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Introduction: Setting the Stage

Ashis Sengupta

1 Rethinking South Asia: a region, an idea, and this book

South Asia occupies a significant place on the cultural and political map of the world today. This is as much due to its long and richly diverse cultural traditions as to its current place in the global market, scientific and technological capabilities and its vital strategic importance in world politics. I choose to define the term ‘South Asia’ primarily as an enormous geographical space comprising the nation-states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka with their shared yet different political and cultural histories. I have left out Afghanistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives mostly for space constraints. I am aware, though, that any such exercise (where ‘selection’ automatically implies ‘elimination’) can be accused of arbitrariness and bias, or of the politics of inclusion/exclusion, to an extent. Merely a six-decade old Western construction, initially to designate in ‘neutral parlance’ a geographical region and later used more in politico-strategic contexts, ‘South Asia’ obviously no longer means either the Western/Orientalist imagining of the ‘Indian subcontinent’ as an exotic land or a sheer backward region of illiteracy and poverty. ‘South Asia’ should mean today a region of immense possibilities and complexities embedded in the ‘affinities’ and ‘contradictions’ of nation, nationality, caste, creed, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, politics, and economics. Contemporary South Asia also means a volatile region embroiled in the ‘twin dialectics’ of nation and state, center and region, region and community, secularism and religious extremism, neoliberalism and the fading idea of welfare state. It is thanks to such overwhelming contradictions and strange connections – between the countries in the region and within them each – that the category of ‘South Asian’ at once evokes and frustrates a common or
shared identity. No less important is it to understand that South Asia simultaneously exists within South Asia and outside its geopolitical boundaries through its diasporic presence across the globe.

There are several books on South Asia that read more as studies in political and economic history; but no single scholarly volume has so far put together the diverse yet interconnected theatres of South Asian countries, encompassing the complex interplay of the region’s history (sociopolitical/cultural) and its theatre. Lothar Lutze’s collection of essays, *Drama in Contemporary South Asia* (1984), focuses on premodern folk and ritual drama, and largely excludes post-independence, modern, contemporary theatre in South Asia altogether. Utpal K. Banerjee’s *Theatre in South Asia: Frontiers of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Overseas* (2012) is but an encyclopedic volume of entries on theatre groups, playwrights, directors, individual plays from four South Asian countries and on some ‘overseas’ productions showcased at theatre festivals in the region. Books on contemporary theatres of individual South Asian countries, except on Indian theatre published since 2004, are surprisingly few, too. Moreover, the few significant books belonging to the last mentioned category have their own preferred focal areas even when they discuss the theatre of a particular country or culture, thus mostly leaving out what this book picks up for careful study – genres and locations of theatre that are germane to a comprehensive, critical understanding of the sociohistorical and politicocultural narratives of contemporary/postcolonial South Asian nation-states, three of which once made up an undivided India. Several of those books are again collections of previously published material or lack critical depth and organization. And most of the remaining critical literature on (contemporary) South Asian theatre, not much in volume, is in regional/local languages and therefore not easily ‘accessible’ to the rest of the world.

This book is not meant to be a mere survey or overview of South Asian drama and theatre. With a postcolonial-cultural-theatre/performance studies approach, it aims at a multidisciplinary study of contemporary South Asian theatres as being reflective as well as partly constitutive of the post-independence societies and ‘national’ cultures they grow out of, deal with and question, too. Mapping through contemporary theatre the multifaceted histories of South Asian countries (as ex-colonies in a state of chaos and/or as postcolonial/contemporary nations with their own aspirations and interrogations) should be a rewarding experience because no history of a society is truly complete without a history of its culture, theatre being its most live form. It is more so in the case of a politically volatile and culturally vibrant South Asia because a
closer, two-way relationship mostly exists here between the course of contemporary history and the history of contemporary theatre. Nepal’s prodemocracy movement, virtually catalyzed by street theatre which in turn thrived on it, serves as an ideal example that may not be taken, though, as a model for studying the relationship between the history of another South Asian country and the course of its theatre. The book, on the whole, seeks to demonstrate how the history of drama/theatre (with its poetics and politics), political history, and sociocultural process are embedded in one another, in varied ways of course.

Originally an instrument of European colonialism, traditional ‘area studies’ became for the United States a pattern of ideological and political mapping especially during the Cold War era that was aimed at dominating world affairs. However, insofar as mapping is ‘a culturally formative representational [and therefore strategic] practice,’ cartographic details of a country/region may also be re-conceptualized, to extend the metaphor, by way of interrogating the ‘fixed’ contours and constituents of the terrain whose map was/is drawn by the ruling regime, colonial or neocolonial. It is important to note here that even though a ‘global technoscientific civilization’ pervades post-Cold War times, imagining the earth as ‘flattened’ and the nation-state almost non-existent, globalism eventually fails to recognize local contexts due to its tendency to grow into an overarching narrative – however different it may be from the earlier concept of world civilization that sold Western civilization as a ‘blueprint for the rest of the world.’ At the other extreme, localism with its exclusive focus on local phenomena tends to disregard ‘global contexts’ altogether. The kind of mapping this book aims at is to examine the course of events in specific geopolitical, geocultural contexts and yet connect them, wherever necessary, with the machinations of power and cultural phenomena outside. This helps in at once capturing the complex realities of a place in an alternative local perspective and projecting its changing character through time by way of its interface with a plethora of politicoeconomic and sociocultural elements that transcends national borders.

Mapping in this perspective becomes a process that pays attention to formerly neglected or currently contested sites of ‘historical memory and [. . . ] contexts, cultures, stories, languages, experiences, desires and hopes that course through’ the body of the place and beyond. This mapping, when done through theatre, is especially interesting because theatre – a cultural product of historical, geopolitical, and ideological conditions – is also capable of reconstructing those conditions by mediating sociopolitical formations. It is worth mapping how South Asian
theatre is as much a representation of offstage ‘realities’ as a space where ‘realities’ are equally formed and re-formed through human performance, exploring in the process a complex relationship between world, text, performance, viewing, and reception. It would be wrong to presume that the body of work under study here fully expresses ‘contemporary South Asia’ through theatre, or ‘contemporary South Asian theatre,’ for that matter, because the subject is so vast and diverse in terms of geography, nationality, language, religion, and theatre history and practice that its representation (or mapping) is bound to be far from complete within the space of a single book. The study also leaves out South Asian diaspora theatre, a genre which demands a full-length study, even while admitting in principle that the location of performance may sometimes extend beyond the homeland as South Asian playwrights and performers are more mobile today than ever before.

**Contemporary South Asian theatre: meaning and scope**

Orientalist theatre scholarship always ‘privileged classical Sanskrit literature over the postclassical vernacular traditions,’ Aparna Dharwadker correctly maintains, making the theatre of the Indian subcontinent, especially of India, ‘virtually synonymous with the poetically exquisite “national theatre of the Hindus” exemplified by Kalidasa.’ The understanding of ‘theatre,’ or ‘theatre studies,’ in the West has undergone a paradigm shift in the wake of recent enthusiasm around ‘performance’ and ‘performance theory.’ While performance by the early 1980s came to be ‘defined in opposition to theatre structures and conventions,’ theatre was simultaneously defined by the likes of Richard Schechner as a subgenre of performance which broadly includes within its scope the performing arts, rituals, popular entertainments, and even everyday social performance. Anthropologists, area and religious studies scholars, and interculturalists in the West have taken greater interest ever since in ‘genres of premodern or nonmodern performance’ that can be located within ‘the ritualistic, religious or social [and folk] life of particular cultural communities.’ South Asian theatre, in this perspective, has come to mean rituals, dances and performances such as the Madar Pirer Gan of Bangladesh, the Bhand performance and Lok theatre of Pakistan, the Kolam and Kooththu of Sri Lanka, the Lakhe dance and the Gaijatra festival of Nepal, and the rural, folk and ritual theatre of India including Raslila, Ramlila, Kathakali, and Nautanki. On the other hand, the decolonizing drive that ran through South Asian theatre practice and criticism for quite some time from the late 1950s – especially in India and in
Sri Lanka – resulted in the virtual dismissal of the Western aesthetics of representation as in the proscenium theatre, though not always of the modern stage itself, the return of Sanskrit classics in the original or in translation, and in the emergence of the ‘theatre of roots’ that appropriated traditional/folk performance forms to create the theatre idiom of the day. This ‘revivalist’ surge in theatre was often accompanied by a search for a ‘national’ theatre, based on the dominant, homogenizing construct of indigenous culture and heritage. It was almost forgotten that South Asian theatre, mostly of Indian origins, had long been a truly composite art form, comprising words, acting, and other performance constituents that in turn articulated the region’s cultural plurality together with borrowings from Western theatre traditions. Many genres of modern and contemporary urban South Asian drama and theatre consequently failed to capture the attention of Anglo-American as well as South Asian scholars and performers for a long time. And this category sometimes included even the script-based street theatre.

For a fuller understanding of contemporary South Asian theatre, let us first clarify what ‘contemporary’ should mean as an adjective (conceptually) and, then, in relation to South Asia and finally to South Asian theatre and criticism. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2007) defines it as ‘belonging to the present time; modern.’ But the present often seems ungraspable in representation if not unrepresentable altogether. When sought to be represented in cultural forms as well as in history, it is either already a recent past or a near future. One may try to fixate the contemporary as an epoch; but then an epoch is presumed to have a coherence of its own that tends to elide other times intruding into it. Therefore, one may instead view the contemporary (‘con’- meaning ‘together’) as the now containing ‘times together.’ It is obviously not a collapse of plural times into a single, homogenized space that flattens the globe to feed the imperialist gaze. Nor is it ‘a synchronic presence,’ as Homi K. Bhabha notes. Rather, it can be ‘a way of keeping time and company, with others, with other times, with others’ times.’ This meaning of ‘contemporary’ also helps us measure time – since it is perhaps not possible to live and act (writing or critiquing is an act, too) in a timeless universe – without recuperating the theory of an all-pervasive evolving time or the idea of a universal historical narrative with an unbroken continuity and yet acknowledging the passing of time, of one’s own time with its progressions and discontinuities, recurrences and overlaps. In this perspective, the contemporary is a site of ‘conjoined yet incommensurate’ elements, both past and present, in ‘multiple configurations and variations,’ a site of what could be
Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre

described as different and competing temporalities, multiple and alternative modernities, one transecting another.

Insofar as the contemporary is a question of ‘whose time it is,’ and not ‘what time it is,’ it recognizes ‘a number of temporalities in various relations’ and helps find the meaning of temporality in a postcolonial perspective. The contemporary in and about ‘South Asia,’ in this light, can more or less be considered as synonymous with ‘post-independence’ – especially with regard to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka – but without designating it as a uniform, coherent era and also beyond the predominant Western understanding of it as a distinctly post-World War II phenomenon. Other times, others’ times, and contestatory temporalities characterize this ‘post-independence’ contemporary that is also ‘postcolonial’ in history- and culture-specific ways. ‘Contemporary’ in the case of Nepal, which was never a ‘colony’ as such, should mean the stretch of time since the dissolution of the Rana oligarchy (1951), during which different forms of democracy have been experimented with, resulting more recently in violence and counter-violence and in the eventual ousting of the monarchy. It is to be borne in mind, though, that the histories of these countries as postcolonial nations in one sense or another have followed different directions, and the terms ‘post-independence’ and ‘contemporary’ are not always convertible as they may denote different temporalities often in consonance with the turn of specific historical events in a country or society.

When it comes to contemporary South Asian cultural forms, including theatre and performance, a plural, heterogeneous time may circulate in a play that apparently addresses the now just as a play may alternatively delve into the past to trace the antecedents of the present that is not dimensionless either. Where writing about (and therefore representing) contemporary theatre (in an essay) is concerned, the essayist may be engaged, as in this book, not only in the immediacy of the contemporary moment but in excavating, as Luckhurst and Marks would have it, ‘the histories lying behind our current cultural forms and sense of “crisis”’ and thus ‘move back in time’ ‘precisely to move our interrogations of the contemporary forward.’ This implies a trajectory, though not necessarily a linear narrative, of even and uneven developments, complementary and conflicting articulations of experience. Here the contemporary should not rigidly mean any specific genres and locations of theatre; it is a term whose relativity depends more on specific sociocultural and political histories and on the range of theatre practice and conventions in a particular society. The book uses the
term ‘contemporary’ to mean the complex, diverse theatre landscape of South Asian countries since independence, albeit with the pool of light on more recent theatre activities and forms, for one more crucial reason. There has been little scholarly study, at least in English, of the post-independence theatre of most South Asian countries. A book that for the first time truly discusses theatre and performance across the region could not possibly begin in the middle of latest happenings but should instead look back occasionally to what happened in the (recent) past.

What is equally important to note in relation to the postcolonial character of contemporary South Asian theatre is that it engages more with the oppressive and exploitative power structure of the (post-independence) state itself than directly with the historical colonial regime whose traces, however, continue to infiltrate if not make up the postcolonial state apparatus and mediate cultural practices. Postcoloniality here largely means engagement with ‘a relation of structural domination, and a suppression – often violent – of the [. . . ] the subject(s) in question’¹⁸ and therefore consists in such processes as the recovery of voices long marginalized on the lines of religion, language, ethnicity, gender and class, and the interrogation of the modern enterprise of nation building on the basis of an imagined, mythicized past and a projected, univocal future. Political independence has given South Asian societies the freedom and the power to redefine the contents and forms of their theatre and performance. As a result, contemporary South Asian theatre addresses the new aspirations of the people and emerging domestic realities even in the face of a majoritarian identity politics and varying degrees of state autocracy and/or government censorship. This theatre should then aesthetically imply neither an overt decolonization drive nor a disjunction with traditional forms and styles in favor of the proscenium stage which itself now, interestingly, combines them with Western modes of representation. In fact, a ‘heterogeneity of . . . [theatre] practice’¹⁹ more or less characterizes the present-day urban and non-urban theatre of any South Asian country under discussion – whether within a single play or across the domain of performance as such. One should neither be anxious about the applicability of any singular meaning of ‘postcolonial’ to contemporary South Asian theatres which are increasingly experimenting with forms and styles to negotiate the ever shifting contours of postcolonial history and their ramifications. The contemporary can therefore be better understood by probing ‘what is taking place without reducing it beforehand’ and by looking on it as ‘a type of remediation.’²⁰
South Asian theatre: beyond a shared performance tradition

South Asian theatre should not be considered as a monolithic category because South Asia is a potpourri of cultural heritages, religions, and languages – all of which bear on the amazing variety of its theatre and performance. But this does not deny commonalities in performance experience, or the crosspollination of theatre practices across South Asia. As theatrical influences from outside the geopolitical borders of South Asia, especially since colonial times, have left a permanent imprint on South Asian theatre forms and styles, within South Asia itself the theatre of one country has crossed national boundaries to influence that of another neighboring country. Only the nature of crosscultural influence keeps changing with time, mostly in accordance with sociohistorical developments.

