

## **Making Brecht UnBrechtian But Is that a Good Thing? Brechtian Epic as Alienated Melodrama in India**

Souradeep Roy

*Queen Mary University of London*

**Abstract:** *This paper looks at the practice of rupantor in the Bengali group theatre movement as a process of translation in which “the original text, as well as the recipient tradition in which it is being adapted undergoes a transformation” (Roy 2000, 320). I analyse Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay’s adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s The Good Person of Szechwan as Bhalomanush. This adaptation is read alongside the contemporary critical reaction to these adaptations in Bengali by theatre critics like Samik Bandyopadhyay, directors and playwrights like Utpal Dutt, as well as newspaper reviews, and recent reactions to archival remnants of the play on YouTube. I argue that the critics’ disavowal of the adaptation fundamentally misunderstands the role of theatre translation where the theatre must speak to a public audience in the here and now of the performance and its audiences. A fundamental departure from the original in stage adaptations is necessary for this audience and, following Fredric Jameson’s (1999) reading of Brecht, a “useful” process. This is inevitable under the material conditions of practising theatre in Bengal where conditions were very different from the one Brecht was facing when working with the Berliner Ensemble.*

**Keywords:** Bertolt Brecht; *The Good Person of Szechwan*; Ajitesh Bandhopadhyay, Bengali theatre; translation; adaptation

“Around the world, there is a tendency to show Brecht as a difficult, obscure object of the most difficult scale among critics. In the theatre business, if their favourite toy is spread among the masses so easily, it’ll be difficult for them to accept that.”

- Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay ([1983] 2010a, 93)

“A *rupantor* of Brecht is certainly possible to suit the Bengali context, but he cannot be killed in the name of *rupantor*.”

- Utpal Dutt ([1977] 2015, 276)

The two quotations above refer to a debate around staging Brecht in India, specifically in the city of Calcutta in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this debate was the idea of *rupantor*. By *rupantor*, I mean a specific kind of translation

practice in which “the original text, as well as the recipient tradition in which it is being adapted undergoes a transformation” (Roy 2020, 320). The essay takes into account these transformations through a close reading of the Bengali adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person of Schezuan* (1941) as *Bhalomanush* in 1974 by the theatre group Nandikar. Nandikar was a theatre group formed on 29 June 1960. In the first two decades the group’s artistic director was Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay who found success in Bengali adaptations of European plays. His Bengali adaptations of plays by Luigi Pirandello, Anton Chekhov, Brecht, besides his own plays, made Nandikar the third most coveted theatre group in the group theatre movement, after Bohurupee (with Shambhu Mitra as its principle artistic director) and Little Theatre Group (with Utpal Dutt as its principle artistic director) had cemented their place as the leading groups by the 1950s. After Ajitesh left the group, Rudraprasad Sengupta became its principle artistic director for three decades, though his wife Swatilekha Sengupta also took up important directorial responsibilities. Nandikar performs still today and their current repertoire has Sohini Sengupta and Saptarshi Moulik as directors. My essay on Nandikar principally focuses on the first phase when Ajitesh was the artistic director. *Bhalomanush* brings to light a conflict between translators such as Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay who defended transforming the original and others who found it to be unBrechtian. This includes his contemporary, Utpal Dutt, as well as the theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay who had called Ajitesh’s earlier Brechtian adaptation, *Teen Posihar Pala* (1969) (from Brecht’s *The Three Penny Opera* (1928)), a “vulgarisation” (quoted in Gunawardana 1971).

I concur that it is indeed a vulgarisation but an unBrechtian vulgarisation is, in fact, necessary, even welcome. Instead of asking whether it is Brechtian or not in terms of appropriation I will instead think of Brecht’s usefulness (in Frederic Jameson’s (1999) use of the word) for a specific moment in the Bengali group theatre movement. This progressive amateur theatre movement pitched itself against the professional, commercial theatre movement in the 1970s particularly with respect to gendered representation of the sex worker. The commercial theatre, also known as the professional theatre in Calcutta, ran parallel to the group theatre movement and was a legacy of the nineteenth century professional theatre movement. Unlike the group theatre movement where the group worked voluntarily mostly without wages, the professional theatre, as the name suggests, included waged actors, producers and directors.

The existence of at least two traditions of the city-based theatre, as well as the older performance form of the *jatra*, existing mainly in rural Bengal, is a result of the unevenness of capital. Unevenness resulted in an overarching divide between the city and rural Bengal and their differing forms of life; this, coupled with the combined forms of theatrical practice in the 1970s, the group theatres and commercial theatres, resulted in a varied audience with varied aesthetic taste. In such a context, a vulgarisation of Brecht was necessary because of the political economy of combined and uneven development of capital in which the group theatre found itself.

By transposing Benjamin's idea of translatability, I will show that in such a cultural context of combined and uneven development (Warwick Research Collective 2015) Brecht is a particularly difficult playwright to be transformed in spite of Ajitesh and Nandikar's ingenious *rupantor*. This does not have much to do with Ajitesh's own abilities as a translator, but, once again, the context of combined and uneven development of capital and the formal and political choices Brecht makes to form his theatre. In the end, I will once again bring back the concept of *rupantor* to see how Brecht, too, created a *rupantor* of the classical Western theatrical canon (namely the Aristotelian classical systems that he inherited), and how he had to find other forms in Asia in order to build his epic theatre.

### **Setting Some Contexts: Nandikar's *Bhalomanush* and its Audiences**

Nandikar staged *Bhalomanush* in 1974 at the theatre hall Rangana located in North Calcutta, which is now a defunct building but in the 1970s it was at the heart of a thriving theatre district where all the other venues staged commercial theatre. They rented Rangana on a full-time lease and performed three or four times a week aiming to fill more than 800 seats for each performance. Nandikar had to compete with commercial theatre and run full-houses to sustain itself. Audiences would likely watch a play by Nandikar and then head on to the other theatres, such as the Sarcarina, on the opposite pavement and it was this audience that Nandikar wanted to attract. *Bhalomanush* was a success and eventually closed with 357 performances, not always because it was difficult to find a full-house for each performance but because Nandikar was shown the door by Rangana's management, who wanted to stage their own play, *Nata-Nati* (*Jugantar* 1976a).<sup>2</sup> For the group theatre movement, a play's showing of over 100 performances is usually considered a milestone, so 300 and above is a very impressive number.

