

## THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THEATRE

### IN SHILLONG

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A vigorous theatre has its roots in the art form evolved by the people through the ages. The Khasis and Jaintias also must have had an indigenous art-form for mass communication. This is apparent from a knowledge of Khasi culture which is remarkably rich in folktales, community songs and dances, and poetic address set in rhyme, known as 'Phawars' and also from a study of the robust Khasi political and social life marked by a spirit of independence.

But in Shillong, the theatre as such, could derive no benefit from the Khasi indigenous art-form. This was because the Khasis and Jaintias in the beginning had no room in the colonial culture which had come in the wake of the establishment in 1864 of the administrative village for Khasi and Jaintia Hills during the rule of Sir Robert Campbell, 'the most Noble, the Governor of Bengal'.

The British, then masters of Shillong, after shifting their administrative headquarters from Cherrapunjee, left no stone unturned to make their temporary sojourn comfortable in Shillong. They set up a colony for the white ruling class. "The European Ward", provided 'Race-course', founded the 'Golf Club', and the 'Shillong Club', established 'Polo Ground', the cricket field (Garrison Ground) and built 'the Ward Lake'. The small European society of Shillong had never contemplated of any art form even for amusement purposes, not to speak of theatre. Their little urge for entertainment were satisfied by domestic parties and drawing room-meets and occasional society halls. But their counterpart in Calcutta, one century earlier, had the distinction of establishing the first amateur stage in British

India in the fashion of the Hanoverian stage in London. The Calcutta Theatre of 1775, founded at the initiative of 74 top-ranking English residents of the city under the patronage of Governor-General Warren Hasting, however, set up an unhealthy tradition of Amateur Theatre which was followed as a theatre tradition in Calcutta and devoutly pursued in the rest of British India.

### I. Bengali Efforts

Theatre, as part of colonial culture, did not come to Shillong directly from the west, but was imported from Bengal by the Bengalee Babus, the 'Bhadralok Class' who came in the train of British rule, after Shillong was made the capital of the newly constituted Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam in 1874. As the Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara formed part of this new province, the rising 'Babus' of these areas, and some others from Bengal proper also, with the advantage of their early initiation in English education, got hold of the new Government jobs and professions then available for the Indians under the British administrative system. The British authorities had settled them in Jail Road, Thana Road and Police Bazar Areas of Shillong. Subsequently, the Bengali settlement spread over to Harisabhapara (Laban), Maidan Laban, and Rilbong. In the early stage of British administration, Shillong was thus a "mere permanent camp of Government servants and traders where non-indigenous elements constituted the overwhelmingly dominant section."<sup>2</sup> The population was very small. According to the 1872 Census, Shillong had only 1363 inhabitants. Later, the population rose to 3737 in 1881 and to 6720 in 1891.<sup>3</sup>

The theatre owes its origin in Shillong to the growing demands for recreation of the Bengalee Babus. The first public hall that provided opportunities

for staging dramas was the Quinton Memorial Hall of Thana Road (later converted into Singhanian Talkies) which was created in memory of Mr. J.W. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam who was killed during his expedition of Manipur in 1891. This hall was founded specially by the joint efforts of the Bengalees of the Jail Road, Thana Road, and Police Bazar Areas who also had the distinction of forming the first theatrical club of Shillong, known as the Assam Bengal Theatre Club. The few Khasi and Assamese neighbours of the Bengalee community of these areas also joined hands in this effort.

The period witnessed the hey day of the Public Stage in Calcutta, dominated by the great playwrights like Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh, Kshirode Prasad Vidyavinode and Rasaraj Amritalal, followed by Dwijendra Lal Roy. That was also the period when religion had its greatest sway in the Indian pre-capitalistic feudal society, and many Bengali plays were based upon Hindu myths with religious import. There was also no dearth of social and historical plays written in the Bengali language. Thus the members of the Assam-Bengal Theatre Club staged in the Quinton Memorial Hall Bengali plays like Harischandra, Behula (mythological plays), Prafulla, Parapare, Shorasee, Vijaya (social plays) and Chandragupta, Shah Jahan etc. (historical plays). The extent of influence of the professional stage of Calcutta on these performances can be gleaned from the fact that in the first scene of 'Shorasee' (the drama-form of Sarat Chatterjee's Bengali novel, Dena-Paona), presented by the Assam Bengal Theatre Club, Jeebananda, the hero of the play was seen upon the stage in a palanquin which was constructed under the meticulous care of Babu Devendra Chandra Gupta, the then Government architect, at a cost of Rs. 50.00.<sup>4</sup> The Bengalee actors, workers and organizers who were associated with the Assam Bengal Theatre Club were Babu Upendralal Kanjilal, Prafulla Kanjilal, Ram Kanai Sen, Bhupal Basu, Nirmal Mukhopadhyay, Surendra Nath Dutta, Tamonash Shome,

Dhiren Sen, Sudhir Das Gupta, Kamini Chattopadhyay, Chandra Kumar Majumdar, Bhuban Ganguli, Annada Charan Chattopadhyaya, and many others.

