CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN BANGLA

Edited by
Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta and Subrata Sinha
This volume forms a part of the Critical Discourses in South Asia series which deals with schools, movements, and discursive practices in major South Asian languages. It offers crucial insights into the making of Bengali or Bangla literature and its critical tradition across a century. The book brings together English translations of major writings of influential figures dealing with literary criticism and theory, aesthetic and performative traditions, and reinterpretations of primary concepts and categories in Bangla. It presents 32 key texts in literary and cultural studies from Bengal from the middle of the 19th to that of the 20th century, with most of them translated for the first time into English. These seminal essays are linked with socio-historical events and phenomena in the colonial and post-independence period in Bengal, including the background to the Language Movement in Bangladesh. They discuss themes such as integrative aesthetic visions, poetic and literary forms, modernism, imagination, power structures and social struggles, ideological values, cultural renovations, and humanism.

Comprehensive and authoritative, this volume offers an overview of the history of critical thought in Bangla literature in South Asia. It will be essential for scholars and researchers of Bengali/Bangla language and literature, literary criticism, literary theory, comparative literature, Indian literature, cultural studies, art and aesthetics, performance studies, history, sociology, regional studies, and South Asian studies. It will also interest the Bengali-speaking diaspora and those working on the intellectual history of Bengal and conservation of languages and culture.

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta is former Professor of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India. She was Visiting Professor, University of Delhi, India, and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan. Her research interests and publications span the fields of cultural studies, gender perspectives, oratures, and translation. She has a book entitled Bibliography of Reception: World Literature in Bengali Periodicals (1890–1900) to her credit, and her most recent volume co-edited with K. Alfons Knauth is Figures of Transcontinental Multilingualism (2018).

Subrata Sinha is Assistant Professor of Bangla at St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata (Raghabpur Campus), India. Earlier, he worked for the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, and the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology, Gurgaon, India. His monograph Adhunikatar Kavyatattva o Sudhindranath Datta was published in 2019.
Critical Discourses in South Asia
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South Asia, and especially India, has a long and rich tradition of critical discourses in its languages. These discourses are unique in their own ways without being exclusive and they form an integral part of the regional intellectual traditions. Each critical discourse has its specificity, while it is also related with other critical traditions in an interlingual and interliterary way. However, there is a considerable amount of insulation among such critical traditions primarily because of lack of translation of seminal texts in major South Asian languages.

This series broadly deals with critical discourses in major South Asian languages representing various schools, movements and discursive practices. Each individual volume in the series brings together English translation of major writings dealing with theoretical formulations, literary criticism and theory, re-interpretations of critical concepts and categories and critical movements in the concerned language that go into the making of its critical tradition.

The volumes in the series not only offer a comprehensive picture of critical discourses in major South Asian languages but also facilitate a comparative understanding of critical traditions across the world.

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Debapriya Basu teaches English Literature at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India. Her primary field of research is women’s writing of the English Renaissance period and digital scholarly editing. Her other interests include translation, genre studies, and the philosophy of technology. She is a contributor in *Shaping the Discourse: Women’s Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865–1947*.

Sucheta Bhattacharya is Professor of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, India. Among her other interests are translations, realist literature of 19th century England and Bengal by ‘non-canonical’ women writers, and border studies with a focus on the life and culture of the people living on the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Parthasarathi Bhaumik teaches Comparative Literature in Jadavpur University, India. He is also Joint-Director of the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University. His recent publications include *Mahatma o Kabi* (Bangla translation of Letters and Debates Between Gandhi and Tagore: 1915–1941), 2020 and *Bengalis in Burma: A Colonial Encounter (1886–1948)*.

Tapan Chakraborty retired from the Audit Policy wing of the State Bank of India after spending over thirty-four years with the bank in various capacities. After retirement he worked with CINI, Jharkhand, India, for several years.

Paromita Chaudhuri teaches English Literature at Asutosh College, Kolkata, India. Her area of interest focuses on issues related to language studies.

Samantak Das is Professor of Comparative Literature and the Director of the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, India.

Probal Dasgupta has taught linguistics and Esperanto in the United States, Australia, and India. He is President, Akademio de Esperanto (2016–2022) and President of World Esperanto Association (2007–2013). He has publications in Bangla, English, and Esperanto, concerning linguistics,

Anirban Datta is a marketing, communication and media professional in Kolkata, India, who took to translation in 2016. He translates world poetry and songs both from Bangla to English and from English to Bangla.

Sudeshna Datta Chaudhuri is Assistant Professor at KIIT, Bhubaneswar, India. Her areas of interest are speculative fiction, mythology, translation, and Hindustani Classical Music. Her translation of Ursula Le Guin’s A Wizard of Earthsea (Irashindur Jadukar) has been recently published.

Doyeeta Majumder is Assistant Professor of English Literature at Jadavpur University, India. Her primary research interests include early modern law and literature, political and juridical theory, and intellectual history. Her publications include Tyranny and Usurpation: The New Prince and Lawmaking Violence in Early Modern Drama (2019) and Rajpurush (2012), a Bangla translation of Machiavelli’s Il Principe.

Sipra Mukherjee is Professor, Department of English, West Bengal State University, India. Her research interests are religion, caste, and power – areas in which she has published extensively. She has translated Manoranjan Byapari’s autobiographical text Itibritte Chandal Jiban into English.

Sreemati Mukherjee is Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at Presidency University, India. Her areas of academic competence are feminist theory, narrative studies, postcolonial theory, and performance theories, and she has several publications in these areas. She also makes documentaries on subjects of contemporary cultural relevance. Her most recent publication is The Many Dialogues of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita (2021).

Sujaan Mukherjee is a Ph.D. researcher at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, India, and works on urban space and colonial memory. He has also worked on the physical cultures of Bengal and is interested in museums as public cultural spaces. He co-edited with Sajni Mukherji a 1937 pamphlet by Humphry House titled I Spy with My Little Eye (2018).

Bimbabati Sen is a publishing and digital learning professional based in Delhi, India. She also runs ‘Onubaad’, a project that translates lesser-known Bangla texts to English.
Notes on transliteration and references

Transliteration

Diacritical marks in this volume have only been used in the case of Sanskrit words and those from *Charyapada*, where the conventions are slightly different. However, for a few common titles, like the *Ramayana*, and for names of characters diacritics have not been used.

For Bangla, the following format of equivalents has been used:

अ, आ = a, इ, ई = i, उ, ऊ = u, ए = e, ऐ = ai, ओ = o, औ = au, स, श = s, श = sh, क्ष = ksh, जन = jn.

In certain cases, particularly in the context of poetry, deviations from the rule had to be made as for example in the transliteration of अ as ‘o’ and not ‘a’ to maintain rhythmic patterns. There may be certain other deviations as well, and we request the indulgence of readers.

Place names and proper names follow standard official forms. The words ‘leela’ and ‘geeti’ are also exceptions where convention has been followed.