*Bhalomanush's* tunes were popular and the advertisement for the play (Figure 1) often centred on the simple moral question that Brecht poses: is it possible to be a good person?



Figure 1: Advertisement for Bhalomanush in Anandabazar Patrika. Image courtesy Nandikar and Sib Sankar Majumdar.

The text asks, “Do you want to be a good person, see a good person?” accompanied by a cartoonish image of a police officer with a baton intimidating scared, famished men and one woman. The advertisement promises four performances a week on three days (Thursday, Saturday and Sunday), with two performances on Sunday. The songs used in the play, now available on YouTube (INRECO Devotional 2012, Rajib Chakraborty 2020), reveal that light entertainment was used to draw audiences in around the moral question. The two songs, drawn from the digitisation of the gramophone records, are sung by Keya Chakraborty (1942-1977), who played Shanta (Shen Ta) and Shantaprosad (Shui Ta), and Rudraprasad Sengupta, who played Gobindo (Fang Sun). The comments for the latter’s song clearly show that Chakraborty’s performance is still remembered very fondly. For instance, one of the comments for the song she had sung says, “What did I just listen to! So many memories have grasped me. How well she could act 🙏🙏 I can’t find a video of her acting anywhere” (Bhattacharya 2022, all translations from the Bengali mine). Chakraborty passed away suddenly and almost all obituaries remembered her in *Bhalomanush*.

One would think that the mood in Nandikar was unanimously celebratory after its success with this play, but that was not the case. Critics of the play came from Nandikar itself. For example, Sengupta, who played Yang Sun in this play, found it to be unBrechtian. We will come to this question of whether it is Brechtian or not later, but Sengupta’s reasoning is crucial for us to understand the context in which this play was performed.

### **The Context: *Bhalomanush*’s Audiences**

Nandikar had to pitch *Bhalomanush* not just as a political play, but also a fun day of entertainment. Speaking of the play’s advertising, Rudraprasad Sengupta chides Nandikar for betraying their aesthetics and politics to keep filling seats in Rangana. “On May Day, we would ask people to come watch *Bhalomanush*; on *jamai soshthi* too, we would ask them to come watch the play,” he laments (Sengupta [1996] 2015, 274; all translations from Bengali mine unless otherwise noted).<sup>3</sup> Could Brecht be both fun and political? Ajitesh would answer yes and Sengupta no. Both of them, however, differed on the question of group theatre’s audiences. While Sengupta believed that only a particular kind of audience could appreciate Brecht, Ajitesh believed that Brecht, and the group theatre movement in general should supersede the commercial theatre of its time and become the primary popular theatre culture in Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2010b).<sup>4</sup> In order to be popular it had to reach audiences beyond the usual, demographically smaller middle-class audiences who had patronised the group theatre. We find a clue to the play’s audience in Ajitesh’s Bengali adaptation right at the beginning of the play-text: in the “Prologue” itself.

There are references to Nandikar's possible audiences and Calcutta's entertainment industry in the various people Bonkubihari (Wang) visits to find a house for the gods. Mr Fo, the first house that Wang visits, "happens to be out just now" (Willet 1979, 4) and the servants cannot take the risk of lodging the gods, but in Ajitesh's version "he has gone with his wife to see a *night show* in the cinema" (Bandyopadhyay 2011, 198, italics signify English in the original). Such a minute change shows the audiences whom Ajitesh, and Nandikar in general, saw as competition but also whom they wanted to bring to the Rangana theatre. Although Brecht uses direct addresses to the audiences to halt the action of the plot, the action and the main problem of the play have not yet begun at this point. The primary function of the "Prologue" is to address the audience. It is thus plausible to conclude that the reference to the cinema-going night-show couple points to Nandikar's possible audiences. On the one hand, Ajitesh is aware of the context he performs in, but the context is not simply that of Bengal and its audiences; it is also made of those elements which are not rooted in Bengal. Brecht, for instance, is one such import. The next section explains how Brecht's ideas and plays first entered the Bengali theatrical community through periodicals and magazines.

### **Setting Other Contexts: The Circulation of Brecht in Periodicals and Magazines**

Ajitesh details his relationship with Brecht in two essays, "*Brecht'er shonge porichoy'er aadiporbo*" and "*Brecht'er shonge porichoy'er moddhyoporbo*" (see Banerjee 1990 for Brecht adaptations in Calcutta and Majumdar 2016 for an introduction to Brecht in the Bengali group theatre movement). In the former, he says how he spent a year thinking about Brecht from October 1964 to October 1965. There were two events in this period which raised significant interest in Brecht. The first was a private screening of *Mother Courage* by the Calcutta Film Society in 1965. The second was the publication of the play *Bidhi o Byatikrom*, an adaptation of Brecht's *Expression and the Rule* in the magazine *Ekkhon*. The play was adapted by Soumitra Chattopadhyay, also the magazine's co-editor. Much of the rest of the essay is his coming to terms with the misinformation he had heard about Brecht. During his years in IPTA this led him to believe that Brecht's theatre was somewhere between *geetinatya* (song-theatre) and *nriyanatya* (dance theatre; 2010, 87). He was so steeped in the "naturalistic" (the word is his) theatre at the time – Rabindranath and Chekhov were his favourite writers in this period – that he thought it best to not work with Brecht. In the second essay, he mentions a performance of *Bidhi o Byatikrom* by the theatre group Cholachol, which was directed by popular film and theatre actor Robi Ghosh. Before this, Ashok Sen, who had come back from Germany with some material on Brecht after Sisirkumar Bhaduri requested this information, had translated *Good Woman of Szechwan* as *Szechwan'er Mohot Naari* (1972) and staged some scenes from it. The translation was published in the monthly magazine *Basumati*. Shambhu Mitra had written two essays on Brecht shortly after his return from abroad with Ajitesh

most likely referring to “Brecht proshonge koekti kotha” published in 1965. In the meantime, Utpal Dutt formed the Brecht Society in India and brought out a journal, *Epic Theatre*, which published a lot of discussion on Brecht. Maitreyee Sangha’s mouthpiece published several translations, and Ajitesh makes a special mention of Shantisekhar Singha’s translation of *Señora Carrar’s Rifles* (1975) first published in the journal of the Indo-GDR society. This shows the relationship between the periodical, the various groups which wrote on Brecht, and performances. A crucial link language here is English and not German, signalling the instability of the original in *rupantor*. Having established the context, the next section will look at *rupantor* critically, and list out the specific challenges which Ajitesh was facing in making a *rupantor* of Brecht.

