately participated in dramas, 'Eden College Girls' Union', 'Medical College Girls', 'Girls' hall Union of DU', 'Girls of Teachers' Training College', 'Bidyarthini Bhaban Girls', 'Women Drama Federation', 'Dhaka Nursing School Girls' Club', staged dramas irregularly (Sukumar Biswas, 1988). In those dramas females performed in both male and female roles. Besides 'DU Central Students' Sangsad', 'Dhaka Students' Union', 'Drama Circle' etc. kept staging dramas regularly or irregularly with the participation of both actors and actresses. 'Drama Circle' played a significant role in that. With some youngsters of university 'Drama Circle' contributed to apply modern western technique to local theatre. Some famous dramatists of that time were: Syed Waliullah, Saeed Ahmed, Alauddin Al Azad, Azimuddin Ahmed, Anis Chowdhury, Bazlur Rashid, Sikandar Abu Zafar, Razia Khan and Laila Samad etc. (Syed Jamil Ahmed, 1994). To be noted, from 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1964, Bangla Academy organized a 6 days long seminar entitled 'Natya Shahittyo and Natya Shilpo' where many intellectuals were present. Sabera Mustafa, Rahima Khatun, Madhury Chotopadhyay, Laila Samad, Razia Khan and Jaharat Ara took part as female critique. On 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> January of the same year, Bangla Academy organized Michael Madhusudan Datta's play 'Krishnakumari' which was presented by DU Student-Teacher Drama Group on the occasion of Michael's birthday. Under the direction of Professor Rafiqul Islam, the performers in that play were Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury, Professor Munir Chowdhury, Lily Chowdhury, Reza Chowdhury, Abdullah Al Mamun, Badaruddin Ahmed, Ramendu Mazumdar, Aminuddin, Raziul Hasan, Badiuzzaman, Enamul Haque, Mahabuba Akhter, Rozi Majid, and Professor Razia Khan. In an article of "the Daily Ittefaq", it has been reported that 'krishnakumari' was the most successful production of theatre recently staged in Dhaka till the history began. One of the important artists of that theatre group was Ferdousi Mazumdar who is still one of the most renowned actresses in theatre in Bangladesh.

### **Women in theatre in liberation Bangladesh**

In post-liberation Bangladesh, theatre gained unprecedented momentum. The sense of newly gained freedom inspired the dramatists to utilize this medium in every way possible. They began to experiment with new ideas and techniques, but their main objective was to bring about a social change. As there was no bar on theatre practices any more, hundreds of theatre groups emerged and worked with exuberant vitality. Theatre became a regular affair, although not professional. The non-professional theatre groups that were formed after liberation included Aranyak Natyadal, Theatre, Natyachakra, Nagarik Natya Sampraday, Dhaka Theatre and many others.

Even though the ‘Group Theatre’ of post-liberation Bangladesh was considered as the main stream, occasional theatre art in offices and residential areas still existed as a secondary one. In the beginning of 70<sup>th</sup> century, women were a great problem in theatre groups. But inspired by some middle class progressive girls, drama clubs of Group Theatre were able to overcome that crisis by the end of this century. The clubs, associated with Group Theatre movement, ideologically worked for the liberation war and independence of Bangladesh and stood directly against the fundamental religious politics.

The dramas of Bangladesh are the best examples in showing the changes freedom can bring in the field of art-literature-culture of a nation. To start everything anew and with a new zeal, a new form of art began. From post-liberation situation to today, the structures that followed after in urbanized theatre practice of Bangladesh are as follows:

- a. Group theatre based theatre practice
- b. Theatre Practice on choice
- c. Rehearsal based Theatre Practice in Educational Institutions
- d. Applied Theatre as Developmental form in Non-government Organizations

The extensive participation of women in the discussed forms of dramas is not only limited to acting today. Women now participate in every sphere like; composing dramas, directing, planning, taking responsibilities for organizing, acquiring institutionalized knowledge on drama at home and abroad, teaching and studying on theatre related subject in school, college and university dramas, conducting discussion and seminar in local, national and international level, doing higher research, translating and exemplifying the foreign dramas, discussing and criticizing dramas. In spite of having the capabilities of taking an active part, the ‘male-fathers’ have constrained the ways of women by raising walls of social and political rules and regulations for thousand years. The on-going practice and custom continuing for a decade has been making women sometimes become either a ‘male’ or a ‘father’ towards their own sex. To expose women’s indifference and selfhood, men not only build walls of prohibition in the form of ‘male-father’ but sometimes stand as friend and help though the number of such is very small. Women are to take part actively in individual-family- society-state and culture, so the difference in ability drawn between men and women is ineffective. And in bringing this awareness, everywoman, from individual to social life, has an equal share. Though the example of such awareness is hardly seen outside Dhaka city. In fact, the economic –social-political –religious aspects and educational scenario are not as same as in other parts of Bangladesh.