There are great similarities in theme and form between the theatres of Bengal in India and today’s Bangladesh because Bangladesh was created out of East Pakistan that was again part of an ‘undivided’ Bengal till 1947. The literary and dance dramas of Rabindranath Tagore, in fact the whole of Tagore literature, are not only popular in Bangladesh but have always helped the country define its secular fabric as against the currents of religious nationalism ever since its creation. The left-oriented Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), which continued in its various regional incarnations after its virtual dissolution in 1947, and the street theatre movement in India during the 1970s were sources of inspiration to several prominent Pakistani theatre artists who lent their support to the prodemocracy movement during the Bhutto regime and who have consistently protested since Zia-ul-Haq’s time against the military-mullah-elite nexus in Pakistan. If Sinhala theatre draws on Sri Lankan Tamil performance traditions, Sri Lankan Tamils have preserved those traditions that traveled with Indian Tamil migrants to the island centuries ago. Early Sinhala plays that were adaptations from Buddhist Jatakas again share story lines and morals with several premodern and modern Nepali plays and performances. Many Nepali plays and performances have drawn on puranic (pertaining to the Puranas) tales and epics from India, while the Sadak Natak (street theatre) of Nepal during the 1980s enriched itself with the Indian experience in the field. Theatre troupes from several South Asian countries regularly visiting India to attend theatre festivals and workshops equally leave considerable impact on Indian theatre forms and styles. This cultural exchange has also made some types of theatre immensely popular across the South Asian region – such as adaptations and translations of foreign plays, localized
versions of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, performed both in open and enclosed spaces, and the Theatre for Development (TfD), an outgrowth of the development projects funded by multinational organizations through their NGOs in the ‘Third World.’

South Asian theatre in general has been a most common and popular medium of address (and protest) in matters of national and social importance. Yet the apparent clustering of nations and their theatres should not be taken to mean any unqualified homogeneity – be it historical, social, cultural, or aesthetic. Each South Asian country has witnessed, especially post-independence/post-liberation or post-oligarchy (as in the case of Nepal), the emergence of a theatre tradition of its own, though not without its inner contradictions, in response or reaction to a particular political climate, specific sociohistorical realities, and certain ‘ideological imperatives.’ It is important to note that in spite of cultural overlaps or commonalities, South Asian countries are easily distinguishable from one another in terms of their disparate political/’national’ cultures and historical differences that not only often jeopardize domestic stability but pose a potential threat to one another’s security. India, though an ancient civilization with a liberal, secular philosophical legacy, is a young democracy where the nation is still ‘under construction,’ narrowly defined at times by forces like the Hindutva brigade that has acquired an indelible notoriety since the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. India as a state is also mired in filthy electoral politics around caste and creed often leading to violent ethnic strife, and largely destabilized by scams and maldistribution of wealth giving birth to a ‘red corridor’ spanning over 13 of its 29 states. Pakistan, for all its supposed commitment to democracy, remains an Islamic Republic arguably paralyzed by terror networks that are no less an offshoot of the West’s foreign policy that began in the context of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Bangladesh’s secularism is still under Islam as state religion and threatened by religious extremity. Nepal, long under the Rana oligarchy and until recently a Hindu monarchy troubled by Maoist insurgency, currently lies in a post-democracy state of political chaos and uncertainty. Sri Lanka, despite its supposed post-civil war drift toward a multi-faith, multi-ethnic state, continues to be perceived as a Sinhala-Buddhist nation that marginalizes the ethnic minorities and as a state that is yet to rehabilitate the war-ravaged Tamil population mentally and materially.

Such historical differences more or less account for differences in the theatre landscapes of South Asian countries. Indian theatre immediately post-independence went through a decolonization drive to distinguish itself from Western/colonial theatre but betrayed in its zeal to ‘showcase’
one changeless India a cultural hegemony that created the Other in society and the arts. But the project of ‘nationalizing’ Indian theatre has come to be interrogated from the margins, despite its appropriation of indigenous performance forms, basically for its alleged ‘classical Hindu’ worldview, elite bias, indifference to contemporary (urban) experience, and its rejection of political theatre. Post-partition Pakistani theatre could not develop freely as the state ideology encouraged a cultural identity that would be different from that of India. All theatre and performance forms that were of ‘Hindu’ origin, were discouraged. Most of contemporary Pakistani theatre, however, is political theatre in its impressive range that emerged during the Zia regime and has fought ever since for a secular, egalitarian society. East Pakistan continued with pre-partition Bengal’s legacy of traditional and Western theatre types, many of which were in fact used to fight the war of liberation on the cultural front, and has witnessed the emergence of a variety of people’s theatre in the course of its history as Bangladesh. Nepali theatre ‘modernized’ itself and recorded an unprecedented growth after the end of the Rana oligarchy by imbibing ideas and theatre practices from the West, while the more recent theatre scene in Nepal, especially since the beginning of the prodemocracy movement in the early 1980s, has been dominated by different types of street and community theatre as well as by stage plays, betraying lately a sense of disillusionment over the ongoing political doldrums. In Sri Lanka, traditional and folk performances were revived and reworked to give its post-independence theatre a distinct national identity, although ‘Sinhala’ (Sinhalese) theatre gradually came to be equated with ‘Sri Lankan’ theatre. The grave political turmoil (including the civil war) that lasted for nearly three decades, nevertheless, brought forth a host of theatre activities across the island – not only the prosenium theatre of a satirical kind in the South but a profusion of ‘community’ and ‘applied’ theatre in the Tamil-populated North and East. It is also interesting to note in this context of different theatre histories in South Asia that even when a particular sub/genre of theatre (for example, Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed) is popular throughout the region, it has its countless variants depending on the ground reality and the performance tradition of the country in question.

**South Asian society in theatre / theatre in South Asian society: representation, intervention, engagement**

This book probes the relationship between (South Asian) theatre, society and history through the prisms of representation, intervention, and
engagement. It is important in this respect to first explain the scope of meaning the study embraces of the terms ‘theatre’ and ‘theatre studies.’ Theatre may inclusively mean, or share an intimate rather than antagonistic relationship with, several other performance forms, depending on its range and history of practice in a given culture. As a cultural form and product – and with its links to other locations of culture – theatre may even be a subject of performance studies whose broad range includes, besides a variety of ritualistic and aesthetic forms, different types of social performance. But the term ‘theatre’ should also continue to include within its scope performance of dramatic texts that characterizes much of modern, urban/semiurban South Asian theatre that, again, does not necessarily preclude traditional, non-textual performance and instead reveals the porosity of borders between forms today. It is true that performance studies can train one to look at performance beyond the page and the stage, thus liberating the reader/spectator from the ‘authority’ of the text and the ‘constraints’ of modern stage realism. It may also help appreciate theatre as a site ‘to experiment with embodiedness and activism’ or to explore its ‘embodied relationship’ to historical and social process. Yet dramatic theatre cannot be dismissed outright as subservient to the dramatic text. A play, when performed on the stage or in the open, is less a reiteration of the text, as W.B. Worthen would say, than its re-signification through stage or performance practice and conventions. The play in performance may thus be considered as ‘an act of surrogation’ that makes ‘an understanding of the text’ emerge ‘not as the cause but as a consequence of performance.’ Performance may still be distinguished from theatre; yet, as the literary and the theatrical can be complementary to each other so can the theatrical and the performative be. Thus, while the book appreciates this complementarity and participates in the contemporary broadening of the scope of drama and theatre studies, it does not give way – to share grounds with Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt – ‘to the full notion’ of the dissolving of ‘disciplinary distinctions’ and yet allows the drama/theatre critic or historian to use a variety of ‘strategies and discourses that map the topology of theatre studies (my emphases) across its cultural, political and historical terrain.’

Insofar as it is a performing art, and especially of an anti- or non-textual nature, theatre is often considered a presentation, rather than a representation, of an action unfurling live before the audience. Indian drama and performance theorist Suresh Awasthi dismisses modern Indian proscenium theatre as ‘product of a colonial theatre culture,’ arguing for a kind of ‘unmediated’ spectacle through the primacy of the
actor’s body and its stylization as against the authorial text. This idealized presentational, rather than representational, status of the theatre can be challenged on its own ground as theatre cannot ultimately help using human bodies (and stage paraphernalia) for the purpose of representing the world. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of non-textual performance traditions (in South Asia), drama as authorial text representing society, albeit composite/polyphonic in character and meant for performance, can be appreciated in a postcolonial country for other reasons, too. Dramatists of a newly independent ‘nation’ would aspire to participate in the re-formation of cultural national life, as Dharwadker notes, and therefore take advantage of the print medium alongside that of the stage. A play text not only occasions its stage version but can reach out to a large mass, literate or educated, and influence public opinion even without ever being performed. A considerable number of first-wave post-independence Indian dramatists ‘approached playwriting primarily as a verbal art [. . . ] potentially connected to, but also independent of, theatrical praxis.’31 Interestingly, the importance of play texts continues in South Asia. In his introduction to Poile Sengupta’s32 Collected Plays (2010), Shashi Deshpande writes: ‘Performances, after all, are transient and not to have written texts available is not only a loss to performing groups, it makes it difficult to make a proper assessment of [. . . ] drama as literature.’33 Whether, or how far, literary drama can also be read as literature depends on connections between the histories of print genre/s, performance tradition/s and drama theories of a society under specific sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions. And that does not fall within the purview of the present book.

Where theatre’s representational, rather than presentational, status is concerned, its relationship with social and historical reality becomes most important – an old but certainly not dead issue. Representation in drama/theatre even as a mimetic art does not appear unproblematic. If ‘representation’ is not reduction to pure imitation of an object prior to representation, representation rather transcribes than reflects or even describes the ‘real.’34 ‘Mimesis’ here means a (creative) substitution for the ‘original.’ On the other hand, even as we accept today that there is no ‘reality’ outside its ‘representation’ in that reality is but ‘a product of [. . . ] performance,’ the relationship between signifier and signified in representation never goes ‘unaffected by historical circumstances’ and ‘ideologies.’35 Only ‘history’ should in this case broadly include ‘the social forces that [not only] inform and constitute [. . . ] society but also feature [. . . ] in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and the sociohistorical situation.’36 Viewed in
this light, drama/theatre appears to be a representation of a situation or condition to which we have no unmediated access in a way no historical representation is a pure or authentic reproduction of the past reality. The absence of purity or authenticity in these two otherwise different modes of representation does not, however, take away the value of representation from either. Instead, the commonality of such perceived deficiency makes it possible for theatre to be treated as alternative history. As historical representation is simultaneously ‘a copy and a counterfeit’ in seeking to be ‘an objective image of the thing itself’ and yet failing to avoid just being ‘about it,’ so is representation in drama/theatre no re-presentation of reality per se because a play, even when realistic, is not a neutral codification of realities always already there but a human construct with its own aesthetics that is inseparable from its politics (of truth-making), disguised though it may be most of the time, or an artifact informed by the forces (not necessarily visible in lived life) that shape our societies and histories.

This is not to say that representation in history and representation in drama/theatre are one. Reality in drama/theatre as a work of fiction is an aesthetic representation of something outside the text/performance that may not have the stake to prove the authenticity of that ‘something,’ whereas a historical representation or explanation is always anxious about such stake and also challenged by other historical articulations of the reality in question. Yet neither of the two types of representation is either ‘true or false in the proper, technical sense of these words, but only more or less plausible’ in comparison with ‘other texts about (roughly) the same’ subject. While history as an institutional discipline still needs a form of its own with an almost prescribed set of tools for veracity, theatre in its creative constructedness enjoys a much greater freedom by engaging with (social) ‘reality’ at different levels of affirmation and interrogation, intervention and transgression, imagination and reinscription. Thus representation in drama and theatre does not always indicate a fixed referent or a determinate position of the object represented but can be strategic, exploring, interpretive, creative and redefining instead. It creates a live, organized, alternative version of a chaotic but dormant reality, past or present, and attributes contemporary, relevant meaning/s to it rather than merely seeking to dis-cover it for the audience. Theatre in its different forms thus supplements conventional history that, thanks to a strict adherence to its disciplinary rules, cannot help leaving out of its purview the intangibles of the past – such as belief and memory – and thus betrays its inadequacies and areas of ignorance. The social relevance of a play, as well as its
aesthetic appeal, depends largely on the intersection of several factors such as issues of address, the dynamics of representation, the historical time and locus of performance, and the orientation of the audience potentially affecting its reception. Theatre’s social effectiveness depends, in other words, on the space betwixt ‘the interests of writing’/production and ‘those of reading’/viewing, ‘between what, in each historical circumstance, appropriates and what is appropriated in and through the text’40 or its performance. Moreover, throughout this process, the playwright’s and/or the director’s own ideology and access to resources may influence the play’s construction and/or its performance, as the theatre historian is no less guided by her own discriminatory sense of what is more or less important, by her own idea of historical representation and its organization.

The relationship between theatre and ‘real’ life (or society) appears more direct in South Asia’s engaged or committed theatre which has a different aesthetic by way of an active intent, issue-centered narrative, and a dynamic relationship with the audience. With its affective and per/formative power, such theatre exists in different forms and under different names – such as ‘progressive theatre,’ ‘oppositional theatre,’ ‘radical theatre,’ ‘theatre of liberation,’ ‘free theatre,’ ‘street theatre,’ ‘popular theatre,’ ‘community theatre,’ ‘applied theatre,’ and so on. It can also be a mix of several such subgenres in varying proportions depending on the kind of effect it intends to produce. Engaged theatre in South Asian countries, a bulk of which is also broadly known as ‘political theatre,’ can combine textual and non-textual material and be produced indoors as well as outdoors. Michael Kirby41 cites two extreme examples to argue for and against such theatre’s affective relationship with the audience and its interventionist engagement with the ‘real’ world. Kirby first quotes from Alexander Tairov’s account of how the play _La Muette_, during its 1830 performance, united the whole theatre in revolutionary enthusiasm and sent the spectators and the actors alike out into the streets of Brussels, practically beginning the Belgian revolution. Kirby calls it an archetypal example of political theatre. He gleans the other example from Enrique Buenaventura’s mimeographed handout that describes how a group of Colombia actors, who depicted in a production the sensational transformation of a troop of soldiers into guerrillas, capitulated a few days later to the real-life army that occupied the very theatre where they had put on their play. This demonstrates for Kirby the disjunction between ‘the political realities of theatre and the realities of everyday life.’ I would prefer not to test the efficacy of political or socially engaged theatre by pushing its
relationship with ‘reality’ to any of these extremes. I would rather argue that the closeness or the distance between the two worlds (each being real in its own right) depends on the nuances of relationship between the play’s historical context and the historical circumstance in which the spectators are currently situated. In 1980s India, Safdar Hashmi’s Halla Bol (Attack!), a street play protesting against the exploitation of labor, had such a tremendous impact on real-life politics that he was beaten to death in broad daylight during one of its performances. A play that might not work in an arguably ‘post-political’ culture may be very effective in another cultural location (such as South Asia), where the masses identify more readily with the play’s nature and course of action. The social force and efficacy of such theatre should not, however, necessarily mean a crude translation of performance into action in real life.