So far, I have identified the possible audiences that Ajitesh wanted to speak to, as well as the context for the circulation of Brechtian ideas in Bengal at that time. The challenge for Ajitesh was this: how could an audience who is familiar with a melodramatic acting style be introduced to a Brechtian play? In the next section I closely read sections from *Bhalomanush* to demonstrate how Ajitesh navigated these challenges by negotiating his inherited tradition of the melodrama with the new tradition of Brechtian dramaturgy.

### **Ajitesh’s Melodramatic *Rupantor* of *Good Person of Szechwan* as *Bhalomanush* and the Possibility of an Alienated Melodrama**

In some situations, the dramatic moment is heavily drawn towards a lot of sentimentalisation, even overt melodrama. In “Scene Eight” when Wang enters the stage with a child, it ends with Shen Te giving a speech to the audience and making them witness “his dirty mouth.” She “lifts up the child and expresses her horror at the fate of poor children in a speech” (Willett [1965] 1979, 77). The speech, written in verse, is a clear demonstration of verse that would suit Brecht’s acting style of demonstration where the actor, in this case the actress, does not psychologise a specific instance that they encounter in the play, but demonstrates – here she shows “his dirty mouth” to the audience – what they are doing. The stage directions indicate that Shen Te expresses not just the individual grief she experiences, but the generalised grief of motherhood at the fate of all poor children. Besides, she pledges to change into her cousin, and we see the transformation immediately after her speech, jolting the audience out of the emotional intensity of the scene. In Ajitesh’s version, the speech is in prose and the dialogue is not that of motherhood in general, but that of Shanta, the individual, who is overcome by grief that her would-be child might have to experience:

...For you I will not hesitate like a tigress, my dearest. I will not let you live like this. I want – I had wanted to remain honest – remain a good person. But poor parents cannot remain honest, cannot remain honest, cannot remain honest. I have to become stringent one more time... (Bandyopadhyay 2011, 253)

The repetition of “cannot remain honest” is an example of the melodramatic style that Nandikar’s audiences would be familiar with. After this speech, Shanta

exits the stage with her clothes, and the scene ends with Nandini's mother (Mrs Shin) entering and staring at the situation. The scene ends. In the original, Mrs Shin is followed by other characters (the unemployed man, the carpenter and others) who interact with Shui Ta, establishing the dialectic between Shen Te and Shui Ta in an individual scene. This prevents the audience from attaching themselves to the emotionalism of Shen Te's earlier speech about motherhood and poverty.

Another crucial situation that is deliberately made melodramatic is the scene where Yang Sun first suspects that Shen Te is held hostage ("Scene Nine"). Brecht allows for Shui Ta's crudeness to crack here as Mrs Shin shows compassion for the pregnancy that is now in its sixth month. When Yang Sun warns Shui Ta that the police are after the firm, Shui Ta "looks at him distractedly." Sun cannot understand why this is the case and wonders if it is "unpleasant local gossip" – spread by Wang about his cousin Shen Te's pregnancy – that is making Shui Ta irritable. He finally says, "Then it must be the weather again. Rain always makes you so touchy and melancholic. I'd like to know why" (Willett [1965] 1979, 91). Ajitesh finds this moment in the text and makes a greater case for melodrama, making Shantapros had far more susceptible to emotion than Shui Ta is. Gobinda (Sun) tells Shantapros had (Shui Ta) that he intends to marry another woman: this situation of conflict is missing in Brecht. This breaks Shantapros had even more and it is he and not Gobinda who brings up the rain:

Shantapros had: As long as I'm alive you cannot marry anyone else.

Gobinda: How is that possible?

Shantapros had: Do you hear the rain outside?

Gobinda: Yes, but –

Shantapros had: Do you not remember anything when it rains?

Gobinda: Remember what?

Shantapros had: Have you forgotten everything? (Bandyopadhyay 2011, 253)

Shantapros had here is clearly the stereotype of the suffering but devoted lover of the man in Bengali literature, quite unlike Shui Ta. As we have seen before, she is closer to the stereotype of the suffering mother. Besides, scenes of quick transformations on stage, so crucial for Brecht, are missing in *Bhalomanush*. The emotionalism is retained. But was abandoning the inherited theatrical mode of melodrama that his audiences were used to a risk that Ajitesh could take?

He was entering into a theatrical tradition of melodrama and chose to establish the heightened emotionalism in several moments in ways that can only be called unBrechtian, especially if we associate a Brechtian method principally with rationality. This is not simply a question of appropriation, but a larger question of audiences and ways of seeing and experiencing. Unlike Brecht, Ajitesh's *rupantor* of Chekhov was easier because the latter's original text allowed for more sentimentality. Brecht's *rupantor* into Bengali catering to an audience



used to melodrama was considerably more difficult than Chekhov's *rupantor* because of the authors' different approaches to playwriting. If Brecht is an author whose work is prone to "translatability" (Benjamin [1923] 1999, 71-72), that does not mean that he is always easily adaptable. To use a more Benjaminian language, his translatability is far lesser for the Bengali stage than Chekhov's. (I use Chekhov's example here because Nandikar's Chekhov adaptations rivalled their success in making Brecht popular.) This has less to do with the different cultural contexts of Germany and Bengal, as they're different for Russia and Bengal as well, but more to do with the different choices Chekhov and Brecht make in their dramaturgy. While a Chekhovian dramaturgy allows for a greater investment in emotional states as he shows the gradual displacement of feudal forms of life with the incoming of modernity, Brecht's dramaturgy of alienation demands a theatre of thinking, not a theatre of a feeling or empathy.