In the thirties of the twentieth century there was a quarrel among the members of the Assam Bengal Theatre Club as a result of which the Bengalees of the Thana Road area seceded from the Assam Bengal Theatre Club and formed the 'Shillong Giti Natya Samaj', another dramatic organization. Their determination to have a separate theatre hall led to the establishment of the Opera Hall at Thana Road in 1932. The Giti Natya Samaj which had centred its activities in the Opera Hall and thus catered to the needs of the first generation of theatre-lovers of Shillong, had produced successfully the hit operas of Calcutta stage, like 'Ali Baba', 'Shiri Farhad' and 'Abu Hossain' etc. The Giti Natya Samaj also staged successfully few plays of Sarat Chatterjee including 'Biraj Bou' and 'Vijaya'. Among the first generation of actors and workers who participated and helped to produce the plays in Opera Hall were Babu Mahendra Gupta, Devendra Choudhury, Girish Bhattacharyya, Loknath Shee, Rajani Choudhury, Rebati Choudhury, Kumud Choudhury, Dwizen Sen, Hem Khajanchi, and Guru Charan Dhar etc. Rai Saheb Debendra Choudhury, Dr. Pulin Behari Deb, Babu Nripendra Nath Sen Gupta, Dwizendra Nath Sen, Sukhada Mahari Das, Ramesh Ch. nandi and Satish Ch. Choudhury did the pioneering work for the establishment of the Giti Natya Samaj which is said to have been born after the merger of 'Shillong Institute' and 'Evening Club'.

These theatrical activities, it may be mentioned here, were amateurish efforts with marked inclination to follow the professional stage of Calcutta. It is interesting to note that loud acting, high pitched articulation of a lengthy dialogue, and melodramatic poses and postures received universal applauses from

the older generation of audience. The Bengalee community of Jail Road and Thana Road still recalls with a feeling of nostalgia the performances of Rajani Choudhury, Loknath Shee and Parvarti Das in mythological plays like, "Ambarisher Brahmashap", "Haris Chandra" or "Abhimanyubadh". The play 'Sita' which sisir Bhaduri made famous by his inimitable acting in the role of Ramachandra was produced in the Opera Hall at the behest of Rai Saheb Dwijen Sen, Babu Prafulla Sen, Inan Dutta and Sukhomoy Dey and others in 1936.

The old tradition of the theatre continued during the forties of the present century. The second generation of Bengali Babus went on producing plays with themes bordering on the mythological, historical and the social. The Quinton Memorial Hall and the Opera Hall hummed with dramatic performances. The Bengali actors and organizers crowding this second phase were Babu Sailesh Sen, Kshitish Bhattacharyya, Sailen Ghosh, Saradindu Ghosh, Bhupen Ghosh, Pratul Nag, Jatish Datta, Hirendranath Sen, Loknath Bhattacharyya, Khandu Shome, Hiranmoy Choudhury, Jnan Bhoumick, Parbati Das, Dinesh Das, Bankim Chatterjee, Pramatha Guha, Anadi Mukherjee, Haripada Samaddar, Upen Sen, Prafulla Das Gupta, Sudha Sindhu Roy, Aulad Hossain and many others.

A very common characteristic feature of old theatre was the incorporation of concert. The members of the Bengal Institute were famous for making concert an indispensable attraction of the Bengali Theatre of Shillong. Moulla Box Saheb (the father of late Aulad Hossain, a prominent citizen and a good actor), Dhan Babu, Tunu Babu, Bhim Babu, Kshirode Babu, Sailen Ghosh, Bhupen Ghosh and Subimal Pal were the celebrated artistes of the Bengal Institute who played concert to the accompaniment of musical instruments like harmonium, tabla, sitar, flute, clarionette, and the cornet. They were associated with the Assam Bengal Theatre Club. Babu Upendra

Nath Sen and Jitendra Nath Das played <sup>10</sup> concert in the performances of the Giti Natya Samaj.

The drop scene of the Opera Hall was decorated with paintings of landscape of Umañanda on the Brahmaputra river. The Assam Bengal Theatre Club stole a march upon the Giti Natya Samaj by presenting painted rural scenery of the plains amidst the background of hill perspective.<sup>11</sup> The stage lighting was accomplished with the help of kerosene-hazack or the carbide gas lamp. The illusion of storm, lightning, horse riding,<sup>12</sup> etc. was produced by different imaginative devices.

But the most interesting feature of the old theatre in Shillong was the rendering of female roles by male actors. The stage-production of mythological and historical plays were invariably linked with a few dances performed by the maids or girls attending the heroine. In these dances called 'Sakhi Nach', Haripada De, Rasamoy Bhomick, Kamakhya Banerjee, Sobharam Kalita and Pradyot Ghosal (alias Pacha Ghosal of P.K. Ghosal & Co.) excelled. Sudhir Das gupta, Jyotirmoy Ghosh and Mani Acharya earned a name by performing female roles.<sup>13</sup> There is an anecdote that when Rabindranath Tagore visited Shillong for the third time in 1927, the youths of Jail Road area made arrangements to show him the performance of his comedy 'Chiro Kumar Sabha'. Later however, Tagore discovered that the girls who would be singing his songs were actually male actors like Sudhir Das Gupta, and Sailesh Sen. Tagore disapproved this absurdity and the idea was altogether dropped.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally it may be mentioned here that it was Tagore who added respectability to the Bengali Theatre by producing 'Natir Puja' first in Santiniketan (1926) and then in Calcutta (1927), a dance drama which was performed<sup>15</sup> by the girls of Santiniketan under his direction. It was an age when theatre was looked down upon in the society,