The meaning of ‘engaged theatre’ may be extended to include theatre’s oppositional engagement not only with the government but with any form of authority or pattern of exploitation that works against the interests of a marginalized class or community. That such theatre often transgresses the conventional line separating life from art, and reality from fiction, is evident from the government’s or the authority’s opposition to or repressive measures against dramatic texts and performances that are perceived to be challenging to the power structure in a given, actual world. Political or socially engaged theatre may or may not bring about any immediate or visible change to the existing political or social order, but it can still influence people’s attitude and change their ways of thinking by dealing with serious issues and in a language that is more direct and persuasive than merely seductive and metaphorical. Even when the audience is comprised of people who already share the beliefs a play or a performance ‘preaches,’ its ‘productive value’ may lie in ‘recommitting the committed to struggle and validating their cause.’ Those who are either not politically aware or do not already share those beliefs can be persuaded all the more by the play’s performative power. This is more applicable to those sections of the audience in a postcolonial, developing society, whose everyday lives are enmeshed in conflicts but who have little idea of how to react to them. In several South Asian societies, as in the Tamil-populated eastern and northern parts of Sri Lanka, engaged theatre – mostly in forms of street, community, and applied theatre – also attempts to take part in rehabilitating and healing the tortured and the dispossessed – mentally and materially – by using theatre as a tool for depicting loss and for possible collective change. It remains debatable, though, whether ‘performance of pain’ re-injures
the body\textsuperscript{44} or reduces the pain by bringing a wounded community together in a spirit of sharing; whether its ‘therapeutic’ aspect neutralizes the impassioned will to change that was otherwise generated in the spectators during the performance or still retains the zeal for political or sociocultural transformation. In any case, engaged theatre in a war-ravaged society usually does not observe the Aristotelian principle of catharsis but instead leaves the audience perturbed and destabilized so that the impressions they carry along beyond the performance space linger long enough to affect their lives and action. And therein lies such social theatre’s efficacy.

Engaged theatre with its different subgenres has been structurally and formally indigenized in several South Asian countries to suit specific politiccultural contexts and locations of performance. To thwart its tendency to grow elitist and what Paulo Freire would call ‘culturally invasive,’ for example by ‘dictating’ what ‘ignorant’ spectators ought to do in a given circumstance, it has been made increasingly hybrid and participatory in form. This is again ideally demonstrated by the Forum Theatre groups in India, the most noted being West Bengal’s Jana Sanskriti which, with its activities spread all over the country, is possibly the largest and longest lasting Forum Theatre network in the world.\textsuperscript{45} It is often alleged that social/political theatre in its indigenized forms is more propaganda than art. Though some forms of engaged theatre in South Asia are often reduced to mere sloganeering, many of its theorists and practitioners believe that aesthetics and politics can very well coexist and complement each other in ‘staged activism’ or in ‘activist performance’ (to borrow phrases from Peter Caster).\textsuperscript{46} All social and political theatre more or less engages with an unjust society or political system for change, an exercise that is incomplete unless aesthetically engaging, too. Even the note of dis-ease a play or performance may deliberately end on to keep the audience thinking about issues has to be worked out aesthetically. However, the aesthetics of South Asian engaged theatre may not be judged by the matrix of ‘high’ art that characterizes much of the mainstream/Western proscenium theatre. With its focus shifting from ‘liberation’ to ‘development’ and ‘education,’ and with multinational NGOs funding several TfD groups and therefore influencing their agendas, much of recent engaged theatre in South Asia seems to have lost its edge or been hijacked by the ‘sponsor’ for its own (disguised) political and economic agenda. Yet there is now a greater variety of engaged theatre in the region than before, which has achieved an intriguing union of performance, activism, and social work.
II South Asian countries: theatres and contexts

Given the vastness and complexity of theatre in South Asia, I could not help leaving out several varieties and locations of it. Yet this book seeks to maintain a balance by focusing on genres and subgenres from across ‘mainstream’ and ‘parallel’ theatres which together provide a revealing window into contemporary South Asian history that has in turn been occasionally impacted by the theatre’s power of performance. This also calls attention to competing theatre and performance practices within the ‘national’ and historical demarcation of a country’s theatre, each raising an alternative history of the nation and its theatre. Such alterities force a rethinking of the ‘mainstream’ in society as well as in art and culture, pitching competing versions of ‘reality’ around the sociohistorical tropes that a nation-state hinges on. Contemporary women playwrights and directors of India, for example, have questioned gender stereotypes and redefined women’s identity by appropriating traditional, male dramaturgies and taking Indian theatre beyond the question of what ‘Indian theatre’ essentially is. The notion of ‘Indian,’ as both imaged in and informed by mainstream theatre, has also expanded to accommodate the voices of previously ignored communities such as the dalits. Pakistan’s Tehrik-e-Niswan (meaning ‘The Women’s Movement’), a theatre ensemble which emerged out of the first All Women’s Conference in Pakistan in 1980, has left an enduring mark on Pakistani society and theatre by protesting against ‘the low status of women.’ Sri Lankan theatre, which has long meant Sinhalese theatre alone, now seeks to make room for Tamil theatre and performance from the North and the East of which few Sinhalese in the South are well aware. Similarly, Nepali theatre seeks to include today the plays and performances of Madhesh, the Maithili-speaking vast plains of the country, besides those of the Nepal hills and valleys. The kind of balance attempted in representation, as suggested above, may again vary in degree, depending on a country’s geographical expanse, political climate, and the plural character of its theatre.

The following subsections on individual countries basically aim to provide a comprehensive, contextual overview of contemporary South Asian theatres under study, underscoring theatre’s complex, changing interface with geopolitical and sociocultural history. This is expected to orient the reader to, and also complement, the more nuanced discussions of the subject in the essays that follow. At the same time, the subsections provide an independent editorial perspective, which when not in sync with the contributors, should provoke the reader to seek
out her own and thus intensify her critical engagement with the book rather than being baffling at all.

**India**

India has a long and rich performance tradition seldom matched by the performance culture of any other country. As catalogued by Suresh Awasthi’s encyclopedic *Performance Tradition in India* (2001), the tradition ranges from the performance of episodes from the two Indian epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) and the *puranas* to the emergence and fall of Sanskrit drama, from the rise of temple drama out of the culture of devotional singing to the other forms of performance originating from the rich poetry and melodious songs of wandering bards, from puppetry and mask dances to martial arts. Western theatre arrived in colonial India in the late nineteenth century, more precisely with the building of the first proscenium theatre in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1860. Anti-colonial-themed theatre developed against this background, but often using colonial stage practice. Indian theatre has been both literary drama on the proscenium stage and performance-oriented production ever since, much of it in tandem with historical and sociocultural developments. The journey of modern and contemporary Indian theatre has been multifaceted – from an ‘encounter with the tradition’ through a recuperation of the realist mode to the present impressive range of practices from different regions/communities and also from abroad. Theatre played a vital role immediately post-1947 in the formation of a postcolonial national consciousness through the creation of theatre associations, government-owned institutions and their patronage of the ‘theatre of roots’ and its likes that aesthetically constructed a single, enduring ‘India’ by homogenizing India’s robust cultural diversity. Theatre continues to have a significant place in contemporary Indian society and politics through its more recent forms, subgenres, and locations that indicate a welcome plurality and inclusivity in the conception of ‘nation’ and ‘national’ theatre and culture.

The decades-old debate about what constitutes ‘Indian’ theatre continues, thanks to an amazing if not bewildering plurality of India’s theatre genres, forms, locations and languages. An obsessive effort to define a national culture and theatre took the first four decades after 1947, marginalizing in the process several theatre subgenres, indigenous as well as ‘Western.’ Aparna Dharwadker writes: ‘[i]n post-independence India, the quest is not so much for a “national theatre” as for a significant theatre in and of the nation.’48 This is more or less how Indian theatre is today; but the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA)-organized first
drama seminar of 1956 basically advocated decolonizing Indian theatre and promoting indigenous forms in a newly independent country. Despite the historical importance of the seminar which took into cognizance the reality of a multilingual/regional Indian theatre, it eventually sought to showcase and institutionalize ‘national’ culture in tune with the hegemonic state narrative of nationhood. The SNA attempted indirectly to erase the Parsi theatre and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) to pave the way for ‘a totally new’ Indian theatre meant to retrieve a usable cultural past that would help build transhistorical ‘nationalist narratives’ and practically privilege consolidation of ‘discreet’ and ‘unsullied’ aesthetic models ‘befitting [ . . . certain] categories of the classical and the folk’ (uneasy bedfellows otherwise). Regions and their cultural plurality did come within the frame of this national theatre; yet it was accompanied by efforts to unify diversity in accordance with its importance in the political process of national integration and reconstruction. The state cultural institutions functioned as sites of influence if not control that conflated the nation and the state, ‘Indian’ and ‘national,’ glossing over the fact that India was never a nation in the European sense of the term and its regions are but plural versions of the nation.

While synthesis and syncretism of forms was advocated by the 1956 seminar, overemphasis was laid on the use of ‘indigenous material from [ . . . ] national heritage (my emphasis) [ . . . ] and traditions’ for a freed people eager to express ‘their culture and aspirations.’ For a plural society like India with a colonial past and a precolonial cultural heritage, syncretism – as an ‘agonistic yet symbiotic coexistence of incompatible elements from diverse traditions’ – has its relevance. Yet one needed to be vigilant that it did not develop the pitfalls of cultural nationalism. The ‘theatre of roots’ movement, which practically began in the late 1950s laying emphasis on tradition, virtually wrote off the IPTA only to rise paradoxically from its ashes and gradually turned into a theatre language of the day. The ‘roots’ theatre aimed to translate into a cultural/aesthetic form Nehru’s vision of ‘that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past.’ In practice over time, however, it has combined ‘specific traditional Indian performance practices with Western theatrical conventions to create modern plays for urban audiences.’ The theatre of roots came to deal later with contemporary social and political issues as well by recasting the ‘indigenous material,’ as Ratan Thiyam’s Chakravyuh (Battle Formation, 1984) exemplifies, and raising questions about the state version of nationhood in the process. The Abhimanyu episode from the Mahabharata is
appropriated in Thiyam’s play to comment obliquely on the condition of civil rights in Manipur under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The attempt to recuperate ‘Indianness’ in polity and culture through the ‘roots’ movement by mystifying the cultural past was thus counterbalanced by such appropriations and also by several other self-critical postcolonial theatre forms that scrutinized the contradictions of a past so that the new nation-state could take lessons from them.

The need to redefine ‘Indian’ theatre in terms of its plurality and malleability was officially realized at the SNA-organized Nehru Centenary Theatre Festival in 1989. Through its selection of 17 plays from across India – realist and non-realist, urban and rural – the festival recognized the diversity of performance styles and spaces, questioning in a sense the transhistorical construction of ‘Indian’ or ‘national’ theatre during the 1956 seminar. The 1989 theatre festival also acknowledged the importance of plays dealing with contemporary socioeconomic experience as it affected ‘home and the world.’ Interestingly, the question about the ‘nationalness’ of Indian theatre continues well into the twenty-first century. In 2005, a special issue of Theatre India, titled ‘How “National” is Our National Theatre?’ critiqued the previous preoccupation with a homogenous Indian theatre. It broadly redefined Indian theatre as a ‘a sum total of its regional multiplicity,’ to put it in Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry’s words, ‘with its intricate collection of scripts, performances, aesthetic affiliations and politics, which are grappling with issues of identity in post-Independent (sic) India.’54 The Indian Theatre Forum (ITF) seminars of 2008 and 2012 also paid adequate attention to similar concerns of content, form and space in the light of contemporary changes in the notions of ‘nation’ and ‘national culture,’ thus redefining the idea of ‘Indian’ theatre altogether.

Evidently, the ‘tangible and weighty’ historical present or the ordinary day-to-day life found little place in the constructed cultural-spiritual continuum of ‘Indian civilization’ and by extension in Indian theatre and performance. Culture in the newly independent India, as during the country’s anti-colonial/nationalist struggle, was mostly defined in reference to an imagined or a recoverable ‘glorious’ tradition. Parallel to the theatre of roots and other theatre sub/genres feeding on a mythical or even historical past, however, there emerged dramas in the realist-naturalist mode during the 1960s, dealing with present urban and rural experience at domestic and social levels. This development had its own socioeconomic contexts. The independent India government’s policy on industrialization brought about urbanization of vast areas and thereby major changes to city and village life, which became a
compelling subject for several playwrights in the realist-naturalist tradition, such as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mahesh Elkunchwar. Industrialization and urbanization, on the other hand, failed to register any mentionable economic growth between 1951 and 1979 due to an unequal distribution of wealth, wars with China and Pakistan, and a huge influx of refugees from Bangladesh. This together with the rampant exploitation of peasants and land laborers by land owners and bourgeois leaders gave rise to discontent among the rural poor culminating in sporadic uprisings like the Naxalite movement that invaded every nook and corner of urban and rural Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These momentous events instantly moved middle-class, educated, urban intellectuals such as Badal Sircar and Mahasweta Devi and found representation on the stage and in the street as also in the pages of contemporary fiction.

Discontents of peasants and workers and of the dispossessed in urban and semiurban areas took the theatre beyond the boundaries of the proscenium stage and down to the streets in the 1970s. ‘If street theatre has any definite tradition in India, it is the anti-imperialist tradition of our people forged during the freedom movement,’ says Safdar Hashmi, founder of Jana Natya Mancha and a pioneer of the contemporary street theatre movement in India. With the Naxalbari uprising in Bengal and the Emergency declared by the central government in 1975, Indian street theatre grew into the people’s ‘struggle for a just social and economic order.’ Strict censorship subjected the performers to police attacks sometimes leading up to their ‘disappearance.’ Yet street theatre continued to advocate social change – in several other Indian states, too. Gursharan Singh, for example, used street theatre to spread his message through the years of ‘militancy’ in 1980s Punjab. The street theatre of India as a variant of progressive theatre has always tried to balance between entertainment and enlightenment. The Forum theatre of Sanjoy Ganguly in West Bengal (established in 1985) has supplemented if not superseded the street theatre by developing more direct ‘relationships’ with the audience through a participatory theatre style modeled on Boal. It vows to fight globalization that tends to ‘robotize the human being[s],’ all kinds of ‘fundamentalism, be it religious or political,’ internalized ‘oppressive values’ and ‘oppressive social relations,’ and seeks to ‘establish a constructive equation between acting and activism.’