A theatrical tradition of staging implicates not just the makers but also the audience who is habituated to certain forms of seeing. Chekhov's translatability in this theatre of feeling is immense for the Bengali audience who is trained to see heightened melodrama (Roy 2020, 324). Will Brecht's theatre of alienation not restrict him to a smaller public than what the group theatre movement wanted to achieve? Ajitesh was aware of these problems and acknowledged them in a 1983 essay. He said that audiences have a viewing habit. If a producer does not understand that viewing habit of this nation's Bengali theatre and its audiences, how will they be able to make modern, foreign plays popular among the masses (Bandyopadhyay [1983] 2010, 93)?<sup>5</sup> In a different essay on Brecht, written shortly after Nandikar found phenomenal success with *Bhalomanush*, Ajitesh defined Brechtian alienation as a method of finding joy: but this was a different kind of joy. He asks whether emotions can be used to make an emotionless ("*aabeghorjito*") theatre where the audiences can make a decision on their own? Yes, emotions are meant to be used only to make the judge more enlightened, not merely entertained (Bandyopadhyay [1975-76] 2010, 83). A very serious experimentalist, Ajitesh never loses sight of one question: who is the experiment for? The people, and the people need to be invested in the emotional state to be entertained.

Given these constraints, Ajitesh was successful in using melodrama, the principal form of emotionality since the nineteenth century in Bengal, to his benefit. He did this by making a *rupantor* of melodrama itself – not, as Brecht would have liked, by eschewing it altogether or at least relying less on it. What he achieves is a form of *alienated melodrama*. An example from early in the play explains this. "Scene Four" ends with Yang Sun leaving the city to train as a pilot. Shen Te's direct address to the audience is one of joy as one of them will be able to "fly above all this wretchedness": "Yang Sun, my loved one, with the clouds for companions!" (Willett [1965] 1979, 47). In Ajitesh's version, Gobinda leaves to become a driver by taking a train to Dhanbad but the scene is fraught with tension and Shantaproshad experiences anger instead of joy at abandonment. Her speech is in the form of a prose poem:

Wave at him – wave at him, everyone, show something to him. May he see us all – he leaves with such pressure in his minds for foreign lands. Wheels on steel – wheels on the train line – take him – take him away – away from grief – away from pain – away from his own home to another land... (Bandyopadhyay 2011, 228)

A generally positive 1975 review of the play *Bhalomanush* found the scene difficult to accept: “When Gobinda (Yang Sun) abandons her to take the train to Dhanbad, why does a betrayed Shanta throw her clothes covering her chest on the ground, lift both her arms and begin to talk in a way that resembles a poem by Shakti Chattopadhyay?” (*Desh* 1975) Elsewhere the same reviewer asks how Shanta (Shen Te), a naive woman who had come from the suburbs with no inkling of urban life, becomes so modern the moment she wears a man’s costume. Ajitesh uses a variety of Bengali accents to establish class, and the melodramatic effect achieved by this effective prose poem shows that Shanta is capable of another kind of melodrama where a richer kind of Bengali is available to her. Even within melodrama, Keya Chakraborty, who played Shanta and Shantaproshad, illustrates the other side of naiveté – a complexity in physicality and speech – that shows the “not this, but that” dictum of Brecht’s acting. The reviewer specifically mentions Chakraborty’s acting: “Her capacity to control herself at all times and her transformation, her speech, gait, expression and change in her manners is a thing to witness and admire. But too much emotion sometimes carries logical reasoning away like the flood. Those who are not engrossed in emotionalism may think without a doubt that what they see is acting.” (*Desh* 1975) Although the reviewer sees this as a drawback, is not making the audience realise that what they are seeing is acting precisely the aim of Brecht’s theatre? The problems here are with theatrical verisimilitude. With the help of the formidable actress Chakraborty, Ajitesh created within melodrama and emotional excesses a situation where Shanta’s transformation could be established by giving her the chance of a melodramatic excess of high verse – a transformation that immediately made the audiences aware that she has risen above the class in which she resided so far. In one way, this is hardly Brechtian, but in the theatrical tradition in which Ajitesh found himself, this is the only possible way to do Brecht, and, judging by the reviewer’s comments, he was successful. Nandikar achieved what I describe as an *alienated melodrama*: a melodrama that gives its audiences the other image of melodrama to which they are accustomed. Here the characters quickly move from one melodramatic register to another and convey transformations in their class positions outside of theatrical verisimilitude.

There is a tremendous variation in Bengali dialects Ajitesh used for his dialogues throughout the play – Shanta (Shen Te) speaks a dialect that is clearly working class. When she transforms into Shantaproshad (Shui Ta), she speaks Bengali that is heavily influenced with Hindi indicating to the principal trading and business class of Calcutta, the Marwaris. The other characters who have upper class aspirations, such as Gobindo (Yang Sun), speak a clearer and more chaste Bengali. Although the explicit language of exchange in Brecht’s text is missing in Ajitesh’s adaptation, he manages to implicitly code the distinctions

between the classes. In the “Prologue,” too, the gods converse in Sanskrit, known to be the language of the gods which Bonkubihari (Wang) does not understand. He thinks that the gods are speaking in Hindi. The gods correct him and Krishna, the second god, ruminates in Sanskrit on the different regional dialects in Bengali. Although these make for some humorous scenes, the different audiences and the Indian subcontinent’s linguistic diversity together with the attendant class, caste and regional markers, are implicitly specified in the choice of languages and dialects. The gods speak Sanskrit, which the commoners like Bonkubihari do not understand. Krishna’s quiet, seemingly innocuous comment shows how the gods look upon the regional dialects of Bengali with a quiet surprise, and not without subtle condescension. There is an element of this very condescension in *Desh*’s reviewer’s comments. They find it impossible to believe that a sex worker can have the ability to express herself in a sophisticated high verse form of Bengali. Language is a greater marker of class in *Bhalomanush* than in John Willett’s English translation on which Ajitesh probably relied.

The next section will concentrate on class but, instead of focusing on *Bhalomanush*, see how the entire theatrical apparatus in Calcutta during these years was influenced by the logic of capitalist modernity. In particular, it will focus on one institutional form of print capitalism: periodicals. The next section will be a very brief book-history to see how Ajitesh was influenced by periodicals and magazines in his acquaintance with Brecht.