Bangla names

The word ‘Bangla’ for the language instead of the anglicised ‘Bengali’ has been retained in the volume. In general, authentic Bangla forms of names have been kept rather than the anglicised versions – Bandyopadhyay and Chattopadhyay, for instance, instead of Banerjee and Chatterjee.

In Bangla, names are represented by first names and not by titles. Titles have been used in introductions while first names have been retained in translated texts.

References

References to quotations in the texts have been provided most often by the editors. On a few occasions, the versions cited are from a later date than the original articles as earlier versions were not accessible.
Introduction

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta and Subrata Sinha

This volume presents essays related to Bangla literature, both in its scripted and non-scripted forms, within the larger project of ‘Critical Discourses in South Asia’. The essays are chiefly from the mid-19th to the 1970s of the 20th century, but there are a few from a later date as well that either look back at the period or continue the discursive chain in an important manner. The essays primarily foreground expectations from  সাহিত্য or literature and performative modes in discussions regarding their reasons for being, their mode of existence, their critical interventions leading to new turning points in the history of literature, and their relations with the global literary community. However, the essays also lead to other pathways of reading and interpretation. They provide, for instance, a spectacular array of material details that constitute a particular space – in this context, both a pre-colonial and a postcolonial one. The force inherent in the materiality often inflects received ideas and concepts and, within the culture made up of many different strands, generates a discursive field that continues to remain distinctive within a larger shared human legacy. The tone of the essays varies, and efforts have been made to retain some elements of the tonality as tonal modulations also structure thought in significant ways.

With the world today in the grips of a pandemic affecting the lives of all and with the most fragile the worst-affected, certain realities demand precedence and urgency over others. It therefore becomes important to revisit the discursive area constructing the literary field in Bangla from certain perspectives. It is perhaps necessary to focus acts of reading on an aesthetics that is in a continuous process of emergence at the meeting point of several changing human and civilisational considerations – with imagination in its many modes contributing to the construction of affective communities and hence processes of justice and equality and, thereby, of inclusion of cross-cultural communicative efforts centred on enabling the humans across the globe, of the prioritisation of small, local viewpoints, of bringing back the non-humans as a significant part of the contemporary, and many such issues, however old they may be. Notes on the essays that follow are guided, to the extent possible, by such perspectives. It is important to mention that a

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detailed engagement with the history of literary discourse in Bengal would take up several volumes. This volume merely presents some of the most relevant essays addressing the aforementioned perspectives.¹

**Texts on a few foundational cultural aspects**

The background to the discursive field appears spacious and diverse in the first text by Shashibhusan Dasgupta, the noted scholar and literary critic, on Bengal in the *Charyageeti*. Charyapadas or songs of realisation by practitioners of the Buddhist Sahajiya cult, written sometime between the 8th and the 12th centuries, and *Srikrishnakirtan* by Boru Chandidas written between 1350 and 1400 CE were the only two manuscripts before 1500 CE that had been recovered. Dasgupta takes up *Charyageeti* as a cultural text of people speaking Bangla, Maithili, Asamiya, and Odia without losing sight of the esoteric nature of the songs expressed in the ‘twilight’ or shadowed language sheltering a silent unutterable realisation. The *dohas* are replete with images from the lifeworld of the indigenous people – their occupations, domestic arrangements, love lives, animals, rivers, mountains, trees, and flowers. These images are rendered into metaphors of *sadhana* along the Buddhist Sahajiya or simple path. Despite the sectarian content, the literary space in this early period linked with the lives and occupations of common people appears integrative. These early texts also suggest that the core of the ‘literary’ in the region holds a deep realisation that can only be hinted at through symbols and metaphors on the one hand, and on the other, the evanescent beauty and the drama of everyday life with both its power structures and its humanity. One encounters an irreducible space that at the same time is intricately entangled with social processes.

The second text by Upendranath Bhattacharya to some extent follows the first in taking up the tradition of the Baul singers in Bengal. Bhattacharya looks at the origin and early history of the Baul cult that he thinks emerged in the first half of the 17th century. The cult includes the Radha–Krishna or the Prakriti–Purusha union along with the spiritualism of the Upanishads and the Sufi tradition and, in practice, takes up elements from the Buddhist-Sahajiya and a transformed version of the Vaishnav-Sahajiya sects. The importance of performative music in religious cults of Bengal particularly among the Bauls and Fakirs for whom it is one of the most significant forms of expression to convey religious and philosophical thoughts is underscored in the text. The Baul tradition has travelled to the world today partly because of the Baul philosophy being based on an apparent simplicity of experience of a personal god, its syncretism, and its renunciation of a traditional way of life. It received a new impetus with Tagore’s foregrounding of the Baul as an upholder of ‘a free spirit’ in his own works. Today, with a vitalised performative tradition, the Baul singer has found her place with others at the core of people’s search for the meaning of ‘freedom,’ and through it to an alternative way of life and living.
The next text in the compilation by Dineshchandra Sen, one of the first historians of Bangla literature, moves over to Sri Chaitanya, the proponent of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, who lived in the latter half of the 15th century (1486 CE to 1533/1534 CE). His mode of worshipping the god Krishna with ecstatic song and dance and his piety linked with bhaktirasa led to a new age in medieval Bangla literature and was instrumental in giving rise to different genres in an emotional, performative mode. In the 16th century, Sri Chaitanya’s life inspired a large body of hagiographic texts based on legend, hearsay, and various hermeneutic enquiries while his life provided inspiration for more than one hundred and fifty poets spanning over three hundred years from the 16th to the 18th century. The mortality of such a bhakta was not easy to accept, and the hagiographies suggested different ends for Sri Chaitanya. Dineshchandra Sen writing in the 20th century accepts the discourse of faith, engages with it, and then moves towards an empirical account of the passing away of Sri Chaitanya, marking an important moment in the framing of modern historiography. A hospitable dialogue between faith and reason is evident in the essay. In the context of literary historiography, it is important to mention the first attempt by Ramgati Nyayaratna in 1872/73 to write a history of Bangla literature entitled Bangla Bhasha o Bangla Sahitya Bishayak Prastab (Treatise on Bangla Language and Literature) where periods were divided into the ancient, middle, and the modern.