and although the Babus patronised theatre, they never allowed their own daughters or female relatives to make a public appearance on the stage. The progressive section of the Bengalee Brahmos took a lead in this respect by spreading female education in Shillong, and girls were seen on the stage only after the foundation of Lady Keane Girls' School (1932) and Lady Keane Girls' College (1935), the first of its kind in Assam for higher education of women. We have evidence of the first play, staged by Lady Keane Girls at 'Sanat-Kutir', Laban, where in the beginning, the College hostel was located. It was Tagore's 'Griho-Prabesh', performed by them in 1935. The play was said to be a hit, and it was re-staged in the 'Ganga Prasad Kedia Hall' after the construction and opening of the Lady Keane School and College Building at their present site in 1937.<sup>16</sup>

In the same year a cultural team from Tagore's Viswabharati visited Shillong and presented the dance-drama Chitrangada at the Opera Hall. This also served as a source of inspiration to the management, staff and the students of the institution.<sup>17</sup>

They started arranging functions every year on various occasions. From the information we get from Sm. Suprava Choudhury, one of the oldest lecturers of Lady Keane College who later retired as the Principal of the Victoria Institution, Calcutta, we come to know that the Lady Keane girls staged Tagore-dramas like Natir Puja, Tapati, Lakshir Pariksha, Raktakarabi and also a historical play in Assamese, entitled 'Anarkali'. Ramola and Chitra, two prominent actresses, were the daughters of Babu Atulanda Das, the founder secretary of the Lady Keane College. Georgina Hazarika surprised everyone by her acting in 'Bishop's Candle Stick'. She played the role of the convict. Indira Roy impressed the audience by her role of Iago in Othello.<sup>18</sup> The colourful function that was held at the Ganga Prasad Kedia Hall on 11th June, 1938, on the occasion of the Prize Distribution Ceremony of Lady Keane Girls' School and College, was

presided over by Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam. The programme included dramatic performances, songs and dances. The girls staged a one act English play 'The Prince was a Piper'. Miss Prabha Desai, daughter of Mr. Desai, I.C.S., Chief Secretary of Assam and Sm. Romola Das acted in the roles of the 'King' and 'the Prince piper' respectively.

Rai Saheb Dwijendra Nath Sen was a great patron of Bengali culture in Shillong. He was himself a good actor. He took the initiative to bring a Jatra Party from Calcutta led by Sri Nabadwip Ghosal. It was due to the efforts of Rai Saheb Dwijen Sen that Udai Shankar came with his Ballet troupe to Shillong and performed dances in the Opera Hall in 1941. Udai Shankar's team included among others Miss Simki and the famous Sarode Sitar mastero, Ostad Alauddin Khan.

## II. The Growth of Assamese Theatre

In the early stage of British administration in Shillong, the society was not linguistically compartmentalized. It was a time when the Sahibs (The Englishmen) and the Babus (the English educated Bengalees) had become the model for the new born incipient Assamese and Khasi middle class who were minority in the urban sector. The dearth of facilities for higher education in English restricted the entry of the Assamese and the Khasis as clerks and Omlas in the new administrative set up, and prevented them from taking respectable professions of lawyers and doctors. The policy of 'jobs to the qualified' followed by the Raj in the British administered areas left no scope for group rivalries for loaves and fishes, and so there was understanding and social intercourse between the Bengali, the Assamese and the Khasi communities. The performance of Bengali plays involved the participation of the Assamese and the Khasis, who constituted a fraction of the audience. Under the circumstances, the train

of theatre set in by Bengali efforts caught the imagination of the few Assamese settlers who seized it keenly as a popular form of entertainment. This was in fact, due to the impact of the Bengal renaissance on Assam which let loose, in the newly formed province, the twin processes of westernization and sanskritisation, acting upon and often in conflict with each other. The Brahmaputra valley itself was profoundly influenced by the Bengali Theatre.<sup>20</sup> Following the foundation of National Theatre in Calcutta in 1872, attempts were made to build permanent public stages at Gauhati, Jorhat and Tejpur, where in the beginning, the Assamese gentry and rising middle class began to share with the Bengali Babus the imitative pleasure of English Theatre. The result, although not very happy always, was the growth of modern Assamese drama. The spark from the flickering flame of the Jonaki Age (1889-1938) kindled first by the Assamese students at Calcutta travelled through the plains of Assam to reach finally the hill plateau of Shillong.

Incidentally, it is to be mentioned that Assamese settlement started in Shillong very slowly for reasons already indicated above. The few Assamese who came to the capital, primarily in pursuit of Government jobs, began to settle in Jail Road and Mawkhar. By 1896 there were hardly more than 25 Assamese young enthusiasts in Shillong working in Government offices, of which 10 to 15 families settled in Laban. The Assam Club of Laban owes its origin to the urge and efforts of this band of early settlers who wanted to have an institution with a hall and a stage for their use. The decision having been taken in 1896, the Syiem of Myllem was approached for a plot of land in Laban. The earthquake of 1897, however, delayed the endeavour. Later, the Syiem gave the land prayed for, and some other plots were subsequently acquired<sup>21</sup> to make the Assam Club premises which still exists. The club has a

stage, a library and an auditorium. The Assam Club started functioning in 1899.