### **The Challenges of Combined and Uneven Development and the Usefulness of Epic Theatre to Overcome these Challenges**

Staging Brecht in the form of an alienated melodrama familiar to Bengali audiences did not resolve the core contradiction regarding the different shapes capital took in places such as Asia and in advanced capitalist nations of Europe and North America. Brecht’s focus on the class struggles of Europe which were in more advanced stages of capital does not suit the contemporary moment of class struggle in South Asia. Utpal Dutt picked up on these fundamental problems when criticising Nandikar’s adaptations of Brecht. A Marxist, Dutt says in a 1971 essay, does not go looking for the bourgeoisie and working class in conflict in *The Three Penny Opera* set in eighteenth-century England, or try and find the same conflict in *Mother Courage* which is set in a feudal time. The remark on *The Three Penny Opera* is a clear reference to Nandikar’s successful adaptation of the play in 1969 as *Teen Poishar Pala*. Dutt’s problems with these changes in *The Three Penny Opera* are as follows: Nandikar does not understand the overall political economy of Bengal nor do they understand the political economy that Brecht wanted to represent in his play. Rudraprasad Sengupta, he recalls, had said in a panel discussion that they had rectified Brecht by making the bank manager into a factory manager. When Sengupta says that this makes the play more revolutionary, he does not understand that the factory manager is also bankrolled by the bank manager in the larger scheme of capitalist economy; so there is no point in transforming Brecht in this way. Besides, in their earlier

adaptation of *The Three Penny Opera* as *Teen Poishar Pala* (1969), they claimed to find a contemporary homegrown bourgeoisie in 1876 in Calcutta.<sup>6</sup> They did not understand that even in the twentieth century the national bourgeoisie had hardly established itself, which leaves the possibilities of a home-grown bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century almost non-existent (Dutt [1977] 2015, 296). Dutt does not characterise them as problems of combined and uneven development, but he is precisely describing that phenomenon. Even though Dutt's criticisms with respect to *The Three Penny Opera* are correct, there are also certain peculiar challenges that are unique to the Indian subcontinent, and one of them is related to the epic. Unlike Brecht, who could not find a living epic tradition in Europe, or at least found the living Chinese epic tradition more useful for his theatre than the extant European epic tradition, Ajitesh already had a living epic tradition available to him. This, once again, created interesting opportunities but also provided him with equally interesting problems.

One reading may see Ajitesh as part of a long line of dramatists from at least the fourth century AD such as Kalidasa who had been using epic narratives as material for dramatisation. Kalidasa's theatre, performed for courtly audiences, is one of the earliest examples of courtly drama where the *raja* – the monarch – establishes himself as the hero in the narrative. In her study of the two versions of the Sakuntala story in the *Mahabharata* epic and Kalidasa's retelling as *nataka* (play) several centuries later, Romila Thapar explains the introduction of the state as Kalidasa's divergence from the original epic narrative:

There is in the play a rhetoric of political power based on the monarchical state. The fourth century A.D. was a period of well established monarchies with the appurtenances of administration, revenue and coercive agencies. The court at Hastinapur is now the focus of those in authority and kingly authority was expressed in various ways, for instance in the taking of impressive titles such as *maharaja-adhiraja*. This would have been quite different from the epic, where Dushanta is referred to as the *gopta* and the *raja*. (2002, 49)

Dushyanta, in the original epic, is drawn from the image of a chieftain, which corresponds to northern Indian society when the epic was originally written. By Kalidasa's time, the descriptions of the court are more formal and the establishment of a Brahmanical court is clear. It is impossible to think of Dushyanta as an anti-hero of Brechtian theatre in this epic tradition. So, what may appear as an advantage for Ajitesh may actually pose specific difficulties which Brecht had not faced. One of the dramatists who were acutely aware of this problem was, once again, Utpal Dutt, who outlined the problems of finding such an anti-hero in the Indian tradition.

He says that the Brechtian epic looks at the ancient epic with irony. Brecht would have looked at Arjun and Karna's heroism, and the heroism in the entire world of *The Mahabharata*, with suspicion. For Brecht's heroes are dwarfs<sup>7</sup> in their societies. In the mythical epic world, Brecht has unleashed characters whose sole aim is to use their intellect and outwit everyone around them, and think of this as heroism. Brecht follows the epic form and, at the same time, shows that the epic in contemporary times is implausible (Dutt [1981] 2015, 315). This, once

again, shows that the Brechtian epic would have been implausible for the Bengali audiences who, from years of acquaintance with the ancient and mediaeval epics and their heroism, would have found irony difficult to accept. Critics of Nandikar's plays also found this completely missing in Nandikar's adaptations of Brecht. The earlier 1969 production produced several negative reactions by those Bengali critics who were invested in political theatre. Samik Bandyopadhyay summed it up in his 1971 interview with A J Gunawardhana:

When Macheath says, "This is your bourgeois society," people laugh. They take it as a joke, for that is the spirit of the entire production. And when I come out of the theatre, the life I live, the connections and the associations to which I respond are very different from what I get in *Tin Paisar Pala*. This is status quo theatre, which means nothing to a generation that thinks in political terms. This production makes us very angry, not merely unhappy (1971, 242)

From this interview it seems that Samik, who had keenly followed the political theatre for almost three decades at the time of this interview, found the play to be a betrayal of the values of political theatre that had painstakingly built itself for three decades. For Samik, Macheath was an "idealized (*sic*) bandit" (1971, 241) that betrays Brecht's vision. Dharani Ghosh, the other interviewee with Samik, made a crucial point: that the play tried to bridge the gap in language between the older commercial theatre, which had a tradition from the nineteenth century, and the new political theatre that emerged from the 1940s. "But it fails – very interestingly," he concluded in 1971 (Ghosh, quoted in Gunawardana 1971, 241). While the failure is pinpointed to specific problems with Nandikar's plays, I have been arguing that it fails because of an inherent difficulty in finding a Brechtian form of the epic for an audience that is used to a different language of epic immersion.