As stated earlier, the doctrine of devotion that had taken hold of Bengal with the emergence of Sri Chaitanya had a great influence on the religion, literature, and social life of the region. In the essay on the Gaudiya Vaishnav order, Bishnupada Bhattacharya states that ‘such a complete evolution of devotion has not been seen in the history of any other race’. The statement has extensive implications suggesting the evolution of an attitude that had at its centre a surrender of the ego, which in turn had the potential to develop a non-anthropocentric approach to life, where man was not at the centre of the world, for a large number of people following the cult and for a still larger number coming under its influence through literature, music etc. In the context of rasa, the proponents of the school argued that the love of a devotee for his god was not a vyabhicāribhāva (transient feeling) as suggested by Bharata and accepted by others, but it was a sthāyibhāva (durable emotion) in its own right. In fact, they felt that love for the divine was the only sthāyibhāva of human life, and ‘savouring it in its emotive-affective form through a surge of the hlādini śakti (the potency that rendered joy) seemed to be the prime goal of human life.’ The 19th century would start looking at the phenomenon in a different manner. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, for instance, writes about the necessity of creating a literature different from the Gitagovindam type, which would incite men to action. Rabindranath Tagore, while drawing extensively upon the Vaishnav literary tradition, in Chaturanga (1916) critiques the cult in its gradual change into a degenerative form where people may be kept in a perpetual state of idle ecstasy and
sometimes as the victims of oppression of a self-seeking master. However, from today’s vantage point, the worldview of a large section of the people with their lives centred on devotion and its concomitants deserves to be remembered and explored and not simply shrugged aside by the modern as symptomatic of a feudal social system.

**Early texts, decolonisation, and visions of the future**

The early years of the 19th century brought transformations in many areas of life, thought, and expression through initiatives taken up by William Carey and his group, Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, and others. Literary discourse in the world of print gradually took shape primarily through journals. Critical writings on literature and book reviews were initiated in *Bibidhartha Sangraha* (1851), edited by Rajendralal Mitra and then Kaliprasanna Sinha, and in *Masik Patrika* (1854), edited by Pyarichand Mitra and Radhanath Sikdar, two of the earliest journals that stated their primary aim to be the welfare of the people.

Colonial issues, to some extent at least, were placed at the centre of critical discourse in Bengal by the mid-19th century. Rangalal Bandyopadhyay’s lecture on Bangla poetry entitled ‘Bangla Kabita Bishayak Prabandha’ (An essay on Bangla poetry) in 1852 provides one of several entry points to the discourse. Bandyopadhyay is responding to an allegation that no poet was ever born in Bengal as the country was in bondage for such a long period of time. He takes up examples from Homer, Bharthari, Tulsidas, and Jayadeva to argue against the statement by demonstrating that the poet was free in his innermost consciousness. He states that after Sanskrit it is Bangla that has the necessary foundation on which a rich poetic literature can emerge and appeals to the people to rise to the occasion and create a new body of poetry that will be a part of world literature for he thinks that the soil is fertile, the seeds are ready, provisions are there, and the only need is to find the farmer.3

Several years later, one would see the dazzling appearance of Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s *Meghnad Badh Kavya* (1861) bringing in a kind of renaissance in Bangla literature. *Meghnad Badh Kavya* gives rise to several critical writings; issues are debated, and there is a gradual coming to terms with the phenomenon of modernity in Bangla literature, which at that point of time indicates moving away from tradition and questioning it. A new confidence emerges, despite controversies, and after the death of Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay pays tribute to him in his journal *Bangadarsan* (August 1873) saying:

If a European, proud of his modern wealth asks us, how can you be relied upon? – Has Bengal given birth to a human personality? – We will tell him we had Sri Chaitanyadev among preachers, Raghunath among philosophers, Sri Jayadeva and Sri Madhusudan among poets!4
The construction of a tradition becomes an important agenda in some of the early texts in the journals, and this is evidenced in the earliest essay (1854) in this volume by Iswar Chandra Gupta on poets from the not-so-far-away oral tradition. In Sambad-Prabhakar, the newspaper edited by him, Gupta regularly wrote on the lives of ancient poets and kabiwallabs, or professional versifiers composing instant poetry on social occasions and often entering organised competitive sessions with other kabiwallabs. Gupta, as Bishnu Dey remarks in his essay in this volume, is the last of the poets looking back nostalgically to the past at a critical moment in history. The essay is a record of the problems faced by collectors of oral texts in the absence of any infrastructure. Gupta’s style is an amalgamation of guilelessness, sophistication, and wit, which often provides a double-edged note to the discourse. He brings to the forefront many marginalised members of society who composed skilled verses in the common everyday language. He consciously points out their position as low castes who yet wrote with such spontaneous sophistication. The attitude is symptomatic of the gap that had firmly set in between the rising middle-class intellectuals and people from other sections of society.

The goals focusing on the welfare of the people receive a more crystallised dimension with an undercurrent of a still semi-conscious decolonising aspiration in the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. There is a projection into the future with both realist and utopic visions for a new nation. Pragmatic ends are evident in Chattopadhyay’s manifesto entitled ‘A Message to the New Writers of Bengal’ (1886) anthologised in this volume. He states most emphatically that one should write only if one feels one is writing for the good of the people and the country or to create beauty. According to him a work which is not true, is against Dharma, and is written to disgrace or hurt others, or even to serve a selfish purpose, should be discarded. This however is a manifesto with its own generic dynamic, and it is important to look at his articulations on the purpose of art in some of his essays such as Uttarcharit (1872), where he asserts that the purpose of ethical wisdom and that of kavya is the same. ‘The poets are the teachers of the world, but they do not teach through explanations of morals, nor through stories. They dictate the purification of the world’s soul by creating beauty that is perfect.’ 5 In a memorable statement, he also declares that that which is both in accord with nature and in excess of it is kāvya. What also needs to be pointed out is that the utopic visions cannot simply be conflated with nationalist goals because there is always an excess, both a concern for the immediate future that would be an agenda in the construction of a nation, sometimes bringing forward a revivalist spirit, as well as a functional ideal for a longue durée, a non-visible and probably ever-receding end. Chattopadhyay incidentally also points out in the introduction to his edited journal Bangadarsan (1872) the importance of writing for all classes of readers and maintains that the growing gap between the rich and the poor in all domains will continue to be a hindrance to the development of the region.
A significant number of periodicals such as Bharati, Sahitya, Manasi o Marmabani, Bharatbarsha, Narayan, Dasi, Balak, Bangabani, Sabuj Patra, Basumati, Prabasi, and Bichitra emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pramatha Chaudhuri, the editor of Sabuj Patra (1914), a journal responsible for bringing in a new era in Bangla literary criticism facilitating the use of chalit or colloquial Bangla instead of the earlier sadhu or sophisticated written form, talks about the new spirit of life in evidence during the period and at the same time is critical of several illusions at work in society in his introduction. He sees the importance of drawing upon both tradition and Western culture iterating that a union of the two, and not their conflict, is necessary to move forward. Elsewhere, too, he not only acknowledges the gifts of English education, but also insists that a mere imitation of the colonial masters will not lead to any positive development. Learning has to be integrated with one’s own environment. Chaudhuri is not in favour of literature that serves a programmatic end and is one of the first to uphold the aesthetic as a sign of the awakened mind. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s time is left behind in this new turn rejecting the utilitarian spirit in literature although Chaudhuri does comment that even if literature cannot provide for the livelihood of human beings, it can prevent them from committing suicide. Symptomatic of a new period or a postcolonial move is also the attempt to take the people out of their inertia that, Chaudhuri emphasises, acts as a driving spirit of the journal.