With the foundation of the Assam Club at Laban, was born the Assamese Theatre in Shillong. The first Assamese drama staged in Shillong was a mythological one, 'Data Karna', produced by the members of the Assam Club in their own stage in 1900 A.D. Between 1901 and 1904, the Assam Club staged Harischandra, Labkush and Bhramaranga. The last mentioned play was an Assamese rendering of shakespeare's Comedy of Errors, made and staged first by the Assamese students of the Jonaki Group at Calcutta in 1888.

In Shillong the cultural activities in general and the theatre in particular came almost to a halt in 1905, when the town lost its position of honour in the new administrative set up, following the formation of the "province of Eastern Bengal and Assam" as a result of the partition of Bengal. Dacca was selected as the capital of the new province, and Shillong reverted to its original position of being the headquarters of the Khasi and Jayantiya Hills District, included now under "Surma Valley and Hills Districts Division". As a result of the shifting of the provincial capital from Shillong, all government servants, excepting those working in the District Offices moved to Dacca or Sylhet or to the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>24</sup> The population of Shillong, which according to the Census estimate of 1901 was 8384, came down. Laban wore a deserted look. The members of the Assam Club ended their activities with a farewell meeting amidst notes of detection. The unexpected blow checked for years even the small influx of the Assamese people.

Things settled after the partition of Bengal was revoked in 1912, when Assam was reconstituted as a Chief Commissioner's Province with a Legislative Council of its own, and, Shillong was made its

capital. This 'welcome relief' brought again the Assamese people in the town and the Assamese theatre was revived after a gap of ten years. The revival began with the performance of Padmanath Gohain Baruah's 'Teton Tamuli' on 7 February, 1914. The play was staged at the end of annual session of the Assam Club. The session closed at 4 P.M. with the decision to have a theatrical performance that night. It is interesting to note that the members produced the play after having an instant rehearsal for two hours during the intervening period. 'Teton Tamuli' was followed by two more social plays, 'Mahari' and 'Gaon Bura' which are notable productions of the war period. In 1920, Rai Bahadur Kanaklal Barua, President of the Assam Club, took the initiative to enlarge the stage of the Assam Club, and one Assamese merchant, Sri Bholanath Barua extended monetary help for its reconstruction. The rapid increase in the demand for entertainment also necessitated some kind of renovation. (Assam was elevated as a Governor's province in 1921 with Shillong remaining as its Capital). The reconstructed stage was named as B. Barua Mancha. Subsequently, Rai Bahadur Siva Prasad Barua and his son Hemendra Prasad Barua contributed a sum of Rs.3400 and Rs.2000 respectively for extension of the auditorium. The new extended hall was renamed as Siva Prasad Barua Hall. In 1922, a social farce, "Kukuri Konar Athmangla" was performed. Other farces, produced by the Assam Club were 'Biya Biparyaya' and 'Bridhyasya Taruni Bharya'. Among the social plays staged by the Assam Club, one that evoked universal applause was 'Sangsar Chitra'. The national movement provided the urge to stage historical and mythological plays. The result was memorable performances of plays like, 'Joymati', 'Labkush', 'Chandragupta', 'Jaksharaj', 'Sabitri Satyaban', 'Sonit Kungari', 'Karengar Ligiri' and 'Kashmir Kumari'. It may be mentioned here that the eminent Assamese playwright Sri Atul Chandra Hazarika

and the renowned stage actor Sri Indreswar Barthakur were associated with the Assam Club's activities. In one performance of 'Joymati', Atul Chandra Hazarika, Sailendra Kumar Dutta, Hem Chandra Barua and Jibeswar Goswami acted in different roles. In 'Chandragupta', Prof. Baradakanta Sarma and Atul Chandra Hazarika performed in the roles of Chanakya and Katyayana respectively. It must be said to the credit of Sri Atul Chandra Hazarika that, at a time when Assamese Theatre was almost drowned under the splashing waves of Bengali Theatre, and the staging of Assamese version of Bengali plays became almost a fashion in Assam, it was Sri Atul Hazarika who employed his creative energy and talent in the writing of Assamese plays and thus liberated Assamese Theatre from the shackles of Bengali theatre. Some of his mythological and historical plays like 'Narakasur', 'Kanauj-Kuanri', 'Beula' and 'Sakuntala' were produced by the Assam Club with great success. The Assam Club of Laban can take pride in the fact that some illustrious personalities from Assam took active role in some of its performances. They were Jyotiprasad Agrawall, Parbati Prasad Barua, Niranjan Barthakur and Dr. Hem Chandra Barua. The female roles in its various performances were rendered by Purnasashi Gupta, Girish Sarma, Jibeswar Goswami, Serafat Uddin Choudhury, Hemkanta Barua, Imanuddin Ahmad, Hem Bardoloi, Ratneswar Borthakur and many others. Dancing formed an intergral part of the theatre. Manikanta Sarma, Gouriswar Barkakoti and Khagen Medhi gave dance performances as Sakhi or maid in 'Meghnad Badh'. Sri Bed Kantha Sarma, Phanidhar Barua, Azahar Hussain and Muhammad Rafique showed proficiency in the art of dancing. Like the Assam Bengal Theatre Club and Giti Natya Samaj, the Assam Club had also its own concert party. The Concert was played by Sarada Kanta Barua (clarionette), Surendra Nath Bora (harmonium), Sailendra Kumar Dutta (tabla) and Ananda Kumar (flute).<sup>25</sup>