The Dalit theatre movement in the late 1970s, an outgrowth of the Dalit Panther movement of 1972, is a landmark in the history of Indian society and theatre. Dalit theatre can be defined as a ‘theatre of
protest which aspires to get back basic human dignity for those from whom it was snatched away’ by ‘the Hindu religion, caste and creed system.’ Whether or not a homogenous dalit consciousness (as evident in the traditional dalit jalsa or in M.B. Chitnis’s modern-style play Yugyatra [The Journey of an Age, 1955]) still has any social relevance is, nevertheless, an important question before dalit playwrights and directors today. Datta Bhagat’s Routes and Escape Routes (1986), for instance, dramatizes the issue in the form of a conflict between a liberal dalit professor and a radical dalit young man who believes in avenging the wrongs traditionally perpetrated against the community. This conflict is reflective of the dalit double consciousness in postcolonial India: whether to work for inclusion of the dalit community in the expanding narrative of nationhood or to fight for the community as ‘an ontologically separate category.’ Contemporary urban proscenium dalit theatre has increasingly appropriated traditional and folk dalit performance forms, often to the dislike of the rural dalit audience. Dalit theatre is a significant theatre subgenre today, often feminist in character, and very much alive in several states of India, notably in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu – although the genealogy of form differs from one state to another.

Playwriting and directing remained a male privilege until the emergence during the 1970s of the autonomous women’s movement (mainly around issues of dowry, rape, and bride burning), largely spearheaded by urban, middle-class, educated women. The focus has gradually shifted from the relatively narrow concerns of ‘women’s welfare’ to the new ideology/program of ‘women’s empowerment’ and the question of individual autonomy. Indian women playwrights and directors have made significant attempts, in this changed social situation, to write, direct, and produce plays to tell their stories of suffering, resistance, and dreams. This has happened broadly in two different directions – with a group of women directors producing plays in Hindi and regional languages by employing non-linear, anti-realist dramaturgies and, on the other hand, with other women playwrights writing in English and predominantly in the realist tradition. Each of these ‘groups’ has created an alternative/womanist theatre of its own kind, lending female characters agency. Women directors have mixed in recent times various performance forms, indigenous as well as foreign, often working without a script and devising theatre directly on the stage. Experiments with folk performance traditions to tell a story in a modern, urban context are matched by contemporization of characters and episodes from Indian epics. Characterization via cross-dressing or gender inversion and solo
performances equally enrich Indian (women’s) theatre by exploring the ‘between’ in male–female identities and in I–Thou relationships respectively. As regards women’s English-language theatre, it deals with issues of domestic violence, sexual abuse, women’s struggle for self-definition and their fight against communalism. Their work no less destabilizes the audiences’ received notions of womanhood and female sexuality, thus strongly influencing their social and political consciousness.

This also brings us to examine the place of English-language plays as a separate category in contemporary Indian theatre. Ever since the emergence of Indian drama in English in the late nineteenth century, questions have centered on the appropriateness of the ‘alien’ language for Indian theatre forms and for the class of characters portrayed, the availability and size of the English-knowing/speaking audience, and also on the quality of prose in it. Besides the growing popularity of what is known in India as ‘transcreated drama,’ Indian plays written primarily in English have of late overcome many of the above obstacles by addressing the complexity of life in towns and metros and using a variety of Indian *englishes* for a vibrant, live theatre. Mahesh Dattani, who propelled Indian English theatre into a new era in the late 1980s, ‘defends his writing in English on the grounds that he writes for city people, and all theatre in a multilingual and multicultural country is limited by language and region.’ City plays, predominantly in English, is a significant genre now. Rage, a Mumbai-based English theatre group that came up in 1993, has collaborated since 2002 with the Royal Court Theatre in London to organize the Writers’ Bloc Workshop that allows young and aspiring professional playwrights ‘to break free from the rigid boundaries of English theatre in India’ and fashion their own ‘homegrown and lyrical’ medium.

Recent theatre events in India, including theatre festivals, articulate current trends and indicate future directions in Indian theatre. The ITF’s ‘Not the Drama Seminar’ of 2008 underscored the need to ‘de-construct (sic) the whole ’56 discourse and [. . . ] build our own completely from our own experiences.’ Almost as a follow-up to it, the ITF seminar of 2012 insisted on creating a performance aesthetic by pluralizing the very concept of theatre space. India’s first-ever Monologue Theatre Festival, held in Kolkata in April 2012, raised hopes for more experimental and innovative theatre addressing issues of a fast changing India. The parallel phenomenon of translating new Indian plays from the primary language into other Indian languages, often via English, is no less encouraging because ‘[t]his method of dissemination,’ as Dharwadker notes, ‘generates – and has already
generated – a body of nationally circulating texts and performance vehicles that offers more convincing evidence of the existence of a “national theatre” than any other institutional, linguistic, or bureaucratic conception.'69 One only wishes that the idea of ‘India’ were more extensively explored around the formation of the ‘religious other’ than has been done by a handful of plays such as Dattani’s Final Solutions and Salman Kurshid’s Sons of Babur, the former locating the question of Muslim discontent in the mutual distrust between India’s two largest religiocultural communities, and the latter interrogating the Hindutva brigade’s pejorative labeling of Indian Muslims as ‘Babur ki aulad’ (sons of Babur).70

Pakistan

The history of Pakistan begins with the story of the partition of India in 1947. The Muslim League’s demand for a separate state for the Muslims who feared to be a perpetually disadvantaged minority in an independent but supposedly Hindu-dominated India, its repeated disagreements with the Indian National Congress over terms for a mutually acceptable Constitution, the League’s massive electoral defeat in 1937, followed by its spectacular win of Muslim seats in the 1945–46 elections that came to little avail in the context of its demand for an undivided Bengal and Punjab as part of a sovereign ‘Pakistan,’ and its subsequent desperate call for the ‘Direct Action’ day (to cut a long story short) eventually culminated in the bloody partition. Although the architect of the new nation-state, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, sought to keep religion and state apart, Pakistan declared itself an Islamic Republic in 1956 and tended with time to turn into an Islamic State with an authoritarian government guided by a rigid if not repressive ‘Islamic’ ideology. A cultural identity centered on such ideology71 was also what the nation initially felt it needed for self-definition.

As a result, most of what were considered as ‘Hindu’ elements of Indian art and performance came to be rejected in the domain of culture. While the cultural bond between Pakistan and India fortunately withstood this challenge, many forms of theatre and performance did not find a congenial atmosphere for growth in Pakistan since theologically Islam, as many ‘Muslim’ and non-‘Muslim’ scholars argue, does not encourage representational art because the human imitation of God-created world and its creatures is considered a ‘sin.’ Interestingly, several types of performing arts and performances have still emerged and thrived in other Islamic societies, as in Iran, either by way of telling Islamic stories or by innovating ‘theatrical modalities’ that would
circumvent the ‘Islamic taboo about personal representation’ and not transgress any religious restriction as such. Moreover, humans imitating humans on the stage should be less blasphemous than painting human figures that come to life at the stroke of a brush on the canvas. The long tradition of secular drama and theatre in Turkey would exemplify the point.\textsuperscript{72} In post-partition Pakistan, however, the nexus between Islamist orthodoxy, military oligarchy and the feudal rich did not let theatre and performance flourish more for profane reasons: such activities would question existing institutions and values. After the partition Pakistan was left only with some Lok (folk) theatre and bits of Parsi theatre in Urdu and Gujarati. Braving all odds, several types of theatre have still emerged in post-partition Pakistan – theatre of protest modeled interestingly on the productions of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), commercial (or popular) theatre initially performing epics and ballads and later turning into crass entertainment loaded with lewd songs and dances, foreign play adaptations and imitations of Western musicals, street theatre challenging the mullah–military alliance, and also some original stage plays in Urdu commenting on contemporary issues of Islamist radicalism, gender depravity, and the overall ‘dismal’ condition of the country.

The commitment to Marxist ideology that acted as a catalyst for the formation of the IPTA in pre-independence India helped bring forth politically-rooted dramatic activities in 1950s Pakistan. However, the inescapable historical circumstances confronting Pakistan during its formative years – such as the problem of refugee rehabilitation, economic crisis, ethnic strife, and communal riots (involving the Bengalis on its eastern and the Punjabis on its western side, and also the Baluchis, Sindhis, Pakhtuns, and Pathans) – seriously affected state-building and accounted for the concentration of power on the military–bureaucracy axis at the expense of political governance. The idea of a nation apparently built on an exclusive religious identity started showing its inherent fault lines, and the state that was expected to be secular in its dispensation failed to recover from an undemocratic power circuit practically. Yet, with the overthrowing of the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan in 1969, the ousting of Yahya Khan two years later coinciding with ‘the collapse of the united Pakistan state,’\textsuperscript{73} and the establishment of a new democracy under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1971, ‘a new concept of Pakistan emerged, which did not correlate with the dominant English drawing room comedies or other remnants of Parsi theatre.’\textsuperscript{74} New theatre ensembles came up and now found state support. Student theatre activity proliferated during the prodemocracy
movement, however fragile – a trend that continued beyond the Bhutto regime. English-language plays did continue, but most of them were now adapted to domestic realities and in local idioms. Pakistan under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto produced after a long time original plays that people could connect with immediately.

Bhutto brought several structural changes to the military and curbed its political role with a view to making it subordinate to the civilian authority. Most ironically, he had to fall back on the military soon to contain ethnic strife in several parts of Pakistan, as if proving the indispensability of the army to the survival of the state. Under General Zia-ul-Haque’s presidency, Bhutto was hanged (1979), political activities were banned and national elections postponed. Zia also implemented harsh Quranic punishments for any violations of Sharia (Islamic laws). Pakistan under Zia not only got Islamized but witnessed what Fawzia Afzal-Khan calls an ‘ unholy alliance’ between ‘ postmodern capitalism, patriarchy, and fundamentalism’ that could be largely traced to the US imperialist design ‘ to keep the armament and drug trade flourishing [via the Taliban movement] for the benefit of consumer capitalism.’ In such circumstances, where theatre and performing arts were largely banned, what were permitted for the state’s commercial gains were popular performances of vulgar comic dialogues accompanied by crude display of the female body. The parallel theatre of Pakistan rose to prominence in the early 1980s in reaction against Zia’s political dictatorship and Islamization agenda and also against the mushrooming of ribald commercial theatre. Variously described as ‘political theatre,’ ‘parallel theatre,’ ‘alternative theatre’ – it has undergone a long journey since its birth and therefore some transformations of form and objectives, too. Conceived by urban intellectuals, as the Mukta Natak movement in Bangladesh and the street theatre movement in India were, and drawing on the protest theatre of 1950s Pakistan as well as on the folk tradition of Lok theatre, most of the parallel theatre of Pakistan sought to sensitize the masses against various forms of injustice and challenged dominant state and religious ideologies along the way.

Some of the leading alternative theatre groups, such as Ajoka, began with street theatre but grew over time into institutionalized theatre troupes producing their plays on the proscenium stage and on the state-owned television, while several others, such as the Punjab Lok Rehas, continued with street theatre plays. Shahid Nadeem, now executive director of Ajoka, accepted appointment as Lahore Television’s general manager during Benazir Bhutto’s time, raising eyebrows for allegedly compromising his aesthetic and political independence. The political
culture of the country was now surely different than when the parallel theatre movement had taken root, and many theatre groups argued that there was nothing wrong with accepting positions in government organizations or funding through the NGOs as long as their agenda was not severely compromised. Pakistan’s parallel theatre in general might have lost some of its radicalism through time, becoming a commodity in the world of what Asma Mundrawala calls ‘donor-driven’ activism; yet it continues to challenge extremist and biased notions of nationalism, religion, and gender through performances put on by both old and new theatre troupes. An invisible divide exists, though, between Ajoka and most other parallel theatre groups over the question of aesthetics. Nadeem increasingly has made it clear that political theatre does not mean the message alone but should at the same time be artistically satisfying. Pakistan’s parallel theatre continues to strive to find a balance between activism and aesthetics.

The parallel theatre movement in Pakistan, initiated by Ajoka and Sheema Kermani-led Tehrik-e-Niswan, coincided with the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy and the emergence of the Women’s Action Forum. Ajoka began its journey with Juloos (Procession, 1984), a translation/adaptation of Indian playwright Badal Sircar’s Michhil (Procession, 1972), when the coercive Martial Law of Zia and the gagging censorship rules were at their height. Since the play script was not cleared by the government for performance, Juloos could not be staged in any of the city theatres and was instead performed outside the proscenium stage, incidentally achieving a closer relationship with the audience. Tehrik-e-Niswan began its sojourn with Dard Kay Faasley (Distances of Pain, 1981), a commentary on the miserable condition of women in times of national chauvinism and religious extremity. The Hudood Ordinance, passed into law in 1980, took woman to be the guilty party by default and prescribed severe punishment against her. Tehrik-e-Niswan’s plays critiqued the different forms of imprisonment a Pakistani woman suffers, still insisting on the will to achieve independence. It should be noted that the groups that are often discussed under the seemingly homogenous category of ‘parallel’ theatre, may sometimes be in conflict with each other not only on grounds of aesthetic issues but also on questions of language, agenda, and collaboration.

Following Zia’s mysterious death in a 1988 air crash and the subsequent restoration of democracy, Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People’s Party came to power as prime minister. But she could not practically curb the orthodoxy’s power under the presidency of Ishaq Khan, formerly Zia’s close adviser. New elections were held in 1990 and in
1997, and the country’s premiership changed hands between Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto during the period. The Islamization program continued; the anti-women Hudood laws remained intact. Worse still, the democracy that resurfaced in Pakistan in 1988 slipped back into the pit as General Parvez Musharraf seized power via a bloodless coup in October 1999. The parallel theatre of Pakistan at once reflected the despondent political and cultural mood of the 1990s. Besides the productions of Ajoka and Tehrik-e-Niswan, Punjab Lok Rehas’s plays also highlighted the oppression of people in a military-dominated state that allegedly shared power with religious extremists. Sanjh, a ‘splinter group [like Punjab Lok Rehas] from Ajoka’ had the privilege to represent Pakistan at the 1997 international theatre festival in Cairo, performing significantly ‘a thinly disguised political allegory’ (Bandiwan/Prisoner) around the capture and execution of the democratically elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977) that still impacted on Pakistani politics78 as a reminder of the damage military dictatorship can do to a nation.