Dialogue with European literatures: affinities and bondings

An essay by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay entitled ‘Sakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona’ (1876) is a point of beginning for a whole series of articles in Indian literary criticism comparing Kālidāsa and Shakespeare. Goals of comparison differ, and often two masters from cultures of the colonising and the colonised are evaluated. This piece, however, offers a study of vibrant affinities in the conceptualisation of Abhijñāṇāśakuntalam and The Tempest, both of which are ‘poetic plays’, as the author explains, and different from Othello that is ‘drama’ in the European sense. Differences, particularly in the cultural context, are highlighted, and the happy conclusion is that while the young Sakuntala is similar to Miranda, the more mature is comparable to Desdemona. The comparative perspective is that of a sahṛdaya in the best traditions of comparativism.

Haraprasad Shastri, the eminent multifaceted scholar, continues the tradition as he compares three popular writers in Bengal – Kālidāsa, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, and Byron – in his essay ‘The Bengali Youth and Three Poets’ (1878). His comparative approach is framed by the ruling paradigm of the period – literature’s contribution to the formation of society and, in this case, its contemporary role in framing the character of the country’s youth. His viewpoints regarding the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as many of the popular authors of medieval and modern Western and
Indian literatures, demonstrate his substantially different attitude to tradition, eschewing both dogmatism and received notions, while opening up the field of reading. The larger theme of his text is the relation between the individual and society and the different ways of achieving happiness through this relationship in popular texts of different ages. Shastri's conclusion is that Chattopadhyay writes to evoke patriotism and Kālidāsa to generate love for all living beings, and in both cases the purpose is social happiness. Byron, the author states, writes for humanitarian reasons, and his purpose is to evoke happiness derived from breaking social norms. Byron’s lessons are contemporary. The focus here, as also in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s manifesto, is on the urban, young, educated middle-class male: literature in print will continue to exclude large sections of people.

Dialogue with European literatures: towards the articulation of difference

A reading of the epic as genre in 1902 by Ramendrasundar Trivedi, the interdisciplinary scientist, in the volume is marked by an intrinsic difference from approaches to its classification in both Indian and European traditions. After a short introduction to the different Sanskrit and Bangla words in use for the word ‘epic’, Trivedi emphatically states that not all works designated as epic are worth the nomenclature. He thinks it is only the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, The Iliad, and The Odyssey that can be called epic. He compares the Mahabharata to the Himalayas with spectacular portrayals of its grandeur and, with a rhetorical flourish, upholds the spontaneous greatness of composition and the absence of a spurious art in the epic. He argues that what is deeply present in the consciousness of the people is the epic – it does not have to be read. One is aware of it without having read it and has knowledge of its characters and events. It is one of those rare ‘texts’ that belongs to all, and the author is careful to point out that the reading of the common person is in no way inferior to that of the scholar. Trivedi does not engage with the criteria for classification of the genre in any tradition but is content with projecting a strongly felt perspective on it and taking it to its logical conclusion. The perspective, in its difference, adds layers to the basic understanding of the genre.

In a similar manner, Mohitlal Majumdar in 1947 looks at the notion of ‘tragedy’ in the Western context and the absence of the realisation of its full potential in Bangla literature. He uses the word ‘tragedy’ in a general sense, linked with ‘rasa’ and not with the mode of enunciation. According to Majumdar, tragedy is the dramatic embodiment of the ‘rasa’ of sorrow, and unlike other modes it not only makes the sahāryā taste the rasa, but also leaves a forceful impact on her. The Greeks had a deep sense of proportion and harmony in life and nature, and they contemplated this harmony in terms of religion. A violation of nature or harmony led to tragic consequences and hence the presence of an unparalleled repertoire of tragedies in
Greek literature. Majumdar also speaks of the image of the crucifixion of Christ at the heart of Western culture and its many repercussions. In Bengal, he states, one is not completely overwhelmed by ‘the cruelty of fate’ – the system of beliefs does not allow the people to look at sorrow as a permanent state. Hence, Majumdar argues, in trying to give form to tragedy, Bangla literature has only been able to create poetic theatre marked by pathos and occasionally a fragmented form of a tragic poem as in Tagore’s ‘Parisodh’ or narrative literature where variants are at work as in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s novels or where sorrow is finally transgressed as in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Srikanta* (I–IV, 1917–1933). The position of the author shifting along a spectrum of different degrees of the insider–outsider leads to potentially new configurations of thought.

Sanskrit aesthetics, continuity, and reinterpretations

In Bangla literary thought, Sanskrit aesthetics, in particular *rasaśāstra*, was an all-pervasive phenomenon in concepts related to the nature of poetry and its ends during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Its absorption into the literary field rendered its overt expression unnecessary, and there were also reservations on the part of a few authors such as Madhusudan Dutt and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay about the relevance or adequacy of some of its formulations. Atulchandra Gupta’s *Kavyajijnasa* (1928) based on themes of *dhvani* and *rasa* with illustrations from modern Bangla literature brings back the Sanskrit aesthetic tradition in literature as part of contemporary discourse. But a deep engagement with the tradition remains negligible because of a set of different social, individual, and aesthetic needs generating a different interpretative approach to literature, while some of its basic concepts continue to provide foundations for new poetic systems.

Writers during the period also draw upon Sanskrit poetics for different ends, and in the essay ‘A consideration of Literature’ (1852) by Rajendralal Mitra, the pathbreaking historiographer, it serves to contribute to the general objective of constructing an ideal society. Mitra does not write specifically about *rasa* or even *kāvya* but constructs three categories to define the several functions of utterance where there is an addressee, namely, to impart knowledge, to evoke rasa, and to influence or to change the direction of people’s thought – the logical, the emotive, and the ethical. The last is important to him as it requires several skills, and, like Cicero, he is aware that persuasive utterance without a sense of the just may be dangerous. He does not state the matter categorically, but his purpose is evident from the title of his essay and from his enumeration of the possibilities of *doṣas* or blemishes in utterance drawing upon Sanskrit poetics where, anything that is employed in an improper or indecent manner is *doṣa*, and then again, the *doṣas* spring from logical fallacies. An attempt to create an order that is different from the fine but complex system of Sanskrit rhetoricians, and that is also more accessible, is evident in the short piece.
The second essay in the volume that deals with rasaśāstra is Rajshekhar Bose’s ‘Rasa and the Question of Taste’ (1927) written in a humorous mode and with reference to Freud, whose works were being critically studied by his brother, the psychoanalyst Girindrasekhar Bose, at the time. Bose looks at the whole question of aubhitya or propriety in literature, links it with taste, and then centres the question around desire and rasaśāstra’s engagement with desire as the first durable emotion. He looks at the frailties of human beings and their circumstances bringing a taste of the contemporary and the mundane to literature. The essay also needs to be read against the background of the fervent debates on obscenity in Bangla periodicals at the time, reflecting norms and values of English Victorian society. Bose’s tone is playful throughout with the hint of an attempt towards the retrieval of sanity. The essay falls in pattern with others of the period in the volume as Bose ends with the statement that the greatest poet is one who can overcome all complexities and contribute to the reconstruction of taste while keeping the common good in focus.