The congregation of the bulk of the Assamese in one locality, and the prolific stage activities contributed largely to the growth of a corporate Assamese life, which in its turn created an urge to mould life in the traditional Assamese way. Shillong, from the Assamese point of view, became culturally integrated with the Brahmaputra valley for the time being, drinking deep from the mainstream of Assamese culture. This resulted not only in the Assamese religious institution, 'Namghar' and the spectacular celebration of folk-dance 'Bihu', but also in the revival of the original indigenous form of Assamese Theatre, 'Ankia Nat' which was so long submerged under the new wave of theatre surging from Bengal. 'Kichak Badh', an Ankia Nat was very successfully produced in Shillong in the traditional form. In 'Kichak Badh Bhaona', Indreswar Barthakur, Jibeswar Goswami, Mathuranath Barua and Harendranath Mahanta entertained the audience in different roles. The success of 'Kichak Badh' inspired the performance of another Bhaona, 'Rukmini Haran'.

In April 1938, Sri Jibeswar Goswami and Suresh Ch. Goswami established an Assamese troupe named 'Prachin Kamrupi Nritya Sangha' with the aim to promote the traditional Assamese dance. This organization earned a reputation by presenting dance dramas in Shillong and Assam.<sup>26</sup>

But the revivalist trend was short lived, and Assamese Theatre soon succumbed to the glittering spell of Bengali indigenous Jatra form. In the forties the influence of Jatra became more remarkably pronounced specially in performances like 'Rupsikha' (1944) and 'Satirjej' (1945), produced by Tarun Milan Sangha, a dramatic organization formed by the Assamese Fourth Grade Employees of Shillong. The Shillong Assamese Students' Union also staged several plays of which Ganesh

Gogoi's 'Sakunir Pratisodh' and Laksha Choudhury's 'Bishnu Sarmar<sup>27</sup> Bichar', staged in 1945, deserve special mention.

The general characteristics of old Theatre are also present in pre-independent Assamese Theatre of Shillong. Its growth and development was profoundly affected by the political vicissitudes and social dynamics transforming the town of Shillong under the colonial regime. The lack of an indigenous base for administration, the slow pace of modernisation and urbanisation, limited job opportunities, extremely lopsided growth of the township, a vacuum in the liberal educational sphere, and finally, a continuous mobility of the small population are some of the constraints which did not allow the theatre, either Assamese or Bengali to strike root in the soil of Shillong. This also accounts for, why theatre could not be pursued by the actors and artistes as a profession and as means of livelihood. It was regarded as an easy mode of entertainment for and by the leisurely class, the 'Babus' of Shillong. Theatre often formed a part of the Puja celebrations, especially of 'Durga-Puja', a practice which is still in vogue.

### III. The Origin of Khasi Theatre

There has been undoubtedly some form of folk-drama in the Khasi language. According to Dr. Hamlet Bareh, "The Khasis have many unwritten drama works<sup>28</sup> which have been staged from time to time". Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh also seems to hold this view when he speaks of the usual practice of dramatic<sup>29</sup> performances around the fire place in Khasi houses.

It is evident that like the Bengali popular folk-drama form of Jatra of the pre-colonial period, the Khasi folk-dramas also remained unwritten,

and, for their performance, they required no fixed stage, scenes or curtain. But modern theatre which is inseparably bound up with the stage, needed a different form of drama written to suit the norms and requirements of the stage. The emergence of the Khasi theatre was delayed due to non-existence of such plays which could represent life through action when performed on the stage. In the pre-colonial period, the Khasis had popular songs representing various modes of cultivation and other action songs depicting scenes of war. But this indigenous form did not receive any encouragement as the base for writing plays for theatre.

Interestingly enough, Christianity which had been a modernising factor in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and was chiefly instrumental for the dissemination of elementary education among the Khasi and Jaintias, providing them a permanent script and written literature,<sup>30</sup> did not have any contribution in the growth of theatre. While the Christian missionaries popularized western music, produced translations of Church hymns in Khasi, adding proper western notations, they did not perceive the importance of utilising mass-media of theatre even for the propagation of the Gospel which was their primary concern. In Europe, and specially in England, drama evolved chiefly out of Church efforts to produce Mystery and Miracle plays, but no such attempt was made by the pioneer missionaries in the hills to provide Khasi literature with drama. In fact, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission discouraged every form of Khasi indigenous cultural activities including dramatic performances.<sup>31</sup> In 1891, Rev. John Roberts of the Welsh Mission made a Khasi translation of an excerpt from Scene III, Act II of Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar' which was included in the Khasi Textbook, Fourth Reader, (printed in 1896). But this was an individual attempt without any contemplation of the promotion of Khasi theatre.