### **The Usefulness of Brecht**

Does my discussion in the previous section, however, mean that Brecht was entirely misunderstood and that there is no use in such a staging? Dutt would argue that it is better to leave Brecht alone. In spite of numerous essays on Brecht and in spite of starting the Brecht Society of India, Dutt did not direct any Brecht in his illustrious career. But I would argue that making Brecht unBrechtian is not a problem that was exclusive to the Bengali stage. Brecht posed a formidable challenge to theatrical tradition and the difficulty of his translatability is in a specific Brechtian wager: to which extent can this tradition of seeing and performing that we call theatre undergo the change that Brecht wants? It may not do so fully, but, if it takes up the Brechtian wager as Ajitesh had dared to do, Brecht's dramaturgy itself allows for certain possibilities that would not have happened through the earlier forms of theatre. Nandikar's performance of *Bhalomanush* paved the way for a materialist conception of sex-work and turned Keya Chakraborty (1942-1977), who played the protagonist in the play, into one of the most formidable actresses of her time. Here we turn away from the

problems with Nandikar's Brechtian adaptations to what I have promised I would explore: its usefulness.

First, it could frame sex-work as a materialist problem for a general theatre-going audience. It also helped Nandikar find a solution to a very practical problem it faced at the time Ajitesh took up *The Good Person of Szechwan* for adaptation. Looking into this micro-history will help us frame Brecht's materialist understanding of sex-work with the material conditions of performance-making in Calcutta in the mid-1970s. Nandikar had rented Rangana, a theatre hall in the commercial theatre-going district of Calcutta, in 1974. It had to fill up 838 seats for each performance and perform 16 to 20 times each month with a full-house generating 3,000 rupees. In the commercial theatre district, a common feature in the plays was a "*woman of ill repute*" (Bandyopadhyay, as quoted by Dutta n.d., italics indicate English in the original source). If the usual theatre-going audience was used to this particular character type, and drawing that audience in was necessary for Nandikar to keep the Rangana theatre, they needed to cater to this type. But how could they find such a type without giving in to romanticising or sentimentalising the "*woman of ill repute*"? In this, Brecht's *Good Person* was exceptionally useful. Nandikar's ambitious project paid off. The 300th performance of *Bhalomanush* was reported in the newspapers. Nandikar had organised a function where they commemorated this occasion and invited Bijan Bhattacharya and Sova Sen, two of the founding members of the new theatre movement in the IPTA in the 1940s. Bhattacharya saw the occasion as one of a promising future which will hold a place in the history of their *natya andolon* (theatre movement of protest). Sova Sen, then with Utpal Dutt's theatre group Peoples' Little Theatre, and who too had experience of hiring and running the Minerva Theatre in North Calcutta full-time a decade ago, found Nandikar's efforts one of resoluteness in the face of considerable struggle for the group theatre movement. On the day, Rudraprasad Sengupta thanked the audiences for their support and announced that Nandikar would give the usually unpaid actors who had performed in all the 300 performances 10 rupees, and others who had acted in fewer performances, five rupees (*Amrito* 1976). From these reports, it is clear that not just Nandikar, but the group theatre movement as a whole found encouragement in *Bhalomanush's* success.

Second, it could experiment with a new form of ensemble performers. The departure from naturalism allowed Nandikar to experiment with and introduce Bengali audiences through the Brechtian chorus to a new performance style that could use song and dance. This brought a new form of rigour to the group. They had done this earlier with *Teen Poishar Pala* (1969) and, in a stock-taking report Nandikar published in 1970, the author of the report recounts this moment as an enriching one for the group:

A lot of work has been done, quite a bit of money has been spent, and a lot of dedication was needed to produce this play. We have not left any faults to our knowledge. We have spent 10 thousand rupees, took a year and half to prepare – we learned how to dance, how to sing. We tried to introduce Brecht as much as we could to our nation. In several

departments, a lot of members took up responsibilities and executed them successfully (*Nandikar*, 1970, 8).

Brecht's dramaturgy, which requires a lot of coordination in the entire ensemble, brought up a renewed sense of focus to the group and made them self-reliant. They could rely on this self-sufficiency again when they picked up *Bhalomanush*.

Third, notwithstanding the difficulties and criticisms of the performance that I have discussed so far, it seems that the general public had embraced *Bhalomanush*. Nandikar kept the ticket prices extremely low. This allowed Nandikar to move out of its usual middle-class audience to the working classes as well.

Fourth, it established Keya Chakraborty as a leading actress of the Bengali stage and brought in a new kind of materialist, feminist politics into gendered representation on the Calcutta stage.<sup>8</sup> I have mentioned before that the reviewer in *Desh* had found Brechtian alienation unbelievable. But finding it unbelievable also suggests that it exists in the first place. Two further examples from the audience's reception of *Bhalomanush* suggest audiences found alienation and the parable play difficult to accept. However, this means that Nandikar was able to introduce and popularise a typical Brechtian difficulty to their audiences. "Alienation," Elin Diamond says in her reading of Brecht's usefulness for a feminist theatre in the Western world, "can be difficult to produce. But the payoffs, especially where gender is concerned, can be stunning" (1997, 47). What were these payoffs? A close look at one of the contemporary reactions to the play shows that Nandikar was successful in creating a new, feminist representation of the sex worker that was absent from the stage at the time.

Darshan Datta was confused about the play's essential moral and wrote an article, "Is it impossible to be a good person?" (n.d.) in *Krittibash*. Datta was confused because the fable of the play did not give an easy answer to this question, but kept repeating different scenarios for Shen Te to overcome, and when she eventually failed, she turned into Shui Ta, without any clear affirmative answer to his question. In his article, he makes a useful comparison between two plays, *Baar Bodhu* and *Bhalomanush*. Both were centred around a prostitute, or, as Ajitesh would call, a woman of ill-repute, with the former belonging to the commercial stage and the latter to the group theatre movement. Datta is at pains to understand how the two women are different, and asks Ajitesh, Rudraprasad Sengupta, and Keya Chakraborty, whether their problems are the same. *Baar Bodhu* (Public Woman or Prostitute) follows tropes regarding prostitution: Lata falls in love with a married man, wants to marry him, and is distraught because she cannot. Sengupta asked Datta, whether Shanta (Shen Te) could not marry Gobinda (Yang Sun) because she did not have 500 rupees; would this cause be highlighted in *Baar Bodhu*? Sengupta, who says he has not seen the play, is quick to point out the class basis for the difference. Keya Chakraborty's answer, however, centres on a crucial difference in seeing the plays. She says that she has seen the play and found it moving in some parts, but the play is principally about "sex repression" (meaning sexual repression, qtd. in Datta, 185) while *Bhalomanush*

is not a play about sex. She does not dismiss Lata's plight altogether but highlights the principal differences in the two approaches to the problem.