Rasaśāstra is absorbed into the modern tradition but not always in a seamless fashion, particularly when writers choose to engage with it in a conscious manner.

Towards Rabindranath Tagore and the aesthetics of interdependence

Jagadish Bhattacharya’s text from a later date ‘The Poetic Mind’ (1979) tries to conceptualise the field of poetry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with reference to Sanskrit poetics and to writers of the period. At the heart of his text is the central question of what constitutes the poetic mind, and evoking two phrases from Sanskrit aesthetics ‘āghatanaghatanapatīyasyabuddhi’, an intellect skilled in causing unusual occurrences, and ‘apūrvavastunirmānakṣamāprajñā’, a wisdom capable of shaping unprecedented matter, he moves over to two Bangla writers, Madhusudan Dutt and Tagore. He engages with the response of Rabindranath Tagore in his essays on the significance and material of poetry where he focuses on the presence of wonder, love, and imagination that includes empathy in the poetic mind. Each of the words holds special significance in today’s world with the potential for entering into relationships with both the human and the non-human world bringing in perspectives of justice and also an ecological approach to aesthetics. In conclusion, Bhattacharya looks at the role of knowledge and practice along with genius in the formation of the poetic mind. His poem at the end of the essay can be taken to be an iconic representation of the figure of the poet with an amalgamation of tropes from classical, sectarian, and folk traditions.

The views of Rabindranath Tagore mentioned earlier are found in the three short seldom translated essays on the meaning, material, and the evaluating criteria of literature written in 1903. They represent certain central
ideas of Tagore that take their full form in later works. His considerations on literature are based upon the premise of the self’s relationship with the world, both as nature or even the cosmos, and with other human beings. In the essays, he talks of evaluating a writer with reference to his ability to make the outside world his own in a lasting and intense manner, and later in his talk on World Literature (Visvasahitya 1907), he speaks about a human being’s worth measured in terms of his relationship with other human beings. The recurring statements in the three essays of the desire of the writer to make the external world intimately one’s own and then to give it back to others in word-pictures and word-music to make it their very own unveil an integrative relationship with the world, which is echoed in the entire plan and design of Visva-Bharati University. Elsewhere in his lecture on ‘What is Art’ (1916), he juxtaposes the creative endeavours of artists with that of god. Just as god out of his surplus takes delight in creating the universe, so also human beings in their surplus break out of the bonds of functionality and self-preservation imposed on them by everyday life and create art. Art has its own purpose and delights in its creativity. The vision of some to integrate aesthetics and the commitment to build an ideal society in the late 19th century finds a fulfilling structure in the works of Tagore. The future in his case extends into time and not just the immediate future, and the imaginary of the globe extends to the planetary. The individual takes his place at the centre, but then the individual is also defined by his desire for bonding.

The conversation on the poetics of relation is continued in the text by Alokeranjan Dasgupta, a modern poet and critic, as he engages with Tagore’s notion of world literature and his belief that what is universal in literature stands on the base of the local. Dasgupta feels that although Tagore draws upon Goethe’s concept of world literature, he is closer to our times. His focus is on the relationship of the part to the whole, an aspect evident in Goethe to some extent but not foregrounded as such. This relationship is extended to rural or folk literature where Tagore suggests the presence of folk literature at the origins of elite literature. It is Herder and not Goethe, the author feels, who inspires him to find this model of a sustainable relationship between base and structure, the rural and the elite. Tagore is also looking for deep and close ties between the literatures of the East and West, the regional and the international, while Dasgupta himself with poet Sankha Ghosh in the introduction to their volume of translated poems Sapta Sindhu Das Diganta (1963) writes about modern poetry giving form to a universal poetic language, an act that they think is extremely necessary at a time of fragmentation witnessed by trends in high modernist poetry.

The many ‘moderns’ in Bangla poetic discourse: explorations and the carving out of new relations

One of the markers of modernist poetry in Bengal was a conscious attempt to move away from the influence of Tagore. In the first three decades of
the 20th century, new journals such as *Dhumketu, Kallol, Kalikalam*, and *Sanibarer Chithi* emerged taking up the cause of modernist literature in different forms. The *Kallol* group in particular drew the attention of the literati with their conviction that Tagore’s poetry was not adequate for them and their times. However, it was with the emergence of the journals *Parichay* and *Kavita* that a quite different kind of poetry, identified as modern, appeared in Bangla literature.

Buddhadeva Bose, one of the key architects of modern Bangla poetry and editor of *Kavita*, in the essay on Tagore and his successors (1954) in this volume, analyses why Tagore posed a ‘problem’ to young poets who were swept away by his genius and who by merely imitating the external forms of his creation were unable to create poetry of any lasting effect. He, of course, also underscores the important contribution of Kazi Nazrul Islam in demonstrating poetry’s ability to incite revolt. Bose shows how modern poetry emerged by making meaningful use of Tagore’s influence, with some stepping aside and others confronting him by ‘assimilating him fully’.

Bose translates Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, poems by Rilke and Hölderlin, and also Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūtam* following a long line of Bengali poets translating foundational texts from both foreign and Indian traditions. His long introduction to the translation of Baudelaire’s text upholds Baudelaire as the modern poet par excellence who introduced the dark and the sinister as an integral part of the poetic universe. His point in choosing Baudelaire is also to look outside the world of the colonial masters. Elsewhere, in the preface to his translation of *Meghadūtam*, he highlights the importance of translating and rewriting ancient poetry in the context of the contemporary. The emergence of the ‘modern’ in Bangla literature and literary discourse linked with the general global anxiety of the period and the search for a new language to express the individual’s sense of crisis have a clear stamp of European modernist literature. Yet, the socio-economic situation linked with European modernism is at a different stage in the country, the time scale is different, and the language of poetry and its related discourse bear marks of a different tradition of writing. Again, this particular kind of literature of avant-garde writers, often highlighted as the one and only kind of modernist literature in the region, brings in a distinctive gap between the ‘popular circuit’ and the ‘cultivated circuit’, leaving out the largest section of potential readers from access to the poems and the related discourse.

Poets often demonstrate an awareness of the issue. Sudhindranath Datta, the poet and editor of *Parichay* (1931), writes in his essay on ‘The Liberation of Poetry’ in the first volume of his journal that the first poets represented the community and its life in general, while the modern poet is merely a meteoric fragment, signifying the end of a journey. However, he upholds the heroism of the modern poet, as with a ‘superhuman’ effort linked with ‘pure consciousness’, ‘authenticity’, and ‘a self-effacing resolve,’ he continues to move on knowing that his creativity has even less meaning in a world which
itself is of little significance. The poet from Bengal has on his own arrived at a site inscribed by Western modernity and its experience of an existential angst that he takes to the limit along with a matching density of language while still underscoring the affirmative strength of the poet. Datta also asserts that the link with the real and the question of authenticity have to be at the forefront of the poetic consciousness. In fact, the poet has to ‘walk the streets’ and enter the marketplace for there is no short-cut to poetry. No longer is there the projection into the future. The preoccupation with the present, a hallmark of modernist poetry, enters the landscape, and despite the call for moving into the marketplace, the diction remains distanced.