Under the circumstances, theatre came to the Khasis and Jaintias through the colonial culture that had set in Shillong after the growth of the township. The budding middle class Khasis who had come from southern areas of Shella, Sohbar and Sohra (Cherrapunji), and those who came from the War areas of Jaintia Hills, after acquiring private lands, settled in Umshason, Mawkhar, Wahingdoh, Jaiaw and Laban areas of Shillong. The ancestors of these new-comers were acquainted with the pre-colonial popular form of Bengali Jatra and also with the recent trends of Bengali Theatre on account of their close contact with the Bengalees of Sylhet district. Now, after coming to Shillong and taking up new occupations in the colonial set up, they were exposed to the niceties of 'Babu Culture'. It is to be noticed that like the contemporary Assamese gentry, the rising generation of the Khasis also liked to be called as 'Babus'. The inherent aptitude of the Khasis and Jayantias for dance, music and mimicry made them fall under the captivating influence of the wave of theatre imported by the Bengali Babus. Many of them, not only saw dramatic performances in the Quinton Memorial Hall or Opera Hall, but also participated actively in the Assam Bengal Theatre club and Giti Natya Samaj theatrical activities.

### **Khasi Drama: Seng Khasi Efforts**

The Khasi theatre owes its origin very much to the activities of Seng Khasi, the socio-cultural organization of the Non-Christian Khasis. Founded in 1899, this organisation tried to arrest the onslaught of Christianity. It tried to preserve and revive Khasi dance, music and other indigenous forms of Khasi art and culture. It also tried to link up Khasi culture with the mainstream of Indian culture. This evoked a new spirit of awakening among the Khasis, and Shillong

witnessed a cultural renaissance during the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> One important result of this awakening was the birth of the Khasi drama.

In 1910, Babu Haricharan Roy, a Khasi writer of the Seng Khasi Association brought out his *Ka Savitri* which is the first full length drama in Khasi language and also the first published play in Khasi. Hari Charan followed the mythological tradition of Bengali Theatre then imitated in Shillong and had as his theme the popular legend of the Mahabharata depicting the virtuous Savitri bringing back her dead husband to life. In 1912, came out another Khasi play *Srimmotimai*, written by Haricharan's younger brother, Dinonath Roy who continued this tradition and published in 1924 another play entitled '*U Tipsngi*' (a hero) which is a 'typical drama work representing Khasi ways of life and thought'.<sup>34</sup>

Babu Rash Mohan Roy, the first Chairman of the Seng Khasi also wrote a drama entitled '*Ka Damayanti Bad U Nol*' which was published in 1927. In dramatising this popular mythological tale, Rash Mohan might have been influenced by the well known Bengali play '*Nal Damayanti*' written by the great Bengali playwright Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1887. We come to learn from Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh that one of Rashmohan's important plays '*U Saimuka Ka Duitara*' was left unpublished.<sup>35</sup> It is not known whether any Khasi drama group has ever attempted to produce the classical plays of the Seng Khasi authors on the stage.

### The First Khasi Stage

The Seng Khasi Organization not only provided encouragement for writing of Khasi dramas, it also keenly desired to use the medium of theatre for

reflection of Khasi aspirations. In 1912, <sup>36</sup>the Seng Khasi Hall was constructed at Mawkhar and a spacious stage was added afterwards to promote Khasi theatre. In order to facilitate regular dramatic performances, the Seng Khasi also established the Khasi Native Club. <sup>37</sup>The pioneering activities of Rash Mohan Roy, Babu Chandra Nath Roy, Hormu Roy Diengdoh, Hajom Kisore Sing and Mohan Massar for the promotion of Khasi Theatre will be written in golden letters in the history of Khasi culture. <sup>38</sup>Although some of them were connected with Seng Khasi, the Unitarian Church or the Brahmo Samaj Movements, they represented the broadminded, liberal generation of the Khasi gentlemen, having a cosmopolitan outlook, determined to make a substantial contribution to the development of Khasi culture. Thus, while the Bengali Clubs of Thana Road and Jail Road, often engaged hired artistes from Calcutta or Gauhati to make their scenes or sets in the Quinton Memorial Hall or the Opera Hall, the Seng Khasi Organisation, or the Khasi Native Club employed indigenous Khasi artistes to frame and point the scenes and wings in their stage at Seng Khasi Hall, Mawkhar, which had an elevated platform. <sup>39</sup>

### **Khasi Plays from Bengali Sources**

The dearth of Khasi plays at this initial stage made the Khasis look for plays written in other languages. Gifted with ears for music, they easily fell under the influence of the Opera Tradition set forth by the Giti Natya Samaj of Thana Road. They are said to have adopted the Indian notes and tunes almost perfectly. It is interesting to learn that 'Ali Baba', a Bengali play of the Opera Style, written by Kshirode Prasad, was performed by many dramatic clubs of Shillong including the Giti Natya Samaj, but the one that was staged by Laban Club, created sensation. The performance was held in Quinton Memorial Hall

in 1933. The audience which comprised also the Bengalees, highly appreciated the roles of Alibaba and Abdala, performed respectively by Joren Lyngdoh and Darju Swer. Jyotish Das, known as 'Buramoni' and also Jiten Das contributed equally to the success of the performance. The Khasi dramatic clubs of this period staged 'Lailamajnu', 'Shiri Farhad' and even mythological plays like 'Harischandra', and 'Naradmuni'. Another worth mentioning performance was 'Ram Sita', staged by the Khasi Drivers' Association. It is curious to note that 'Malati Madhab', a 19th Century Bengali play, translated from Bhababhuti's sanskrit work of the same name by Babu Kali Prasanna Singha was never produced in Shillong in any language other than Khasi. We do not know who the authors of these Khasi versions were and where those scripts in Khasi have gone.