Like the reviewer in *Desh*, Datta also found Shanta reciting lines in the manner of a verse-play by Rabindranath to express her pain of conceiving a child unconvincing. He says that a prostitute in Sonagachi in Calcutta, the largest red-light district in the world, cannot ever recite such poetry. He then offers a startling solution to the problem: the play should have shown Shanta in the future, when she has become a "good person". Then people from her past life come to her for help; what can she do in such a situation? The play could then explore those possibilities (Datta n.d., 185). Datta, we can see, finds it impossible for a prostitute to aspire to literacy; when he says that she has become a good person, he probably means that she has left her working class work as a prostitute and entered a middle-class, respectable life, i.e., the life of a good person. That is when she could be offered possibilities meaning that only bourgeois respectability offers possibilities of moral courage, which speaks of the notion that one could, almost magically, attain that life of respectability. Questions of morality are not raised when someone is a prostitute. The prostitute's life is stereotypically constructed as overdetermined by sentimental longing for a life outside of sex-work, a longing to marry and become respectable. "Both Lata in *Baar Bodhu* and Shanta have a naivete and both want to marry," he says (Datta n.d., n.p.). The way out for both, in his mind, is marriage and a life of respectability. Anything related to sex-work is a question of "sex repression". Brecht's play foils this stereotypical notion and in this way gives the prostitute the possibility to perform poetry in her state as a prostitute which makes the play unconvincing for Datta. In other words, *Baar Bodhu* confirmed his expectation of how prostitutes are treated as well as the fantasy of what, he thinks, prostitutes want.

*Bhalomanush* enters into a world that is "detached from reality." But this detachment from reality is precisely the aim of Brechtian theatre, and it looks like Datta's problems with the play is precisely where we can find success in Nandikar's experiment with Brecht. Being used to victimising representations of prostitutes in the commercial theatre, he finds the Brechtian treatment of the problem impossible to understand. At the same time, he is enamoured with the actress who plays the prostitute in the play: Keya Chakraborty. When she had refuted Datta's claims, he mentions that he could not express himself freely to her because she was a "learned woman" and he was merely her "virtuous audience" (Datta, n.d. 186). Chakraborty worked in a very respectable middle-class job as a lecturer in a college and her own positions as actress and college lecturer both intimidate and fascinate Datta. Through *Bhalomanush*, Nandikar found an opportunity to represent the prostitute in ways that could both attract people to and challenge their conceptions of such characters on the commercial stage. They also found an actual middle-class, "respectable" woman to perform such a role allowing them to confuse the hierarchies around gendered respectability in Bengali society at the time. The play also drew audiences into



the drama by taking advantage of Brecht's choral choices, which audiences were familiar with, thus making Brecht easier to assimilate.

The play turned Keya Chakraborty into a theatrical celebrity and paved the way for her career as a formidable actress in Bengali theatre. When Nandikar staged a Bengali adaptation of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* the next year, she was awarded the best stage actress for that year (*Jugantar* 1976b, *Anandabazar Patrika* 1976). Amalendu Bose, one of Chakraborty's classmates from university had come to see *Bhalomanush* and was completely enraptured by her. During a reunion of the English department in 1977, shortly after she had suddenly passed away, he wrote of her performance in *Bhalomanush*:

Who can forget the great roles, the greatest among them (in my humble assessment) being the challengingly difficult dual role in *Bhalo Manush*? As I sat in the auditorium, amazed by the multitudinous subtleties of her histrionic interpretation of the dramatic theme, amazed by her stunning whirl dance, I muttered repeatedly, She was a student of our department, she was a student of our department! ("Variegated Lustre," 37).

Bose is so enthralled by Chakraborty here that he finds it difficult to distinguish his classmate from the character she plays. Brechtian dramaturgy allowed Chakraborty to show her skills as a complete performer, well-versed in dance as well as dialogue. Even though the play may not have been Brechtian for reasons I have explained before, the payoff, to use Diamond's word, as far as gendered representation in the group theatre was concerned, was indeed outstanding.

### **Towards a Conclusion: Gestures Towards the *Rupantor* of a Theatrical Tradition**

While explaining the untragic hero in his first version of "What is Epic Theatre?", Walter Benjamin describes the tragic of the untragic classical play as an "overgrown stalking-track" (Benjamin [1939] 1973, 6). He elaborates on this further in the second version:

...in the secular drama of the West, too, the search for the untragic hero has never ceased. Often in conflict with its theoreticians, such drama has deviated time and again, always in new ways, from the authentic form of tragedy – that is, from Greek tragedy. This important but badly marked road (which may serve here as the image of a tradition) ran, in the Middle Ages, via Hroswitha and the Mysteries; in the age of the baroque, via Gryphius and Calderón. Later we find it in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg. Shakespearian scenes stand as monuments at its edge, and Goethe crossed it in the second part of *Faust*. It is a European road, but it is a German one too. ([1939] 1973, 17-18)

Benjamin's genealogy is useful for us because it also provides a sense of what the road for dramatic forms in combined and uneven development in Europe might look like: an overgrown mule track. Adding to this tradition that Benjamin identifies specifically as a European and German one, he interestingly fails to mention that Brecht found himself in this tradition via China, and, as much as he is part of this German tradition, he is also trotting this European path after having travelled to Asia. But what happens when this overgrown mule track reaches other shores; when, to use another Benjaminian image (this time from

his essay on translation), a “tangent touches a circle lightly but at one point” ([1923] 1999, 80) and continues on its path based on the nature of this path? I argue that it was not just Ajitesh and Asian adaptations of Brecht who have touched on this point, but Brecht himself, too, undertook this tangential journey. There is a crucial difference here: the tangent was a German or European one for Brecht, and the circle was Chinese theatre. In Ajitesh’s case, the tangent is different. It takes its course from the more recent nineteenth century melodramas to the tradition inaugurated by IPTA – another overgrown mule track that is climbing to find a different way from classical Sanskrit, just as the European one wanted to travel differently from classical Greek tragic drama. The circle is Brecht and the tradition he represents. But what happens once the tangent has touched the circle? It goes its own way into infinity, altered, crucially, by the nature of its touch with the circle, but “in its own course” nonetheless, “according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (Benjamin [1923] 1999, 81). That Ajitesh had to find an alienated melodrama is not by choice, but by the very nature of the tradition of the theatrical tradition he had inherited, and that he had to alter it into a kind of alienated melodrama is also the only possible option available to him in this context.