Jibanananda Das, often acknowledged as the greatest poet after Tagore, insists on the validity of imagination, and within imagination, he insists on intellect and experience nourished by poetic traditions of the past and the present in his essay ‘On poetry’ (1939) in this volume. He argues for an autonomous space for poetry in the modern world. Poetry, he asserts, questions all existing norms and creates a new world order that has an ‘integral, subterranean’ relation with life. It does not seek utilitarian purposes, and for poetry to enter the framework of society, the masses would need a ‘change of heart’ or else only third-rate poets would be appreciated. Das does not know who can catalyse that change, and he feels as long as that does not happen, the poet will continue to roam the streets, take refuge in nature and among the crowds, and strike out with the ‘rebounding power of his imagination’. Das in his poetry seeks a dwelling in nature and brings a whole new range of sensibilities with the use of striking synaesthetic imageries. The future is not the immediate future, and the present is both isolating and non-isolating with its extension into time and place. The essay also works with several images from nature, making it an integral part of the modern. That remains the unique contribution of this poet whose poems remain accessible to all.

From a different viewpoint, Bishnu Dey, the socialist poet considerably influenced by Eliot, explores the meaning of the progressive in poetry, which he affirms is linked with a historical perspective in keeping with scientific approaches towards reality and with a focus on an integrated technique. According to Dey, a dedication to technique and an understanding of one’s personal crisis as being part of a larger historical one allow the writer to stay away from static received notions of art. The centrality of the subject is questioned in his statement. The author then looks at the history of Bangla literature foregrounding writers who had kept faith with perspectives of the common people. The essay concludes by pointing out that writers are ‘not mere craftsmen, nor inspired souls’ but ‘complete human beings, both socially and individually’. The language is intricate and complex while there is a return to the future and the foregrounding of a certain tradition of inclusion of common perspectives from the lives of people.

A different aspect of the modern is embedded in the compilation of the first collection of poems by Muslim poets from the early age to the present, entitled *Kavya-Malancha* (1945) and edited by Abdul Kadir and Rezaul
Karim. Rezaul Karim who writes the introduction demonstrates the significant contribution of Bengali Muslims in the development of Bangla language and literature. The poems selected for the anthology, he states, reveal a rare quality of beauty and craftsmanship and follow the art for art’s sake dictum. There are a few exceptions that take up theoretical or spiritual themes. A different kind of relational poetics emerges from the author’s illustration of the extent to which Muslim poets in the Middle Ages established a connection with the culture of the region, accepted its traditions, used the stories and metaphors of the land, and gave a new form to Vaishnav songs of Bengal by submitting them to the Islamic tradition. Such an anthology receives shape as the acknowledgement of a sad and grim reality, a marker also of the period of the modern in Bengal.

It is necessary to point out that texts on poetry in this volume do not go beyond the early 1950s after which there is a different phase of modernist poetry in the same decade and then again a radical and complex period in the 1960s with a profusion of ‘little magazines’ by various groups. Along with the inward turning of poets, there is often also a greater sense of commitment leading to a new consciousness of the poetic self. An example from Sankha Ghosh in whose poems there is a constant journey from the deeper layers of the inner world to social issues and everyday events that in their turn lead to a reawakening of the self may be pertinent here. He gives an example from real life:

If a desperate girl comes out from her home to join a procession of hunger driven people and if the police take her beyond the line that cannot be crossed and kill her – at that moment her mother’s face flashes before her: that death along with the pain of the entire country can be the words of poetry itself. But poetry at that same moment can be the poet’s own birth, his awakening, the immense rise of his shapeless, aggrieved love, blessed by the sadness stretching from one horizon to another.7

The event Ghosh talks about leads to the famous poem ‘Jamunabati’. In the works of other poets like Subhas Mukhopadhyay, one finds broken human beings reflecting the dying out of human possibilities and the struggle of a poet on a rehumanising mission.

The 1960s were again a turbulent period in the history of India with both internal and external crises. While the economic situation deteriorated further, a large section of the youth was enkindled with a new energy and the dream of freedom from struggle and poverty. Various new journals and manifestos of various groups of poets began to emerge right from the early years of the decade. Satabhisha and Krittibas from the 1950s were two of the most popular poetry journals. Krittibas, whose founder editor was Sunil Gangopadhyay, in fact, became the platform for a new kind of poetry. As the editor stated in the sixteenth volume, ‘Intense, indifferent, insane, patient, angry, respected, hungry, peaceful, beatnik, fearful, immersed, clever, good,
haunted, religious and dissatisfied poets received their shelter in its pages. There was a deep-seated rebelliousness in the poets of the times, linked with rebelliousness the world over, only in this case it was against the conformist pattern inherent in the writings of what the new poets designated as ‘middle class.’ The Hungry Generation of poets, severely non-conformist, with Malay Roychowdhury as the leader, brought out several manifestos under the influence of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat generation of poets. They wanted to write of a hungry, wild, and uncivilised truth, giving rise to a poetry of violence. Sankha Ghosh in an article entitled ‘Dui Basante’ in Desh in 1962 stated that in the last few years it seemed as if the poets were ready to enter into a new adventure. As a new venture, they naturally felt a little bewildered at first, but the very strong steps towards losing and then trying to find directions led to a preparation for the new in modern poetry. Some poets later left the group and found their powerful individual voices as in the case of Shakti Chattopadhyay, while a new strand of confessional poetry also emerged during the period. There were a host of other voices, some quiet but powerful like those of Utpalkumar Basu, Binoy Majumdar, and Bhaskar Chakraborty, while others gradually moved over to a different scenario altogether in the late 1960s and the early 1970s with the Naxalbari Movement and with the Muktijuddha or the Liberation War in Bangladesh. A few women writers like Kabita Sinha, Vijaya Mukhopadhyay, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, and others would also find their own voice during the period.

There are numerous levels of diffraction of motifs, topoi, and sensibilities circulating within global modernity that constitute the modernist phase in Bangla poetry. It is important to take a more detailed look at them to arrive at an understanding of the period and issues related to the specificity of the region that at the same time is also subject to hegemonic forces of global modernity.