### **The Jaintia Performances**

The Syntengs or Jaintias also did not lag behind in showing their histrionic talents. Their productions were marked by the addition of a greater number of songs and dances. The Jaintias had already been used to the employment of the tabla, harmonium, the clarionette and other Indian musical instruments, imported from Bengal. Now they used these in their dramatic performances in Shillong. The Jaintias often adopted stories from silent English movies then shown in Kelvin Cinema. The subject matter as well as the style of representation of these plays were indeed funny. The title of one such play produced by the Jaintias was 'Douglas Fairbank in Jodhpur'. It is said that with the curtain opening for this play, the audience saw fairies floating in the sky. The focus of coloured lights converted the scene into a spectrum-world of fantasy and thrill. The Lumkyrwiang Club of the Jaintias is said to have produced plays

entitled 'Raitong' and 'Syntu Khlo Syntu Shnong'. Some actors of this club gained great popularity. People still recollect the names of Wad Najier and B. Kyndia who excelled in their performances.<sup>42</sup>

### Performance of Original Khasi Plays

The actual date of staging the first Khasi play cannot be told with certainty. After the formation of the Khasi Native Club many drama groups of the Khasis came into existence. Prominent among them were the Khasi dramatic clubs of Mawkhar, Wahingdoh and Laban. The Khasi Native Club of the Seng Khasi is said to have staged many plays in Shillong with plots based upon the finest folk tales and legends that permeate the green pine-clad hills, the bubbling streams and waterfalls, and the silent wood lands. 'Manik Raitong', 'Ka Sala Nongum' and 'U Tiewlarun' are some of the plays produced creditably under the patronage of the Seng Khasi.<sup>43</sup> One particular Khasi play is said to have created a great impact in Shillong town. This was a play written by Babu Chandra Nath Roy on the immortal love of Manik Raitong, the Khasi minstrel. It was staged<sup>44</sup> in the Opera Hall during the Christmas of 1933. During the second world war, another Khasi dramatic Club came into lime light. Its name was Shillong Panora Club or the Panora Theatrical Club. The club was located at Wahingdoh. It staged its first play 'Ka Romily' on the night of 3rd March, 1943. All the plays for this club were written by Peace Roy Pariat who is said to have been "a prince in writing tragi-comedies".<sup>45</sup> The Panora Club staged Pariat's plays at Opera Hall, Quinton Memorial Hall and Seng Khasi Hall. The names of these plays are 'Ka Kyrzan', 'Ka Jingrah', 'Ieit, Ieit, Ym Dei Jingieit Shet Khun Jakai', 'Bor<sup>46</sup> Ksuid Pырshah Bor Blei' and 'Na Kyndong Sha Sor'.

## Conclusion

The old theatrical efforts, as it would appear from this review, were very much limited in aims and purposes. It lacked high seriousness. The national awakening in Bengal freed theatre from the grip of Babu culture when it became a mighty instrument for mass regeneration. But in Shillong, theatre continued to be influenced by the vulgar tastes of the Babus and business class. Theatre was pursued more for fun and amusement than for serving a higher cause with a definite social purpose. The period of the forties of this century was momentous in every respect. A new world was desperately struggling to emerge from the smouldering ashes of the two world wars. The echo of this era of turmoil was not heard in Shillong Theatre of pre-independence period, be it Bengali, Assamese or Khasi. Theatre did not reflect the genuine aspirations of the people. No one heard in theatre the tumult of the Indian freedom movement. The Khasi authors of this period did not even contemplate the great probability of projecting on the stage the heroic struggle and sacrifice of U Tirot Singh or U Kiang Nongbah. Shillong also refused to be affected by the progressive theatre movement launched in India by the IPTA. The colonial structure of the town set forth these limitations. Theatre in the pre-independence period of Shillong, therefore, was basically 'go-merry-like'.

## Notes & References

1. Hemendra Nath Das Gupta, **The Indian Stage** (Vol. I), p.187. Sophia Goldborne, giving an account of the Calcutta Theatre, wrote in her book **Hartely House**, "No expense has been spared to gratify either the eye or the ear; a very pleasing band of music saluted the present Governor on his entrance and the pit was crowded with spectators. It is lighted upon the English plan with lamps at the bottom of the stage".

Quoted from "Bangla Rangamancher Aitihya O Amader Siksha", a Bengali article by Shyamdas Bhattacharyya published in the **Souvenir of Natyasangsad**, Shillong in 1972, on the occasion of the Centenary Celebration of the Bengali Public Stage.