When I engaged with *rupantor* at an earlier point through Ajitesh’s translations of Chekhov I had said, “Ajitesh did not simply recreate or experiment with existing performative forms but tested them through Brecht, who, in turn, was also tested through these performative forms” (2020, 320) but did not elaborate on it in that essay. The very endeavour of the project of testing traditions is, in a way, Brechtian. What else is the overgrown mule track but a *rupantor* of the tradition that Brecht himself inherited, a test that sees how much of this *rupantor* can be permissible? Brecht had to test his own epic theatre by altering or abandoning the Aristotelian classical dramatic tradition. Ajitesh had to test his own through an encounter with Brecht. Ultimately, both belong to different theatrical traditions, but what happens through this encounter – through this test – is that it provides an image of the world constantly being transformed by the forces of combined and uneven development of capital. This phenomenon is a universal one but in its specific manifestation it is inherently localised to the place where it manifests. I would also go so far to say that this inherently localised moment of a global phenomenon could have only happened in the twentieth century, where capital had made inroads into various parts of the world. This phenomenon allowed cultural workers globally to embark on a cultural project of, firstly, recognising that phenomenon and, secondly, devising ways to dismantle it.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Priyam Goswami Chowdhury and Florian Schybilski for patiently seeing this essay through the various drafts; Dr Nicholas Ridout for offering his suggestions on an early draft; and the anonymous peer-reviewer for their

comments on this essay. The archival work for this essay was carried out at the Natyashodh Sangsthan archives. I thank all the staff for maintaining the archives I consulted to write this essay.

- <sup>2</sup> Nandikar staged a protest by squatting on the streets on Tuesday, 2 March, 1976. They were supposed to perform *Bhalomanush* the coming Thursday, 4 March. Nandikar was confident that the matter would warrant the attention of the Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, the highest elected member of the state legislative assembly. They thought his intervention could result in an agreement with Rangana's management. Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay claimed that there was a verbal agreement that they would remain at Rangana until they found a different auditorium. Rangana's management claimed that the agreement was made two years ago and Nandikar had still not found an auditorium and that the theatre was running at a loss (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1976). I have not been able to find out if an agreement was reached on the matter but Nandikar eventually did move out of Rangana. I have not been able to verify if the management's claim of a loss is correct, but owners of theatre buildings did produce their own plays and did not simply rent out their space on a lease. The fact, however, that Nandikar thought that the state itself would intervene in a matter of private landholdings and agreements, shows that they had a lot of confidence behind their own cultural weight. This came primarily from *Bhalomanish's* continued popularity and that it would be seen by the general cultural elite as an important play to continue running.
- <sup>3</sup> *Jamai soshiti* is a day when the husband is fed a feast by his in-laws. No such custom is there for the wife in Bengali Hindu culture. It could be seen as a specifically patriarchal ritual.
- <sup>4</sup> Since Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay and Samik Bandyopadhyay share the same surnames, I will refer to their first names while addressing them in this essay. This is simply to avoid any confusion for the reader. Besides, in Bengali, writers are generally referred to by their first names in essays. It does not mean a sign of disrespect.
- <sup>5</sup> Indeed, his adaptations, not just of Brecht, but of several other authors, were popular. Shiboboroto Chattopadhyay lists the number of performances directed and adapted by Ajitesh for Nandikar. The name is followed by the name of the play it was adapted from. The number represents the number of performances. *Manjari Amer Manjeri (The Cherry Orchard)* (1964): 157; *Sher Afghan (Henry IV)* (1966): 291; *Teen Poishar Pala (Three Penny Opera)* (1969): 469; *Bhalomanush (The Good Woman of Szeztuan)* (1974): 357 (Chattopadhyay 2017, 213-214).
- <sup>6</sup> Dutt had seen a rehearsal of *Three Penny Opera* in 1962. In his *Theatre Diary* ([1994] 2015) he notes, "In the morning: rehearsal of Three-penny Opera (*sic*) at Berliner Ensemble" for the entry on 1 October 1962. (Dutt 2015, 672). It is likely he had this production in mind when Nandikar staged theirs in 1969.
- <sup>7</sup> The literal translation of the word Dutt uses "*bamon*" would be dwarfs, but they can also mean Brahmins in Bengali. He does not analyse this with respect to the caste society in India so I have gone with the literal translation. Dutt probably would have wanted the confusion to remain.
- <sup>8</sup> Keya Chakraborty's work has seen a recent resurgence in theatre studies. See Trina Nileena Banerjee's chapters, "The Politics of the Labouring Body and an Emerging Feminist Consciousness: Keya Chakraborty and Nandikar (1960-1977)" and "Nandikar's Antigone: Agency, Autonomy, or Sacrifice? (1976-1977)" in *Performing Silence* (2021) and Souradeep Roy's M Phil dissertation, "The Life (Not Death) of Keya Chakraborty: Towards a Feminist Historiography of the Progressive Amateur Theatre Movement in Bengal" (2021).

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**Souradeep Roy** is a translator, poet, and performer. He has worked as part of the editorial collective of the Indian Writers' Forum and at Ashoka University. He is currently working on a PhD on the history of the Bengali theatre movement (primarily the IPTA and the group theatre movement) from the 1940s to the 1970s. Souradeep teaches theatre making at Queen Mary, University of London. He is currently developing his play on the 1943-44 Bengal famine, *How to Make Rice*. And is Associate Editor of *Almost Island* and works as fundraising assistant for the London-based arts charity, People's Palace Projects.