Pakistan’s story of sliding from a moderate Muslim state into a haven of ‘Islamist’ terrorists began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the US-backed Afghan jihad against it. The Jamaat-i-Islami found a much-awaited opportunity to ‘Islamize’ Pakistan by helping plant a Taliban regime in Afghanistan and making the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan its ally in domestic and international politics. Following 9/11, General Musharraf, then President of Pakistan, had no option but to join the American ‘war on terror’ and order crackdowns on select terror networks across the country. But nothing much changed the unstable political atmosphere of Pakistan, even after another return to democracy following Benazir’s assassination. The presence of Osama bin Laden on Pakistan’s soil until he was killed by American Navy Seals in May 2011 has largely dented Pakistan’s international image. Hotel Mohenjodaro (2008), an Ajoka stage adaptation of a 1967 Ghulam Abbas short story, depicts a Pakistan fragmented and chaotic. The attack on Marriott Hotel, not long after the first staging of the play, may be said to have enacted an offstage ‘fulfillment’ of the ‘warning’ onstage. Moreover, Tehrik-e-Niswan’s staging of Anwer Jafri’s Hum Rokaen Gae (We Will Stop, 2012) lambasts the fake guardians of Islam who mislead ordinary Muslims and harass the religious minorities. No less noteworthy is Fehmida Riaz’s 2002 Urdu adaptation for Tehrik-e-Niswan of Lysistrata, titled Jang Ab Nahin Hogi (There Will Be No War), which became in 2003 part of the World Lysistrata Project. Such plays situate the audience in the liminality of the real and the fictive world, drawing
on what is happening in the actual world and critiquing the ‘real’ in the (enclosed) performance space.

There are other kinds of ‘performati ve interventions in the body politic of Pakistan.’ The hijras of the country often make a mockery through their flamboyant, hyperbolically feminine demeanors of the state ideology that only benefits the military and the ruling elites. In her article, ‘Hijraism: Jostling for a Third Space in Pakistani Politics,’ Clair Pamment cites an interesting incident in the run-up to the 2008 general elections, where a hip-swinging hijra ‘squeezed’ a ‘burley’ military driver’s bottom, on getting no tips from him and his colleagues for her flirtations, and thus mocked their ‘self-promoted military machismo’ and by extension the military institution itself. The bhands’ performances at courts, weddings, birth ceremonies and other public gatherings also provide a strong critique in a boisterous manner of contemporary politics in Pakistan. Mention may be made of Munir Hussain’s performances, as Pamment observes in another article, one of which lampooned former president Musharraf as a ‘ravaging barber’ shaving off the ‘heads’ of civilian power, thus alluding to the dismissal of Iftikhar Chaudhry from the position of Pakistan’s Chief Justice. Whether or not they can change the course of Pakistani politics, bhands and hijras definitely comment on, if not influence, it through their lampoonery and overt theatricality, escaping censorship in an otherwise conservative political culture. The bhands’ performative strategies are also at times imitated in real-life politics.

English-language theatre’s intervention in Pakistan’s cultural politics is interesting on its own terms. The recent spate of English musicals, either direct borrowings from the West or adaptations with an abundance of Western-style music and dance, may be considered as a form of challenge to the ‘Talibanization’ of culture. Commercial theatre also poses a threat to repressive culture; but while it is often dismissed as a ‘lower’ form of performance predominated by ribaldry, English musicals are perceived as better aesthetic productions meant for an audience with an arguably ‘refined’ taste. Nida Butt’s Chicago (2008) is stunning as much for its sensual overtones as for its satirical attack on corruption in the administration. While Shah Sharabeel’s Phantom of the Opera (2008) and Moulin Rouge (2009) continue to be extremely popular, his 2009 adaptation of Ray and Michael Cooney’s Tom, Dick and Harry (2005), with a mix of the Punjabi language and culture in it, signaled ‘an exciting departure from the West End and Broadway replicas’ that have long occupied a central place in Pakistan’s musicals culture. On the other hand, Nida Butt’s Karachi (2011), an attempt to do ‘an original
musical in Urdu,’ relates a local story of ‘ambition pitted against mafia brutality’ in a Karachi that on the music track is ‘gun shots, generators, truck horns, big crowds, protests, and then the more modern part which is all jazz, rock and dance.’ Other kinds of innovative theatre also dot the trouble-torn landscape of Pakistan today. Verve Productions’ *Innuendo*, for example, is a unique three-day long play (2011) that builds on the feelings of love, peace, hope, cowardice, fear, bravery, mischief, hate, greed, envy, modesty, penance and sorrow – ‘each played out by one of the thirteen players’ in the cast.

Alongside the recent deluge of teleplays/films, Pakistan is trying to produce more original theatre and performance that would embody the aspirations of the people, involve them in it, address the country’s current political and sociocultural climate, and create more theatre artists and groups beyond Lahore and Karachi. The participation of ethnic minorities in the theatre of Pakistan or the room left in it for addressing their issues is still nominal. There are hardly any theatre groups in the Pakhtoon and Baluchistan areas and only a few in Sindh. But the theatre/performance scene in Pakistan is changing. Interactive Resource Theatre has been trying to reach out to far-flung areas and to people of different ethnic and class backgrounds with its Boalsian Theatre of the Oppressed. Samina Ahmed rightly observes that ‘Pakistani theatre is again going through a phase of transformation – and artists are trying to win the audience over by quality performances.’ Theatre can always create grounds for free dialogue and discourse that can profusely contribute toward the health of a society. And theatre artists in Pakistan are constantly working with this belief in the power of their work. ‘Isn’t theatre, art and culture the basis of a democratic tradition of a country?’ asks Sahid Nadeem. This is a question worth mulling over – anytime, anywhere – because ‘lack of healthy and vibrant cultural activity has been one of the main reasons for violence, intolerance and serious identity crisis’ in any part of the world.

**Bangladesh**

The performance culture of Bangladesh shares its history with that of Bengal in pre-partition India, which in fact covers a wide range of practices from the popular medieval tradition of recitation by the Kathaks of the Bengali Ramayana verses to Chaitanya’s *kirtanas* and *kathas* to timeless religious festivals like the *Gajonotsava* to centuries-old rural/folk performance subgenres such as *jatras, palas, alkaps, and gambhiras*. The theatre and performance of post-partition but pre-liberation Bangladesh (1947–1971), then East Pakistan, suffered for a while but...
gained fresh momentum with the Language Movement of 1952. The (theatre) history of this intermediate period stands nearly deleted from the national memory of today’s Pakistan but is the most celebrated chapter of the (theatre) history of independent Bangladesh. There are today about a hundred prominent theatre groups or group theatre ensembles in Bangladesh – the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation, formed in 1980–81, being their federal body. The plays staged over the past four decades or so in urban Bangladesh alone demonstrate a variety of theatre genres and subgenres – the prose plays and dance dramas of Rabindranath Tagore, adaptations and translations of foreign plays, original stage plays including the theatre of the absurd and avant-garde plays, street theatre, Theatre for Development, Mukta Natak (‘liberated theatre’), and so on. Besides the continuation of indigenous theatre and performance mostly in villages, scores of plays have been produced by urban theatre groups by appropriating traditional/folk forms to address contemporary sociopolitical and cultural realities. There were brief attempts to establish a professional theatre in Bangladesh between 1957 and 1964; but it came to fruition only in 1994 with the creation of the Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT). However, Bangladesh has been a member of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) since 1982.

The creation of Pakistan, as Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal observe, was ‘a most decisive political abortion’ of ‘the theory that there were two nations in India, Hindu and Muslim’ – because Pakistan was perceived by the Congress (Party) as Muslim-majority areas ‘seceding’ from the Union of India which retained parts of Punjab (on its west) and Bengal (on its east) and thus left Jinnah with no option but to settle for what he himself called a ‘mutilated and moth-eaten’ Pakistan. Besides, the partition of Bengal looked more ironic as West Pakistan came to dismiss Bengali Muslims as ‘impure’ Muslims. The Bengali language and culture (both being of ‘Sanskritic’ origin) were perceived to be inimical to ‘Muslimness’ that was largely sought to be defined in terms of the languages and cultures of the Middle East. Urdu in an adapted form of Arabic script in this case was considered very close to the ‘essence’ of Islamic culture. The presumption of one Islam, however, was inherently wrong because no religion can ultimately transcend mediations by elements of local language, culture, and ethnicity. No wonder Islam in Bengal (including today’s Bangladesh) has always been different from Islam in West Pakistan or in other Islamic countries, for that matter. Despite nineteenth-century religious reform movements to ‘restore’ the authenticity of Islam among the Muslim population of Bengal, mainly through translations into Bengali of Islamic literature,
and the attempted Arabicization of Bengali script, Bengali Muslims had embraced a distinct Bengali ethnic and linguistic identity without having to ‘officially’ denounce their religious affiliation.89

It was realized soon after the creation of Pakistan that the ‘universal-ity’ of Islam as a faith was not adequate for a harmonious relationship between the Muslims of East and West Pakistan. So the type of ‘Islamic’ nationalism that was propagated by making Urdu the state language of Pakistan came to be contested by the secular nationalism of Bengali, now Bangladeshi, Muslims, culminating in the Liberation War of 1971. The East Pakistani political leadership reacted to West Pakistani impositions of language and culture by declaring Bengali in 1952 to be the lingua franca of East Pakistan and 21st February the new State Language Day. Defying government orders prohibiting processions and gatherings on that day, Dhaka University students organized demonstrations and inevitably clashed with the police. Many of them, together with a large number of other people who joined the movement cutting across class and caste, were killed or injured on 21st (and also on 22nd). This day, popularly known as Ekushe (Twenty-first) in Bangladesh and now celebrated as the International Mother Language Day, became the most powerful secular symbol on which the new nation of Bangladesh would be built. On the tenth commemoration of the Victory Day, the day the Pakistani Army surrendered to the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh, the National Monument was significantly dedicated to all those who had sacrificed themselves for the freedom of Bangladesh, thus associating Ekushe with liberation.90

Several amateur theatre ensembles emerged across the country in response to such momentous events. Many more came up immediately post-liberation, staging plays that strove to sustain the spirit of the liberation movement and thus build up a collective consciousness that would promote Bengali culture and uphold the ideals of a secular, liberated and liberal Bangladesh. Yet what paradoxically threatens Bangladesh today is the rise of religious (Islamist) nationalism and its exploitation by political Islamist parties for electoral gain. The failure of the Mujib government on the political as well as the economic front indirectly let the political Islamists and religious parties into national politics. To them, Mujib seemed to have sold Bangladesh to the ‘Hindu’ India that directly provided the leader with military help to achieve liberation for his country. The word ‘secular’ was deleted from the Constitution and replaced by ‘absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah’ – ironically during the rule of Zia-ur Rahman, the man who had heroically led the Mukti Bahini against the Pakistani forces in 1971.
Religious nationalists may not seek to ‘impose an Islamic form of governance,’ but they have always sought to have their presence in national politics through Islamist political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami that are keen to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state. While the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) has not succeeded in maintaining any sharp ideological difference from its ally Jamaat-e-Islami, some Awami League (AL) personalities have also publicized their private commitment to an Islamic way of life especially to win voters in the run-up to elections. The increasing differentiation between ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic’ is fast eroding the founding principles of Bangladesh as a nation-state.

Such performances of religious nationalism and political Islam have an inevitable impact on the body politic of Bangladesh and on its contemporary theatre. In reaction against all ‘fundamentalist’ politics, the war of 1971 has been recurrently represented, directly or indirectly, on the urban Bangladesh stage as a crucial reminder of the irreparable damage that religious extremism can heap on a people that had sacrificed so much for a secular Bangladesh. Plays mentionable in this regard are Syed Shamsul Haq’s verse drama, Payer Awaj Pawa Jay (At the Sound of Marching Feet, 1976), Nasiruddin Yousof’s Ghum Nei (Sleepless, 1994), Kumar Pridip Baul’s Katha Ekattor (The Saga of 1971, 2005), and Mohammad Bari’s adaptation of Zahir Raihan’s popular short story Samayer Prayojane (As Time Demands, 2005). There are indigenous performances, too, which have continually built up resistance to the corrosive religious-political ideology of the country at different points of time. In Madar Pirer Gan, for example, the performers – Hindus or Muslims or both together – challenge Islamic orthodoxy by dramatizing their strong belief in the Sufi cult of South Asia. Jari Gan is another such performance subgenre where two groups of performers, led by their respective lead narrators, ‘debate issues of contemporary relevance,’ including the significance of the Shariat and the Marfat in our times, in a makeshift auditorium with audiences sitting around them. Countless street plays have also been produced since the 1980s to make strong statements for secularism and democracy. And Rabindranath Tagore has ever been the beacon of hope and strength to Bangladeshi secularists, and his plays, besides the rich treasure of his poetry and songs, have served as a tool of cultural resistance to all fanaticism. Noteworthy are Nagorik Natya Sampraday’s Achalayatan (The Petrified Place), on the stagnation of life due to blind beliefs and dogmatism; Bisarjan (Sacrifice), on the danger and futility of fundamentalist thinking; and Raktakarobi (Red Oleanders), on the need of sacrifice for a better life.
However, as ‘communities employ historical evidence to create a specific collective memory that legitimizes the existence of the new nation-state,’94 such exercise implies some omissions, too. The predominantly Bengali ‘national myth-making,’ which influences the scripting of Bangladesh history, omitted the plight of non-Bengali, non-Muslim ethnic (minority) groups and created pressure indirectly on them to assimilate to Bengali culture and also erase, in an implied sense, their own ethnic past and identity. Thus part of the majority Bengali community, which fought the war against (West) Pakistan for their separate ethnic and linguistic identity, gradually betrayed signs of cultural hegemony within the new nation-state itself, almost forgetting that ethnic minorities such as the Santhals, the Chakmas, the Marmas and the Biharis deserved equal recognition and opportunities in the civic and official system.95 The indigenous performances of these ethnic groups (or tribes) naturally find little place in the history of Bangladesh theatre due to the dominance of the Bengali language and culture. The Genkhuli Geed of the Chakmas, a popular performance genre that narrates a love story or a social event almost in a manner the bard performs in the Bengali oral tradition; the Goraia of the Tripuris, an agro-ritual based performance predominated by dance, instrumental music and physical acting; the Jya Palas of the Marmas mostly depicting through dialogue, song, dance, and physical acting their dreaded memories of displacement – all of them indeed merit attention.