2. A. Guha, **Planter Raj to Swaraj**, ICHR, New Delhi, 1977, p.25.
3. W.W. Hunter, **A Statistical Account of Assam**, Vol. II, Reprinted Delhi, 1974, p. 221. Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India, Reprinted in 1979, p. 499.
4. Jatish Dutta, "Shillonge Saratchandrer Natak", a Bengali article published in the Saratchandra Birth Centenary Celebration, Souvenir, 1976. p. 39. The author informs that Shorashee was first staged in April 1928 at the Assam Club, Laban. The Assam Bengal Theatre Club's performance took place in July, 1928.
5. Hem Chandra Chattopadhyaya, 'Smritir Monikothay', a Bengali article published in **Bandana**, Jail Road, Puja Committee Souvenir, 1384 B.S.
6. **Ibid.** The author himself dramatised Saratchandra's Biraj Bou and produced it in the Opera Hall. See Jatish Dutta, **Op.cit.**
7. The Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Gity Natya Samaj, 1982.
- 8-10. **Ibid.** Also see "Purano Diner Katha" by Jatish Dutta, a Bengali article published in Jail Road Puja Committee's Souvenir, 1383 B.S.
11. Hem Chandra Chattopadhyaya, **Op.cit.**
12. Aulad Hossain, "Chiro Sabuj Sangha", a Bengali article published by Natya Sangsad, Shillong, in its **Souvenir**, 1972, on the occasion of Centenary Celebration of Bengali National Theatre (1872-1972).
13. Hem Chandra Chattopadhyaya, **Op.cit.** Aulad Hossain, **Op.cit.**
14. Shyamadas Bhattacharyya, "Shillong Rabindranath O Kichhu Prasangik Prasna", a Bengali article published in Umium, 2nd Issue, Aswin, 1391 B.S., **Journal of Shillong Bangiya Parisad**, p. 10.

15. Pravat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, **Rabindra Jibane**, Viswabharati, Santiniketan, 1343 B.S., pp. 297 & 321. Sm Gauri Basu, the daughter of the eminent painter, Nandalal Basu and other Asram girls hailing from respectable families took part in these performances. Tagore himself took the role of Upali.
16. **Ibid.**, p. 13.
17. **Ibid.** English Section, Bibhu Bhusan Choudhury, the Lady Keane Girls' High School and College, p.1.
18. **Ibid.** English Section. Suprabha Choudhury, "My life in Lady Keane College", p. 7. Also see p.21, **Cultural Profile**, Aspachia.
19. Jatish Datta, "Purano Diner Katha" a Bengali article published by Jail Road Durga Puja Committee's Souvenir, Shillong, 1383 B.S.
20. Maheswar Neog, **Asmiya Sahityar Ruprekha**, p. 298. Also see **Political History of Assam**, Vol. I, Ed. by H.K. Barpujari, p. 127, Cultural Impact of Bengal.
21. Atul Hazarika, **Manchalekha**, Gauhati, 1967, pp. 556-57.
22. **Ibid.** Also see "Shillongot Asamiya Nat", an Assamese article by Bikash Bhuyan, published in **Natya Sangsad**, Shillong's Souvenir, 1974.
23. Maheswar Neog, **Op.cit.**, p. 209.
24. S.J. Duncan, "My Shillong", Shillong Centenary Celebration Souvenir, 1976, p. 40.
- 25-27. Atul Hazarika, **Op.cit.**, pp. 558-570.
28. Hamlet Barih, **A Short History of Khasi Literature**, p. 58, 1st Edition, 1962.
29. R.S. Lyngdoh, "A Short Resume on the Development of Khasi Drama in Khasi Literature", an English article published in Rympei Theatrical Centre Souvenir, 1982, p. 9.
30. Hamlet Barih, **The History and Culture of the Khasi People**, Guwahati, 1985, pp. 364-366, 394-395. Also see Nalini Natarajan, **The Missionary Among the Khasi**, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 90-124.

31. The Welsh Mission launched practically a campaign against Khasi culture, banned the Khasi national sport of archery and threatened to excommunicate any one from the Church if he attended the Khasi dance or any Khasi Cultural and religious function. See J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Messenger of Khasi Heritage", an article published in the Seng Khasi book "Khasi Heritage", Shillong, 1979. The Jaintia festival Behdien Khlam ceased to be performed after the Dalloi at Jowai was converted to Christianity. See H. Rymbai's article "The Birth of Seinraj" in **Khasi Heritage**, Shillong, 1979, p. 185. Also Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**, p. 9. "But this mission, as it appears, discouraged the development of drama".
32. Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**, p. 9.
33. Hamlet Bareh, **Op.cit.**, in his **A Short History of Khasi Literature**, Bareh calls this phenomenon a "Cultural Awakening". Chapter IV, p. 39. See also Bareh's **The History and Culture of Khasi People**, **Op.cit.**, pp. 366-370.
34. **Ibid.**, p. 59.
35. Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**, p. 10.
36. **Khasi Heritage**, **Op.cit.**, p. 15. The hall was constructed at the site of the house bought for it in 1902.
37. R. S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**, p. 9.
- 38-41. Jatish Datta, "Reminiscence from the Past", an English article published in the Drama Festival Souvenir of Shillong **Natya Samsad** in 1975.
42. Webster-Davies Jyrwa, "The Cultural Activities of Shillong", an article published in the Souvenir of Mayukh, on the Occasion of All Languages Short Drama Competition, held in Shillong, in 1982.
43. **Ibid.**
44. Jatish Datta, **Op.cit.**
45. Webster Davies Jyrwa, **Op.cit.** Also R. S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**
46. R.S. Lyngdoh, **Op.cit.**, p. 10.