Group Theatre Federation has seventy two different theatre groups along with 8 associated clubs. In each group there are 30-60 members. Among them, regular women are 2-10% of the total. In old and well - established theatre groups and new and creative theatre groups the participation of women is very hopeful. On the other hand there is no exact statistics about the number of irregular or particular theatre groups in various offices, clubs, committees, areas and educational institutions. But the performance these different theatre groups show in different auditoriums and stages is observed with presence of actresses.

On the basis of the lives and culture of common people prevailed outside the auditorium in post-liberation Bangladesh, the two important initiatives were taken: Gram Theatre of Dhaka Theatre and Mukto Natak of Aranyak. These two forms of dramas were directed outside Dhaka and along with male members, the female participants used to move from one village to another. In 90's, when the movement against autocratic government was in the peak, the female artists of Democratic Theatre Groups took part in street dramas that were staged in different crossroads of Dhaka.

## CONCLUSION

From 1980's in the formal structure of universities, theory and practical classes on theatre was included in graduation, post-graduation and higher studies which added a new dimension to the field of theatre and culture. 'Natyachakra' started short term systematic drama training in Dhaka. Later Shilpakala Academy and many other dramagroups introduced short-term drama courses. In Many private universities of Bangladesh, theatre is being taught nowadays as an additional subject. By becoming a subject of higher studies, theatre has achieved a social dignity. Jahangirnagar University and Dhaka University top the list in its application. But the scope for applying this knowledge on theatre in profession is very limited and so the students lose their interest and many of them switch their profession. However, during study, no distinction was made between genders in rehearsing, acting, directing, planning and producing and in the theoretical classes. But after the completion of study, there's hardly seen any female students to have involvement with stage, the scenario is quite similar with the male-students. Most of them get engaged in non-government jobs and many of them choose their career in electronic media, one percent of them does field work in applying drama in the development of the project of non-government developmental organization and another part gets tied up in the cycle of family after doing an occasional theatre practice. But in this stage, the scenario of several theatre groups is different. The members of these groups perform in local dramas even though they are involved in profession and social lives. Though for most of them, this practice does not continue for long. Moreover those who join in electronic media cannot give enough time as is required. For this reason, the regular display of significant productions becomes less active. Despite having many such limitations, the anticipation is still there in Dhaka. Still the theatre groups are continuously struggling. Among all these existing ups and downs, the female artists are working with a great enthusiasm and dynamic spirit on the stages in Dhaka and encouraging the next generation. It is really a matter of pride and joy to show honour to their relentless effort and talent.

In theatres of post-liberation Bangladesh, the role of Mahila Samity Auditorium on Baily Road' (today's Natak Sarani) is indisputable. Mahila Samity of Bangladesh set a new trend in theatre of the country and that has become a life-source of drama. Mahila Samity used to take different institutions as rent for meeting and discussions. But during that time, there was no alternative auditorium of any such Samity. Though later the stage 'Girls' Guide House' played an important role in arranging regular show of dramas on the same road. The chief of Mahila Samity, late Nilima Ibrahim took an initiative to regularize the shows to overcome the uncertainties. It is because of her interest that Mahila Samity Auditorium was given to be used by the drama groups. Probably in drama she was the first woman researcher who did her PhD on '19<sup>th</sup> century Bangla Dramas in

social and Political Context.’ Besides working as an organizer of the drama group ‘Rangan’, she used to compose, direct, and produce dramas.

Now the stages have been built with modern facilities and high technologies, there is presence of regular audience, urbanized opportunities have been increased. And social dignity has been earned, but due to the lack of professional practices drama has not gone beyond doing occasional jobs in spite of having all the emotions, passions and devotions towards theatre. As a result, in most of the cases, lack of skill is observed. After passing a certain period of time, even the promising artists have to struggle a lot for their livelihood to maintain their constant presence in dramas.

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