**Structuring elements of narrative literature: retrieving history, form, and word**

During the middle of the 19th century, narrative literature in prose was gaining ground in Bangla literature with the satirical picaresque kind of writing known as *naksa* and then the novel. The idea of the novel was quite protean in many of the critical texts. The term ‘upanyas’ that later became synonymous with the term ‘novel’ was used interchangeably with many other terms denoting other modes of narrative. There was a consciousness not only of its Western links, but also of the Arabic–Persian tradition. The intercultural negotiations were rich and layered but eventually resulted in the erasure of the sketch or the ‘*naksa*’ that was replaced by the novel. During the latter half of the 19th century, two striking observations emerge from discourses on the novel – the notion of ‘*kavya*’ or poetic literature on the one hand and a hard-core didacticism on the other where the colonial context sometimes brings a new meaning to didacticism.
The novel in Bangla proceeded along varied lines of development including different kinds of discourse in its form. As genre, it could emerge only when individuals took responsibility for their own lives and did not depend on an erstwhile fate and when there was a change in certain norms of society. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali* (1929), for instance, the first section ends with the death of Indir Thakrun, the old widow in the family, and with the end of the *kulin pratha* where a man from an upper caste could marry as many wives as he pleased and where the man–woman relationship did not have space to crystallise. It also marked an end to the reign of superstition where the eldest son in a family would always die because of a curse related to a forefather’s evil deed. The curse does not seem to work anymore. With the change in the social structure, one enters the domain of the *künstlerroman* – the life of Apu – the child of parents who have settled down together as husband and wife to start a family, an idyllic space indispensable to the early novel. This novel does not merely work with the relationship between the individual and society, but also between the individual and the cosmos.

In general, the space of the novel and the short story occasioned a reading of the everyday life of the people, a history with multiple nuances that again to some extent brought in differences to the very form of the novel. Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971), the novelist with an intimate experience of village society, declares in his *Amar Sahitya Jiban* (1953) that in the depiction of rural life in the works of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, he sees social authority always ‘occupying one corner of the triangle’. Its power is immense and its revenge terrible. In his diverse experiences, he finds it ‘bereft of any strength’, but ‘because its shape and weight were once enormous it lay like the body of Ghatotkacha on the path of society’s progress’. Foreign imperialist powers also give it protection, and the task of the novelist, Bandyopadhyay thinks, is to remove it bit by bit.

Manik Bandyopadhyay whose short piece ‘Why I Write’ (1944) appears in the volume may be compared to Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, as a writer in the realist mode with a sharp and succinct style that has not been encountered before. Bandyopadhyay’s novels look deeply into the grim realities of social lives enmeshed within varied power structures. In this short piece, he lays out the logical, material dimensions of writing. He feels that the ability to write depends on the impassioned urge for mental experience, an intense desire to write, along with a focused effort on learning the skill. The writer for him is a ‘pen-pushing’ labourer, and that metaphor introduces a new phase in Bangla literature.

Included in this volume is a representative essay by Ashapurna Devi, an autodidact who became one of the most important writers of fiction in the mid decades of the 20th century. In late 19th century, women had entered the field of discursive writing, and what could or could not be written was determined by the larger patriarchal society even in journals for women for a considerable period. Within this framework, several women writers
like Swarnakumari Devi, Sita Devi, Shanta Devi, Anurupa Devi, and others created a strong background for the emergence of the woman writer in a conscious independent form. In Begum Rokeya’s novella *Padmarag* (1924), married women of various religions leave their oppressive homes and come together in an institution. A separate, independent discourse emerges in the pages of the novel where married life is not the only destiny available to a woman, and looking after the family not the sole religion. Ashapurna Devi while subscribing to many of the traditional values also demonstrates the struggle of women through generations to carve out a little space for themselves. Her essay in this volume entitled ‘My Thoughts on Literature’ (1978) upholds her intense urge to write of a rich, complex and intricate inner world that unfolds itself in all its minute details to one who is looking at life from within the four walls of her house. A faith that a better and more just world will prevail, particularly for women, giving them the freedom to choose the small liberties they desire, instigates her desire to write.

A quite different voice is represented in Mahasweta Devi’s text ‘I/My Writings’ (1976). The Bangla novel went through various changes during and after the struggle for independence with the middle-class writer struggling with different kinds of crises. A few writers try to move out into the domain of non-script traditions as in the case of Satinath Bhaduri and his novel *Dhorai Charit Manas* (I–II, 1949–1951), where Gandhi is a central figure of authenticity. Bhaduri draws upon oral traditions and mixed languages infecting mainstream language and consciousness. A critique of political and civil society from below, the novel calls for a new language of literary discourse. Mahasweta Devi follows this tradition and takes it further. She takes up the question of the writer’s deep commitment to her people and her time. Her writing, she states, is a protest against the gross unimaginable exploitation of people by those in power, and her themes are lessons learnt from history. But the raw material of history, she insists, has to be transformed into artistic material. She uses the living language of the common people to bring in this transformation; and she does not want any label such as ‘a woman writer’ to be attached to her.

The figure of the postcolonial writer is again encountered in Debas Ray’s essay ‘In Search of a New Form of the Novel’ (1994). Written much later in time than the others in this volume, the experience recounted belongs in general to the postcolonial writer conscious of his ambivalent position. Ray mourns the loss of traditional narrative forms that cannot be recuperated. Nevertheless, drawing upon Alejo Carpentier’s *The Lost Steps* (1953), he underscores the necessity to rediscover and then to lose again what has been discovered. Without the rediscovery, writers would continue to remain ‘parasites of a metropolitan culture,’ and without the renewed loss they would remain a victim to eternal nostalgia alienated from the contemporaneity of existence. As a novelist he feels that his task is to strive for accord between sentence and meaning lost in the course of colonised existence and to strive for a situation where words are not fabricated and no intervention
exists between the word and its meaning. The concept of the word yoked to meaning producing kāvya in Sanskrit poetics has new bearings now – a new weight is imposed on ‘word’ in the context of memory, oblivion, and experience in postcolonial society. Contexts of solidarities are also constantly woven into the discursive text.

The language of theatre and its engagement with people

Theatre in the second half of the 19th century in Bengal was negotiating with folk, classical, and European traditions. By the end of the century, the non-mimetic, stylised indigenous forms often framed by music gradually started giving way to the proscenium stage and to themes rooted in history and social realism retaining some elements from its early forms. Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844–1912) was a pioneer in giving form to this new theatre, and he was succeeded by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri who gave it a new orientation. Bhaduri in his text ‘Form in Theatre’ speaks about the early days of Bangla theatre, the relevance of the indigenous jatra form, its loss of popularity because of its excessive reliance on mythological stories, the demand for a more realistic presentation, the role of British theatre groups, and the final emergence of permanent theatre houses in Bengal. He points out that people in the world of theatre were not ashamed of their imitation of European theatrical forms for they felt that they could do what the Europeans did and that they could do it better. Bhaduri, who had tried very hard to establish a national theatre, is also of the opinion that one should look back to indigenous forms in conceiving of a national theatre for, among other reasons, the jatra form was designed to serve people who could not afford costly entertainment and therefore was more inclusive.