The nation is almost always gendered. The image of the ‘ideal’/‘clean’ woman is often crucial to the nationalist imagining of a postcolonial nation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s birangana (heroic woman) policy drew great admiration as it awarded a dignified status to the widows and rape victims of the war who otherwise might have been socially neglected or ostracized. Zia-ur Rahman also took up the cause of women, after he had forced his way into power, through the state’s ‘Women in Development’ policy. But benevolent state measures adopted at different times had, on the whole, reinforced the image of the helpless/hapless woman needing protection/rehabilitation through preservation/restoration of their ‘normal’ and ‘virtuous’ womanhood.96 More recent attempts by political Islamists to define the nation of Bangladesh in line with Islamic dogmatism have proved more repressive for women. The secular (and modern) imagining of nationhood no less situates the woman question ‘in an inner domain of national culture.’97 Even the women’s wings of the BNP and the AL are concerned more about welfare issues than civil rights. Contesting women’s subsumption in the narratives of both religious and secular nationalism,
women playwrights and directors are becoming increasingly visible in Bangladesh, although their theatre may not be labeled ‘feminist’. The plays they have written and/or directed range from adaptations (Sara Zaker’s *Mukhosh* [Mask, 1993], based on Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*) to recitative performances (Ishrat Nishat’s *Poddo Baul*) to Tagore plays (Nuna Afroz’s *Shesher Kabita* [The Farewell Song, 2011]) to *pala*-style productions (Ruma Modak’s *Kamolabotir Pala* [The Story of Kamolaboti, 1998], based on a local myth). Male playwrights have made no less contribution to the redefining of the woman’s place in the family and society. Mention may be made of Syed Jamil Ahmed-directed *Behular Bhasan* (Behula’s Voyage, 2010), a play in the *pala-gaan* form made out of re-compositions of a medieval Bengali ‘Hindu’ literary text *Manasa-mangal*, where a strong, committed wife sets out on a journey to bring her dead husband back to life but does not hesitate to condemn him for his greed and promiscuity.

Class and class-factions, which are as important in the analysis of Bangladesh’s political history, have an equal impact on its theatre. The AL was successful in mobilizing people across class and regional divides for the cause of liberation, but rifts surfaced soon after the achievement of political freedom and especially with the famine of 1974. The socialist agenda of the Liberation days had little substance about it anymore and the nationalization of industries and production favored the ruling AL elites. Zia exploited this politicoeconomic condition against the centrist Awami League to swing public support to his side but ended up creating a new class of industrialists through generous bank loans and a patronage system that gave rise to rampant corruption. A nexus emerged between the military, the bureaucracy, and the business class, to the disadvantage of the rural and urban poor. ‘Group Theatre ensembles directed their class-conscious resistance’ against the establishment, Syed Jamil Ahmed rightly observes in his essay here, through productions such as Shamsul Haq’s verse play *Nuraldiner Sarajiban* (Nuraldin: A Life, 1982) based on the Rangpur peasant rebellion of 1783; Abdullah Hel Mahmud’s *Nankar Pala* (The Nankar Tale, 1985) based on the 1946 rebellion of *nankar* peasants against the *zamindari* system in Maymansingh and Sylhet regions; and Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nil-Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1985) based on the Indigo Revolt (1859–62). These plays significantly comment on the contemporary economic scene of Bangladesh by exposing the collusion in the machinations of power between colonial imperialism and post-liberation Bangladesh politics and, at the same time, voice postcolonial resistance to it. A remarkable development in
Bangladesh’s theatre of the oppressed was the emergence in 1984 of a theatre movement called the Mukta Natak Movement (Liberated Theatre Movement) which reached out to the poor and the landless in villages in a way many Group Theatre ensembles could not. Begun by Aranyak, it developed into an independent, popular theatre movement that basically protested against the exploitation of marginal farmers by the ruling elite and corrupt elected members of Union Parishads. The Mukta Natak Movement gradually died out as most activists and volunteers relocated to towns and cities in search of jobs and the villagers also lost interest in such performances with the arrival of the television and other forms of entertainment.

Lack of social development, women and child trafficking, ignorance of the masses about crucial issues of daily living – all this plagues contemporary Bangladesh society and finds representation in several other types of theatre activity. Theatre for Development (TfD) performances, organized by development organizations across the country, soon filled the void left by the premature death of the Mukta Natak movement. LOSAUK, a non-government development organization founded in 1987, chose the traditional jatra form to raise social consciousness, although the form has undergone major changes over time. It is now much shorter in length, trendy in costume, and topical in theme. As a cultural form that aims at ‘development,’ TfD plays deal with issues of poverty, illiteracy, misuse of public resources, dowry, common health problems, and social prejudices. TfD performers get paid by the NGOs or government agencies which supervise their work and hence their performances are mostly designed to serve the greater interests of the funding agencies. The importance of TfD cannot be ignored altogether, though, since the state has often failed to reach out to the poor and the underprivileged who have been instead helped significantly by several NGOs through their development program, TfD being part of it. TfD productions, however, provide little or no scope for any direct interaction with spectators as in the Mukata Natak form.

Theatre festivals – such as street theatre festivals organized by Bangladesh Street Theatre Federation and Group Theatre Federation, and the International Theatre Institute (ITI)-organized theatre festival – are also part of the contemporary theatre scene in Bangladesh. These festivals, often held in the open, compensate for lack of conventional theatre space, create new audiences and raise public awareness about the special place of theatre in the social life and cultural history of Bangladesh. The theatre of Bangladesh has thrived in an atmosphere of greater freedom ever since the repeal in 1975 of the draconian
Dramatic Performances Control Act of 1876, although the Public Places Amusement Act with its own list of ‘prohibitions’ is still in place.

Nepal

Despite its defeat at the hands of the British in a war from 1814 to 1816 and the consequent loss of considerable landmass, Nepal was never a British colony and is therefore a nation with a political history quite different from that of its South Asian neighbors. Nepal’s ‘national independence during the colonial era’ could not, however, avert Nepal’s very own history of colonization at the hands of its autocratic prime ministers from the Rana family who ‘reduced the monarch to a figurehead.’

Monarchy, on the other hand, enjoyed immunity from public criticism, though it sometimes proved no less harmful to Nepal and its people. King Tribhuvan freed the country from the Rana oligarchy in 1951 and took initial steps toward parliamentary democracy that suffered a big jolt with his death in 1955. His son, King Mahendra, held the first democratic elections for a national assembly in 1959 but dismissed the elected government in 1960. In 1962 he instituted a ‘partyless’ panchayat system, thus assuming sole authority as head of state even as the system bore the semblance of a representative government.

The theatre of ancient Nepal existed predominantly in ritual and dance forms. During the last few years of King Tribhuvan’s regime (1951–1955) Nepal opened up to the rest of the world, and its theatre enriched itself by combining Western dramaturgies with the spectacular indigenous performance tradition. Nepali audiences, who were by then no less used to the already prevalent ‘theatrical comedies and stage rhetoric,’ were startled by Balkrishna Sama’s plays that for the first time depicted the lives of ordinary people in lyrical prose, interspersed with verse at times.

Sama also wrote plays on mythological topics, but their political overtones and satirical overtures were unmistakable – the reason why some of his dramatic works could not be staged during the Rana regime. Sama’s contribution to modern Nepal’s theatre lies in his moving portrayal of the commoner’s life and in shifting the focus on to themes of national, social, and psychological importance. Nepali theatre became pronouncedly secular in his hands. Sama’s immediate successors furthered the trends in realistic and naturalistic theatre through the 1950s and captured in their work over the next two decades the predicament of the individual in a changed sociopolitical situation especially under the autocratic regime of King Mahendra. Vijaya Malla, for one, brought forth a theatre that made the audience feel the power
of performance by articulating their social and psychological lives that had hitherto been given little attention in literature or in the theatre.

Birendra, Mahendra’s son who succeeded him as king in 1972, was compelled to call for a national referendum, ‘amid student demonstrations and anti-regime activities in 1979,’ ‘to decide the nature of Nepal’s government – either the continuation of the Panchayat system with democratic reforms or the establishment of a multiparty system.’ Theatre now became more socially anchored. The new plays of Dhrubachandra Gautam and Mohanraj Sharma, for example, critiqued the autocratic rulers and the feudalistic attitude of the nobility by contemporizing puranic tales (Gautam’s Bhasmashurko Nalihad/The Shinbone of Bhasmasur, 1981) and by using modern dramatic techniques such as surrealism (Sharma’s Jemanata/Whichever Way You Like It, 1983). Nepali theatre prior to its politicization through the street theatre movement did not, therefore, ignore contemporary social issues, as often alleged. Only it delineated them indirectly, often in terms of their impact on the lives of individuals and through a mix of history, allegory, and myths. The profusion of such theatre work subsequently encouraged, directly or indirectly, the ‘urban youth of Kathmandu’ to build up their own theatre that would ‘combine […] social change and entertainment,’ although the predominant tone of most of their work was still far from one of political protest. After the country was freed from the Rana oligarchy it took the Nepali populace nearly three decades to launch a full-scale mass movement for democracy, and it was about this time that Nepali theatre came to deal with live political issues. Sama died in 1981. The same year incidentally saw the birth of a street theatre group called Sarwanam which, together with another one (Aarohan) that emerged the very next year, changed the landscape of Nepali theatre forever and the direction of Nepali politics, too.

Whether the prodemocracy movement catalyzed the political street theatre (Sadak Natak) of Nepal or was engendered by it is like the proverbial chicken–egg dialectic. The public will to end the panchayat system had long been there, which the street theatre groups exploited to bring about the mass movement for restoring democracy. This theatre movement began in the city of Kathmandu, but gradually spread all over the valley. Ashesh Malla and Sunil Pokharel, founder directors of Sarwanam and Aarohan respectively, were hardly aware, when they began their work, of the tradition and practice of this variant of political theatre in other societies and cultures. Even before they came to know Safdar Hashmi or Badal Sircar in India, in person or through their work, they realized that their theatre must provide fresh impetus to the
prodemocracy movement and therefore reach out to common people by addressing their contemporary concerns. Malla and Pokharel revolutionized the form and style of their performance, establishing a direct, interactive relationship with the audience. If Sama took the theatre out of the palace, Malla and Pokharel took it literally down to the street. The street theatre groups in Nepal also used characters, dance, and music elements from Nepali ritual theatre, remarkably of both Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, so as to make their issue-oriented plays more appealing to the mass already familiar with such elements of traditional/folk performance.

Theatre and performance in Nepal faced censorship both during and after the Rana regime. The old Nepali tradition of lampooning political figures, especially during the Gaijatra festival, came to be banned during the last phase of the Rana rule. Political campaigning was allowed by the authority following the declaration of the 1980 National Referendum; but the scope of ‘legitimate criticisms’ of the government was never made clear and, more important, a ‘section of the Treason Act of 1961 [. . . continued to] prohibit criticism of the king or the royal family.’ No wonder the plays that were even remotely critical of the monarchy or of the feudalistic social structure were not permitted by the Royal Nepal Academy to participate in its annual theatre festival (Natyamahotsav) that began in 1977. Moreover, quite contrary to Abhi Subedi’s claim, the street theatre groups frequently confronted a threat of censorship during the 1980s. That Nepali street theatre developed out of Nepal’s ‘heritage of street performance’ is quite true. But this performance heritage basically relates to ritual theatre and folk dance on occasions of religious and agricultural festivity. Hence the political street theatre as initiated by Sarwanam and Aarohan should not be considered as a direct ‘inheritor’ of Nepal’s traditional street performance. These street theatre groups would often appear unannounced in parks and crowded roads, put on their show, and dash off to avert arrest or harassment by the police. Subedi is right only if the ‘freedom’ he sensed in the political street plays implies the ‘liberty’ the performers took to turn non-theatrical spaces into performance spaces for making statements that could not have been made in the proscenium theatre.

The street theatre of Nepal was indigenous. Yet it later drew on the political theatre practices in other countries – the street theatre of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, among others. Ashesh Malla’s theatre is basically his own. But he has also developed it by borrowing from Safdar Hashmi and Badal Sircar throughout his career and in a way that suited his historical and aesthetic contexts. Sarwanam has organized
theatre festivals and workshops which, attended by practitioners from all around South Asia, have contributed to the diversification of its performance style. Malla has created a theatre in his country that for the first time ‘staged’ stories of common people in their own language and without traditional performance paraphernalia, reduced the gap between spectacle and audience that was so typical of performances at the Royal Palace or in auditoriums, used human bodies as props and for scenery, and mixed rehearsed dialogue with impromptu speeches and action. Malla’s Sarwanam, which did not reject the proscenium stage altogether, fundamentally aimed to restore democracy; and therefore its performances largely cut across class, caste, and gender. Sunil Pokharel, who left Sarwanam in 1982 to found his own group Aarohan, also drew on the techniques of Hashmi and his likes. His street theatre during the 1980s was guided, as he says in an interview, by the principles of ‘Pluralism, Democracy and Social Justice.’ As he now looks back, he finds it more accurately described as ‘propaganda theatre for awareness,’ ‘mission-oriented and of political nature,’ which was nevertheless necessary in those times.

On the other hand, the street theatre of Nepal was also influenced by the works of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, iconic theatre personalities from outside South Asia. Brecht’s theatre for instruction and entertainment had considerably influenced Nepal’s street theatre insofar as it motivated the audience to think critically and seek social and political justice. Nepal’s street theatre thus came to acquire a distinct politics of performance to counter the ongoing performance of politics and made it clear that the course of history was alterable. Boal’s influence, and Paulo Freire’s through Boal’s work, is also discernible in the emancipation and empowerment of the spectator that the street theatre aimed at. However, Boal’s emphasis on the simultaneous liberation of the oppressed and the oppressor, on the discovery of the potential oppressor in the oppressed in a given circumstance or on the unpremeditated changes to the narrative during the play’s performance through the device of the spect-actor was nearly absent from Nepal’s street theatre in the 1980s.

The People’s Movement (Jano Andolan) that began in 1980 succeeded in 1990. People marched steadily toward Nepal’s Royal Palace in April 1990 to protest against the corrupt, repressive and autocratic government. King Bireendra dissolved the panchayat system, lifted the ban on political parties and ‘presided over’ the formation of a multiparty parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarchy. Sadly, the outcome of the free-and-fair 1991 elections, which sent the Nepali
Ashis Sengupta

Congress Party (NCP) to power, was short-lived with the Parliament being dissolved in mid-1994 due to dissension within the NCP itself. Maoist insurgencies began to spread during the next five years as coalition governments, one after another, were formed and dissolved lacking stability. The 1999 general elections brought the NCP back to power, yet it failed to provide a successful, stable government. The ‘new’ Nepal as envisioned by the People’s Movement seemed a distant dream, due to corruption and personal opportunism in political leaders and the resultant lack of development leading to extreme poverty. The revolutionary Maoist ideology also degenerated in practice into a violent insurgency – not only against the police and public officials but against civilians who refused to side with them. The political crisis escalated with the killing of King Birendra in June 2001 supposedly by his mentally deranged son and the proclamation of Gyanendra, King Birendra’s brother, as Nepal’s king. Following the failure of peace talks with the Maoists, the new king declared a state of emergency, dissolved the Parliament, assumed executive power, and eventually declared himself an absolute monarch through a military coup in February 2005.112 It is at this point in time that People’s Movement II gained momentum – to be precise, in May 2006 – which culminated in the dissolution of the monarchy in 2008.