An article by the noted contemporary poet and critic Sankha Ghosh on ‘Theatre Moments and the Search for Language’ (1961) focuses on Tagore and demonstrates the nature of critical formulations that were available in the domain of performance studies during the period. Ghosh explains why Tagore was drawing on verse forms when his contemporaries in Europe were turning towards prose as a necessary vehicle of drama. The relation between language and dramatic conflict is worked out in the essay, and the conclusion is that as complexities and rifts deepened in the personality of Tagore in the last stages of his life, the possibilities of conflict in his plays became more intense giving form to a language of appropriate strength. It was then that Tagore discovered the music of words that was capable of integrating conflict, and there was no more the necessity for the creation of ‘a dramatic garland through music’ or ‘a musical garland through drama’ as in the days of his early plays. Verbal expressions, on which Tagore seemed to have been losing faith in the dramatic context, were replaced by the ‘universal’ language of music, along with dance, that resonated with all groups of theatre goers.

Theatre from the early days in Bengal was also seen as a means of making the people conscious of their real state of oppression under the British rule
as in Dinabandhu Mitra’s play *Nil Darpan* (1860). A new chapter in the history of theatre in Bengal emerged with the staging of Bijan Bhattacharya’s *Nabanna* in 1944 by the Gananatya Sangha or the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in Bengal. It was based on the famine of Bengal and was performed both in the city and in rural areas. Earlier Bulletin No. 1 of the IPTA had declared that the task of the movement was to portray vividly and memorably through the medium of the stage and other traditional arts the human details of important facts of our people’s rights and enlighten them about their rights and the nature and solution of the problems facing them and also that the ‘productions should be simple and direct so that the masses can easily appreciate, understand and also participate’ in their creation and production. The Gananatya Movement brought together many well-known personalities from the cultural field, but within a few years it began to divide into several groups. The history is complex, and the reasons are diverse. The last Congress of the IPTA was organised in 1957–58 (December–January) in Delhi.

Meanwhile, the realistic trend continued to give sustenance to theatre in Bengal, and under the leadership of Shambhu Mitra (1915–1997), the group Bohurupee was formed. Its first production was Tulsi Lahiri’s *Pathik* (October 1949), a play based on an imminent conflict between the owners and workers of a coal mine. The group gradually emerged as a leader of the Nabanatya or the New Theatre movement. It produced a whole range of plays by Ibsen, Sophocles, and Ionesco among others and opened the space of theatrical experience for the people. The tradition of the Gananatya Sangha, however, was continued by Utpal Dutt (1929–1993), the famous playwright and actor, in his People’s Little Theatre. In a parallel stream, commercial theatre also continued to flourish.

Badal Sircar did not belong to any group. In his Third Theatre, he moved out of the proscenium into public spaces with minimum props and improvised dialogue. Sircar’s deliberations on ‘The Language of Theatre’ (1981) focused on the extra-linguistic aspects of language – on gestures, movements, and tonal qualities, with an emphasis on the inclusion of the audience. For Third Theatre, the goal is to touch the audience, bring them out of their complacency, enact a change of consciousness, and take them to some stage of action. Language is performance in his theatre, and one can see the radical difference in the examples that he gives. His theatre, however, was critiqued by many of the prominent theatre personalities of the time in Bengal while Sircar critiqued their use of the proscenium. The authenticity of Sircar’s engagement with folk forms was questioned as also was the nature of the ‘indigenous’ against the background of his involvement with Richard Schechner and other foreign theatre persons and groups. Yet, the intensity of the theatrical experience had a powerful effect in inscribing a set of values based on theatre-as-action. Theatre personalities in India over the years have acknowledged the contribution of Sircar’s Third Theatre to theatre movements in the country.
The last text in the section on theatre is by Syed Mustafa Siraj written in the 1970s on Alkap, an indigenous comic satirical form of theatre dealing with local and contemporary issues and sometimes events of great national or global magnitude. Such forms sometimes gradually became extant, sometimes survived within a particular space and context, and often continued to exist by assimilating urban mass entertainment forms. Siraj affirms that the form in Alkap is inclusive of the audience, and without audience participation the performance cannot take place. A second element, he points out, is the incorporation of ‘maya’ or endearing illusions in the fabric of the performance that is strongly woven around the harsh realities of life. The dream world of the people, presented in a humorous manner, is often represented through maya, which becomes the basis of its immense popularity. Sometimes, the laughter is arrested, and there is silence when, for instance, a hungry young boy sits with his father under a tree and dreams of his recently dead mother bringing him a plate of rice and then wakes up suddenly as he stumbles and falls while holding out an imaginary plate and calls out to his father in a hoarse voice. The actors are generally from the marginalised sections in society. This text from a master or ustad of the Alkap group offers several examples to suggest the meaning and implications of audience participation and the notion of theatre itself.

The Language Movement and its implications

The volume ends with an essay by Qazi Motahar Husain in 1947 in East Bengal, which takes up the issue of the state language and elaborates on the role of Bangla in the history of the formation of Muslim identity among the Bangla-speaking people. It may also be read as providing a background to the events that culminate in the Language Movement and the martyrdom of many in 1952. The significance of the role and function of language in the development of literature and culture and then to the overall progress of the people is worked out in the text. True freedom can arrive, Qazi Motahar Husain believes, only when one emerges out of a state of rapture, is able to determine for oneself, and can analyse issues and matters from an open perspective. Only a just engagement with the mother tongue can enable this, he demonstrates and adds, ‘Whatever is beautiful, desirable or respectful in life, has to be attained through the mother tongue. No real progress is possible without this mother tongue.’ This focus on the mother tongue and an analysis of its organic relation with the growth and progress of people become the culminating point in the quest for relevance.

The discursive space of literary criticism

The discursive material presented in the volume brings forward processes by which people came together; imagined spaces of beauty, truth, and freedom; critiqued dominant power structures; shared aspirations and ideals;
and tried to build solidarities with larger and larger groups of people in the world with a voice of their own. There were, however, inner ruptures, divisions among people based on caste, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, and geographical area, aggravated by colonising powers that became linked with economic and social disparities creating core areas of inequality in society, which were difficult to bridge and led to concentrations of power and hence exploitative situations. The discursive texts themselves also sometimes contributed to the divisive forces. However, the creative centre fortified by imagination seemed to be the only space that could continue to be affirmative in the face of overwhelming negative forces. Literary discourse, except in certain moments as in the period preceding independence or in the case of theatre, did not set out with a utilitarian agenda but had its purposiveness in building affective communities, enabling greater bondings and providing visions of a cultural ecology. As Mahasweta Devi commenting on the deep injustices of history states that ‘The ceaseless vibration, changes in layers and transformations continue deep within my mind’, and one may hope also perhaps a little in the reading community where discourse related to the literary may provide a ‘force to shift underneath, beyond or on the side of the hegemonic order of things’.12

Notes


3 Rangalal Bandopadhyay, Bangla Kabita Bishayak Prabandha, Rangalal Rachanabali, Santikumar Dasgupta and Haribandhu Mukhoti (eds.), Kolkata: Datta Chaudhuri and Sons, 1954, pp. 71–86. The essay was first published as a booklet in 1853.