Between the two (ineffective) restorations of democracy in 1990 and 2008, Nepali theatre (street as well as proscenium) reflected a change of mood ‘from hope to disillusionment.’113 Political instability and rising violence made life miserable for commoners; Nepal had meanwhile turned into a place of war. ‘Performance in place of war’ (to adapt a book title to our context)114 can be a complicated project, but the theatre of Malla and Pokharel during those days provided succor to the Nepali people living through abysmal loss and anguish. Malla’s theatre brought the community together in a spirit of sharing, and even collectively reliving, the pain inflicted by the multipronged conflict. It portrays the plight of common people caught up between Maoist violence, government atrocities, and corrupt practices of wily politicians. Pokharel’s Aarohan theatre created a solid community of theatre workers at Gurukul, who braved shells and blasts to be at the theatre institute to rehearse plays for a theatre-loving public keen to see images of themselves in the worst of times. Aarohan did more stage plays during this time, mostly written by noted Nepali playwright Abhi Subedi, than agitprop-style street theatre. There were other stage playwrights (such as Krisha Shah Yatri) and other theatre groups (such as Jyoti Punja Group) that projected people’s dejection at the ongoing violence. The theatre of the time, proscenium or non-proscenium, also focused on
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social maladies – such as torture of women under suspicion of witchcraft in rural Nepal, menace of alcoholism, erosion of family and social values, child labor, and the like. In an interview to Nepal Monitor on 2 July 2007, Pokharel rightly said: ‘[O]ur society has been unable to make progress because [. . .] social revolutions that are needed to sustain [. . . political] revolutions are not there.’

When the election was finally held in April 2008, the Maoists emerged as the largest party and formed a coalition government with the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and the Madhesi People’s Rights Forum. But following his standoff with President Ram Baran Yadav over the sensitive issue of integrating the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into the Nepal Army, rebel-turned-Prime Minister Puspa Kamal Dahal resigned in May 2009. The political scenario in Nepal has taken many more turns ever since, and the fight for power seems to have relegated into the background any possible political reconstruction of the country. Theatre in Nepal since 2006 has moved beyond the types of street theatre performance prevalent during the two phases of the People’s Movement. Street theatre continues to be the most popular form, but the focus has shifted from political issues on to issues of development. Pokharel identifies two major reasons for the change: the growing unpopularity of ‘propaganda theatre’ among a section of theatre practitioners and the availability of funds through NGOs in a cash-strapped country for theatres for development and education.

Paradoxically, NGO-sponsored theatre is also ‘propaganda theatre’ of its own kind which again forces theatre artists, as Pokharel himself admits, to compromise on the selection of themes and techniques. The theatre form which Pokharel has adopted of late to rise above the propaganda frame, and which is one of the most popular theatre genres across Nepal today, is an indigenous appropriation of Boal’s Forum theatre, popularly known in Nepal as Kachahari theatre. Etymologically, ‘kachahari’ is a people’s court traditionally held by villagers to resolve a conflict within a community in a rather interactive and conciliatory spirit. Performed in the open as well as on the stage, a Kachahari play ‘can, by promoting logic and understanding, help mediate two sides in a conflict’ and be used sometimes for therapy. In fact, various kinds of theatre activism are simultaneously at work in contemporary Nepal, not the least of which is the building of theatre structures in and around the city of Kathmandu over the past decade or so in order to cultivate a modern and professional theatre culture.

Theatre in modern Nepal has long benefited from the participation of women as actors. Women’s theatre as such is not a reality in Nepal yet.
But sporadic performances such as *Sabadhan* (Beware) by ABC Nepal, an NGO begun by two Nepali women in 1987, may be said to have sown its seed. Keeping the poor rural audience in mind, the play cautions against keeping a girl home and uneducated, using her as a child laborer, and giving her in marriage to a stranger in exchange for money. The dramatic works of Sharada Subba, Bed Kumari Neupane, and Sangita Rayamajhi protest against the deprivation, insecurity, and unfulfillment that average Nepali women undergo in their family and social life, whether in rural areas or in urban affluent homes. Sarwanam’s *Kumji Aagyan Garlu Hunchha* (Thus Spoke Kumji, 1999) and Aarohan’s *Doll’s House* (2003) also interrogate women’s historically-accorded status, raising alongside an alternative narrative of their desire and rights.

It is also important to note that ever since the dawn of Nepali civilization the people of Nepal have celebrated life through agricultural and religious festivals that include key performance elements and go nearly unfazed even in these uncertain times. Different though they are from Nepal’s socially-engaged or politically-oriented theatre of the last three decades, rituals and festive events as performance categories have not only provided resources for some contemporary theatre genres to draw on but lent some order to life even in a trouble-torn, war-ravaged Nepal and therefore merit attention as part of the country’s contemporary theatre landscape.

**Sri Lanka**

Even five years after the civil war came to an end, a war that broke out in 1983 following a long bitter conflict between the Sinhalese-Buddhist-led government and the dissident-turned-militant sections of the Tamil population, the island looks split not only politically but also in terms of the cultural landscape which obviously includes theatre. In post-independence Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Tamil theatres have vied with each other for space and recognition as much in theatre criticism as in the cultural narrative of the nation. Recent scholarship on these two theatre domains may serve as a good pointer. In her preface to *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror* (2011), Ranjini Obeyesekere candidly admits that ‘Sri Lankan’ has been used for ‘Sinhalese’ ‘intentionally for the name recognition’ as it is not common knowledge that the Sinhalese is the majority population in Sri Lanka and their language is Sinhala (Sinhalese). But in so doing Obeyesekere unwittingly equates ‘majority’ culture with ‘national’ culture. Moreover, her argument that the civil war in Sri Lanka ‘had made Tamil theater almost non-existent other than in small pockets’ of the North and the East is
not correct because in reality Tamil theatre had been both vibrant and
diverse in its content and form throughout the northern and eastern
regions of the island ‘both in spite of and because of the ongoing
violence.’ Karthigesu Sivathamby’s contention, on the other hand,
that there had been ‘no political motivation [. . . ] or artistic impulse
to create varied [Sinhala] theatre’ during the tumultuous period is
not fully valid either. For, the conflict in the South between succes-
sive authoritarian governments at the center and the Jatika Vimukti
Peramuna (JVP) had informed or influenced Sinhalese theatre through
the 1980s. Contemporary Sri Lankan theatre should therefore mean
both Sinhalese and Tamil productions with their thematic and formal
varieties – modern proscenium theatre appropriating elements from
premodern ritual and folk performances, post-independence theatre
with a ‘national’ character that had again borrowed from other various
Asian performance traditions, and also the more recent socially-engaged
and politically-oriented open theatre.

On gaining political independence in 1948, Sri Lanka, like any newly
independent country, experienced a passion for self-definition as a
nation. The majority Sinhalese culture came to be prioritized over the
‘subcultures’ of ethnolinguistic minorities including the Tamils who
had been historically brought from India as plantation laborers for
the former British colony. Postcolonial Sinhala nationalism, which
was grounded in and shaped by Sri Lanka’s new policies on language,
education, and religion, turned Sri Lanka into a predominantly Sinhala-
Buddhist nation to the utter disillusionment and even disenfranchise-
ment of the Tamil population. The electoral victory in 1956 of the
Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition, with support from the
Bhikkhus (Buddhist monks), was indeed a triumph of Sinhala-Buddhist
nationalism. On the cultural front, post-independence Sri Lankan thea-
tre was predominantly Sinhala theatre that began with translations and
adaptations of Western realistic plays, secularizing the theatre in urban
Sri Lanka as a serious art form and thus initiating a significant depar-
ture from ritual and folk theatre still quite popular in the countryside.
The proscenium plays not only differed from folk theatre forms such as
Kolam and Nadagama but also lacked the ‘popular appeal of
nurti plays.’ The major breakthrough came with E.R. Sarachchandra’s
experiments with poetic drama which combined Western dramaturgies
with indigenous dance forms and ‘the operatic style of nurti musi-
cals.’ This was evidently no attempt to restore the ‘purity’ of precolo-
nial cultural forms, but a postcolonial aspiration to reclaim the Sinhala
artistic and cultural legacy – without any ‘revolutionary’ nationalistic
fervor, though. Incidentally, this created a hybrid theatre form which succeeded in overcoming the somewhat artificial divide between native and foreign, realist and non-realist theatre. Sarachchadra's plays, however, did not much ‘reflect’ the fast changing political realities from the late sixties on.

A leftist/socialist ideology-driven politics was on the rise in the South. The real turning point came in the 1970s with the left-supported Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) coming to power. The expectation of the JVP, which extended its support to SLFP during the general elections of 1970, was that agrarian reforms would now be made for the benefit of the poor peasantry and an anti-imperialist economy devised. Working under Sinhala pressure groups, SLFP chief Ms. Bandaranaike could not fulfill the JVP demands – which resulted in the armed insurrection in 1970 of peasants and the JVP youth. The government's ‘savage' repression of the revolt in 1974 betrayed ‘its inability to sustain a social democratic welfare state in a context dominated by imperialism and capitalism.'127 The United National Party (UNP) came to power in 1977, but the ‘open’ economy continued, pushing the country further toward privatization in the capitalist mode. By enforcing a new constitution in 1978, J.R. Jayawardene changed the parliamentary system into executive presidency and thus attempted to suppress all dissent. In such a state of political turbulence, the operatic theatre of Sarachchandra no longer appealed to the general public that was either compulsorily drawn deep into politics or severely affected by it. So the mid-1960s and 1970s saw a return to realist theatre with translations and adaptations of modern European and American plays, including Brecht and Artaud, punctuated and followed by original social plays dealing largely with the plight of the poor, workers’ rights, and the brutal killings during the 1971 insurrection.

The political scene turned most complicated during the 1980s. With the Tamil conflict taking centerstage, left-oriented, ‘politically subversive’ JVP activists re-emerged, but this time as ‘a Sinhala nationalist organization.’ ‘[A] new wave of Sinhala nationalism’ and of anti-government violence erupted following the Indo-Sinhala Accord of 1987 that forced the Sri Lankan government to concede in principle to the longstanding Tamil demand for devolution of power.128 Questioning the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKf) on Sri Lankan soil, the JVP began to unleash terror on both the state machinery and their opponents in the civil society, killing many in the process. The second JVP insurgency was also crushed at the expense of numerous human lives on either side. In the middle of it all, theatre survived and even flourished while
the press, radio, and television were heavily censored. Obeyesekere ascribes theatre’s better fate to the country’s Buddhist tradition of ‘critical skepticism,’ a cultural tradition of accommodation of dissent as a ‘non-violent form of political protest.’ Then, why were certain stage plays, let alone street theatre performances, under the state scanner in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 1980s? The government did not generally censor the proscenium theatre possibly because it found the ‘protest’ on stage much safer than direct and violent political action in the streets. Moreover, such theatre was not ‘a rehearsal of revolution’ as in early Boal, Obeyesekere correctly notes in her conclusion to Sri Lankan Theatre, but instead cathartic in effect (in the Aristotelian sense of the term) since the traumatic experience of the people, or their dissent, found an outlet through its artistic reenactment on the stage.

This does not, however, deny anyway the sense of community and succor those plays provided to the audience or undermine the courage the theatre practitioners displayed by putting them on.

In Sri Lanka, the street theatre did not enjoy as much freedom as the proscenium theatre did because wayside or open performances were more directly critical of the government or of political personalities. Action in the street theatre transgressed traditional performance boundaries by spilling over onto the public space and thus tending to make ordinary people co-agents of its subversive ‘project.’ Alluding to Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s ‘Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space’ and Safdar Hashmi’s work in India, Kanchuka Dharmasiri rightly observes in an article that the theatre of Gamini Haththotuwegama, the pioneer of street theatre in Sri Lanka, destabilized ‘the state’s conceptualization of the territory as its possession’ and made external encroachments a way to challenge its policies from within. The Wayside and Open Theatre’s productions exposed the contradictions in the Sinhalese nationalist construction of the ‘postcolonial’ state as a paradise that in actuality was in the hellfire of ethnic strife and had long been dictated on the economic front by multinational companies. In 1989 Haththotuwegama began a theatre workshop with Richard Soysa with a view to bridging the gap between urban and rural theatre, much in the manner of India’s Badal Sircar. But the project suffered a jolt with Soysa’s sudden ‘disappearance’ – a gruesome incident somewhat reminiscent of the killing of Safdar Hashmi during a performance in Delhi. Despite its perceived decline in the 1990s due to its history of alleged state suppression and its own failure to attain higher artistic standards, the street theatre was later adapted with innovative modifications by ensembles such as Janakaraliya to address a broad range of issues from ethnicity to gender to politics.
The history of Sri Lankan Tamils and their theatre, which seemingly takes a different path, is inextricably connected with the history of Sinhala nationalism and cultural resurgence in post-independence Sri Lanka. The Federal Party (FP), founded in 1949, was initially the only political platform for Tamils to ‘put forward [. . .] [their] demand for [a] federal system of government, provincial autonomy [. . .] and citizenship to stateless Tamils.’¹³³ But this demand turned in 1951, thanks to the increasing alienation of the Tamil population from Sri Lankan society and politics, into an FP proclamation on a ‘Tamil Homeland’ that would qualify for self-determination. The emotive issue of language in 1956 gradually expanded into ethnolinguistic nationalism, politicizing both communities and widening the gulf between them. The enactment of the new ‘Republic Constitution’ with special provisions for Sinhala-Buddhists worsened the political situation as Tamil resistance against the Sinhalese and the government now grew violent and met with state repression. The demand for devolution of power to Tamils within a ‘United Sri Lanka’ dramatically changed into a separatist movement, giving birth to the Tamil United Front in 1972 which soon rechristened itself as Tamil United Liberation Front and adopted a resolution at its first meeting in 1976 for forming a separate state called the ‘Tamil Eelam.’¹³⁴ All hope for a political negotiation was lost with the riots of 1983 that in fact marked the beginning of a full-scale civil war. The killing of thirteen Sinhalese soldiers by militant Tamil youths, who called themselves ‘Tigers,’ was retaliated by an anti-Tamil pogrom in July of 1983 in which thousands of Tamils lost their lives and more were left badly injured. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), formed in 1976, became the most powerful of all Tamil militant outfits and spearheaded the liberation movement. The arrival of the IPKF further aggravated the Tamil situation. Peace negotiations failed, numerous civilian lives were lost in Tamil-populated provinces, and many more left injured and homeless.

Contemporary Tamil theatre developed and evolved in this different political climate and away from the cultural activities in the South and the West. Whatever Tamil drama was visible in and around Colombo during the first two decades of independent Sri Lanka was subsumed in the equation of ‘Sinhala’ theatre with ‘Sri Lankan’ theatre, which nonetheless borrowed heavily from other cultural traditions, including the Tamil performing arts. Gradually, Tamil theatre shifted to and concentrated in Jaffna in the North and Batticaloa in the East, undergoing radical changes in form and performance space necessitated by contemporary ground realities such as the possibility of attacks on ‘shows’
in prominent public places and the political nature of the Tamil issues that demanded immediate attention. A truly Sri Lankan Tamil theatre upsurge did not occur until the 1970s. Early Tamil plays, whether stage adaptations of Tamil films (mostly from India) or naturalistic ‘dialogue plays’ or verse dramas, lost their appeal. A variety of socially or politically committed Tamil theatre forms grew out of ‘the war context’ and mostly away from the proscenium stage, revealing the complicated relationship between war and theatre, place and performance space. As the war provided a ‘stimulus to theatre practitioners,’ it also imposed certain restrictions — although such theatre usually thrives and survives by opposing the hostile ‘context.’

Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam may be credited as one of the pioneers of the new wave of Tamil drama and theatre that swept through the 1980s. His famous stage plays are sensitive forays into fractured and displaced Tamil lives between the 1983 riots and the end of the Premadasa era in 1993. Shanmugalingam will ever be remembered for founding a College of Drama and Theatre (Nadaga Aranka Kalloori) in Jaffna in 1979 where he tried to devise a new theatre language by adopting the best from diverse theatre traditions in Sri Lanka and thus revolutionized the concept of Tamil theatre ‘in acting and presentation.’ As mainstream performance became difficult due to escalation of ethnic tension combated by state repression, many theatre activists took to street theatre to connect with people living in large numbers in refugee camps by the late eighties. Theatre workshops conducted by Shanmugalingam and his colleague Kandasamy Sithamparanatham found an unprecedented number of takers in young Tamils as the program helped them come to terms with their actual experience and negotiate present realities. James Thompson cites in an article the work of Theatre Action Group (TAG, founded by Sithamparanatham in 1990) as an outstanding example of such applied theatre that drew on heterogeneous theatre practices for rehabilitation and therapy of the traumatized. ‘Action’ or ‘therapy’ in such context and praxis means ‘physical, emotionally affective interventions [. . .] in the now’ with a view to allowing the spectator-participant ‘a real engagement with [social] change.’

By the mid-1990s the ‘reign of terror’ in the South seemingly came to an end. But the Tamil conflict rather intensified after short lulls in violence. The ceasefire agreement under the new UNP government (2002) failed; the LTTE resumed attacks on the army and civilians in the South; and the government re/captured territories in the North and the East by 2008, pushing the Tigers to ‘a small area on the Jaffna
peninsula.' Alternative Tamil theatre had established itself by the end of the last century as ‘the mainstream theatre’ in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, most of it taking place at non-traditional venues. Tamil audiences were sensitized to the stark realities of their lived life as well as to the efficacy of this new theatre in dealing with their current stress. Performances modeled on Boal’s Forum theatre and highlighting the historic signposts of the Tamil struggle became popular to Tamil audiences. The debate between spect-actors and actors brought forth changes to the preconceived (or scripted) action, often collapsing divides between observer and participant, audience and actor, and actor and spectator. Community theatre as practiced by Shivagnanam Jeyasankar became a popular theatre subgenre as early as 1995, when he moved to Batticaloa from Jaffna, and more specifically with his establishment of The Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skill Activists Group in 2002. Such community theatre is often considered a form of localized applied theatre that is different from its counterparts in the West as its performers are not outsiders to the community in question but rather insiders and therefore sufferers as well. With the post-1995 ‘ban’ on street theatre in the Jaffna region, a significant fact in itself, school-based theatre action performances acquired greater importance as they were viewed as ‘educational theatre’ and therefore granted ‘permission,’ however complicated the paraphernalia.

In 2009, the Sri Lanka government declared its victory over the LTTE after the killing of Velupillai Prabhakaran, thus officially bringing an end to the twenty-five-year long civil war. While questions have been raised by international communities over gross violation of human rights by both sides during the historic war, postwar reconstruction under the Rajapakse government has been perceived as far from satisfactory. Promises of devolution of power, or hopes for regional autonomy for the Tamils, remain to be adequately realized. Most of the Tamil theatre groups in postwar northern and eastern provinces have been working with the displaced and the traumatized toward their rehabilitation and development. Special mention should be made of a multi-ethnic mobile theatre group, named Makkal Kalari (in Sinhalese)/Jana Karaliya (in Tamil), which was founded in 2004 by Parakrama Niriella to work collectively for society through theatre and which has garnered significant support from Sinhala and Tamil theatre-loving people. Such collaborative work is indeed a welcome approach to improving relations between the communities that have historically coinhabited the island for centuries. Equally historic was the Sri Lankan National Drama Festival of 2009 where Tamil stage plays were for the first time
considered for national awards. Theatre in Sri Lanka thus can play a vital role in redefining the nation so as to make it more inclusive in terms of language, religion, ethnicity, and culture. One still wishes that issues of gender and sexuality received greater attention in Sri Lankan theatre, both Sinhala and Tamil, than the small number of recent plays, mostly by male playwrights, which have delineated the subject in a not-so-liberal manner.

III The essays

This volume contains essays that enact the above pattern of engagement by focusing on the South Asian region, rather than only on India (as is the usual practice), and exploring the interface of the region’s histories with its theatre trajectories. By cutting across disciplines, but not seeking to dissolve them as such, it aims to be a truly multidisciplinary book on contemporary South Asian theatre. A brief explanation is perhaps necessary for the order of country-wise essays in the book, which is in fact reflected in the book’s subtitle, too. The countries are not arranged in alphabetical order chiefly for reasons of geopolitical history. The chronological order of overall history of most parts of the region long under colonial rule, however hegemonic or erratic that order may look on other grounds, has considerable significance in this case largely due to the momentous events of partition of India in 1947 and creation of Bangladesh in 1971–72. In no way, after all, does it intend to reinstate the India-centric approach to South Asia. Nepal and Sri Lanka, countries with distinctive political histories, do not come within this frame of argument and are therefore arranged alphabetically.

Shayoni Mitra’s essay, ‘Dispatches from the Margins: Theatre in India since the 1990s,’ goes beyond questions of ‘tradition, modernity, colonialism, and its legacy realism’ that the spate of scholarly volumes published during the last decade grappled with, and instead analyzes what has happened since the 1990s when the very conditions under which post-independence Indian theatre was made changed in ‘an increasingly neoliberal and globalizing cultural landscape.’ She demonstrates how in contemporary theatre conversations between the ‘various fragments of the margins’ are much more compelling than ‘confronting the centre with evidence of the margin.’ Mitra’s essay weaves its way against the hegemonies of space, gender, language, and caste that the original proponents of postcolonial culture ‘wished to institute for Indian theatre.’ This ‘contestatory approach’ opens up viable alternatives to mainstream, institutionalized theatre in India.
Asma Mundrawala’s essay, ‘Theatre Chronicles: Framing Theatre Narratives in Pakistan’s Sociopolitical Context,’ traces the evolution of Pakistan’s theatre in the light of the country’s complex beginnings and its subsequent sociopolitical history that has encouraged and partly even ‘impeded the development of this performance genre’ and ‘influenced the choice of its practitioners’ agendas.’ Theatre activities in post-partition Pakistan are dominated by two seminal theatre groups, Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka, which, founded in reaction against Zia-ul-Haque’s military regime, have been predominantly political in character. Mundrawala contrasts such theatre activism with relatively new genres of theatre and performance that emerge in a climate of globalization and neoliberalism, changing the nature of protest to ‘paid activism.’ She, however, concludes that socially-engaged theatre still continues in the face of all commodification and a rising conservatism in Pakistani society.

Informed by Victor Turner’s theory of social life as ‘social drama,’ Syed Jamil Ahmed’s essay, ‘Designs of Living in the Contemporary Theatre of Bangladesh,’ discusses contemporary Bangladesh theatre with the objectives to examine the terrain ‘as a representation of performance in non-theatrical contexts’ and to scrutinize it as ‘an insidious politico-aesthetic tool’ that seeks to reinstate or resist the performances in social realms by ‘deploying the “imaginary” as a metacommentary on the “real”.’ Accommodating different types of theatre since the late 1960s, the essay examines their sociohistorical tropes that unfurl the politico-cultural narrative of Bangladesh as a postcolonial nation-state. It proceeds in three parts, focusing on the following strands successively: narration of the nation, articulation of subaltern resistance to state hegemony, and the replications and transgressions of gender.

Carol Davis’s essay, ‘Towards an Engaged Stage: Nepali Theatre in Uncertain Times,’ focuses on Nepal’s burgeoning contemporary theatre that is catalyzed by its intimate relationship to society and politics. It is the suppression of public opinion under long regimes of oligarchy and monarchy that eventually gave rise to a prodemocracy movement during the 1980s, in which street theatre flourished as an effective tool for political change. The essay then traces how the optimism reflected in the pre-1990 plays is replaced by despair in post-democracy theatre at the corruption among political leaders and the excesses of Maoist violence. Nepali theatre remains rooted in its traditional performance culture and at the same time politically engaged ‘as it wrestles with aesthetics, topics, and form, and sorts out its place in a constantly shifting society.’
Kanchuka Dharmasiri’s essay, ‘From Narratives of National Origin to Bloodied Streets: Contemporary Sinhala and Tamil Theatre in Sri Lanka,’ examines the specific spaces Sinhala and Tamil theatres inhabit in the postcolonial political and cultural fabric of Sri Lanka. Theatre types that emerged during the sixties, however rich aesthetically, failed to address the youth as society was rocked by events such as the 1971 and 1988–89 JVP youth movements, the 1983 ethnic riots and the ensuing civil war. While Sinhala theatre was influenced by the youth insurrections in the South, Tamil theatre shifted to areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces following the widespread violence unleashed on minority Tamils. This relocation has witnessed a spate of Tamil community theatres – although in a different setting now. Dramatists and directors today wonder ‘how to view this history in a broader perspective and move forward.’ The essay also examines issues of neoliberalism and gender/sexuality in the theatre/s of Sri Lanka.

And the book again

While remapping the region by examining enduring historical and cultural connections, the book thus discusses multiple traditions and practices of theatre across South Asia within their specific political and sociocultural contexts. South Asian theatre has since the late twentieth century meant a whole range of performance genres and practices – appropriation or reformulation of traditional and folk forms to address contemporary concerns in an urban, alternatively modern theatre; improvised and collectively devised performances on or off the proscenium stage; dramatic theatre in native/regional languages or in English; translation/adaptation of foreign plays; and a whole host of community and applied theatre types. Together, the five chapters create a complex frame of contemporary South Asian theatre with its affinities and disaffinities, continuities and discontinuities – a pattern that broadly hinges on its abiding as well as changing contours of reciprocal relationship with society and politics.

The transition from the colonial order to postcolonial regimes influenced the new nation-state’s theatre to the extent of largely defining the post-independence nation through it. Postcolonial national consciousness, which mostly conflates the indigenous and the national, had more or less informed the theatre of each of the South Asian countries under study, inaugurating and steadily augmenting a decolonization drive. Only decolonization has had a history/culture-specific character in relation to the politically independent nation and often collaborated
rather than collided with different elements of theatrical modernity bequeathed by colonial cultural practice. This is best exemplified by the theatre in post-independence India and Sri Lanka. The defining of a national theatre became an aesthetic-cultural compulsion that was largely realized through state patronage in different forms including the construction of government-owned theatres for hosting certain categories of performance that supposedly showcased ‘national’ culture and heritage. Pakistan found it hard for a long time to consider any single range of performance genres to be ‘national’ because, stuck between being a new nation-state (which would be declared an ‘Islamic Republic’ in 1956) and ‘a broken wing of South Asia,’ it suffered a crisis of cultural identity. A plethora of theatre types that nevertheless sprouted on Pakistan’s soil post-partition were either directly influenced by Indian classical/folk traditions or modeled after Western proscenium theatre conventions. Similarly, rather ironically, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) continued with its pre-partition repertoire of plays and other performance traditions to distinguish its Bengali culture from the narrative of (West) Pakistani nationalism. Nepal’s case was again different in that post-1951 it looked for its national identity in the Nepali language and history that literary drama in Nepali embodied and proliferated predominantly through Western theatre idioms, dismissing from its domain the Parsi theatre of the Rana dynasty and its local incarnations. Ritual and folk theatre, however, continued.

Nation-building is a continuous project in all plural, multicultural, multilingual societies. It is more so in the case of postcolonial South Asian countries where the ‘nation’ which was to give birth to the ‘state’ before independence came to be defined and expressed by the state post-independence. The process of state-building with all its bureaucratic machinery went on within the frame of ‘one nation one state,’ thus subsuming other minority ‘nationalities.’ Postcolonial South Asian nations are still under construction, accentuated or interrupted by a parallel state-building. While the state overplays a hegemonic cultural-national narrative to elide its own ‘Other,’ the ‘Other’ questions the narrative’s authenticity by performing its peripheral but indelible identity. This powerful social and political drama has defined and redefined the entire region, sometimes culminating in violence and civil war. The whole approach to theatre and performance has often undergone radical changes in such circumstances.

In India, theatre has long moved past playwright / director-dominated performances with formalized aesthetics to street theatre, avant-garde performances by women directors, collectively developed plays by
marginalized communities, and to English-language dramas in an idiom no longer perceived as ‘un-Indian.’ These contemporary forms deal with the problems and aspirations of a plural, bold, self-questioning India. In Pakistan, protests and demonstrations as a form of performance have complemented the rehearsed political theatre which emerged during Zia-ul-Haque’s regime to fight for secular democracy and civil rights. Contemporary Bangladesh theatre, which includes a host of experimental urban stage plays and indigenous performances, addresses issues of ethnicity and gender in addition to its longstanding preoccupation with secularism and economic justice. Street theatre revolutionized a Nepal in search of democracy and continues in tandem with a breed of new stage plays to fight post-democracy corruption and address ordinary people’s predicament in a seemingly regressive country. The ethnic strife in Sri Lanka has changed the whole mode of Sri Lankan Tamil performance with theatre practitioners once seeking refuge in remote places and devising new techniques to strengthen the Tamil revolutionary cause or to comfort the traumatized community.

Several other types of theatre have emerged in contemporary South Asia that may be appreciated somewhat outside the paradigm of the state-dominated nation-building and its interrogation/subversion by marginal groups. They mostly include diverse forms of community and applied theatre – such as the indigenous varieties of Forum Theatre for social awareness in India and Nepal, donor-related Theatre for Development in Bangladesh and Pakistan, portable theatre in Sri Lanka and India, and so on. Though deficient in aesthetic standards at times, these theatre sub/genres have succeeded in bringing about a people’s theatre that combines theatre, education and welfare. They also help sustain theatre ensembles and their members by providing them with employment in a region where theatre is yet to find a full-scale professional or commercial status.

Theatre always has its own language through its spectacle. Yet language as ‘the system of communication in speech’ is an important issue in all literary theatre, especially in South Asia. Each country under discussion is, whether or not officially acknowledged, multilingual and multiethnic, and its theatre is therefore more or less multilingual and multiethnic, too. Plays are mostly written and performed in regional and ethnic languages. Yet one particular language in a country, as the language of the majority or thanks to its use by the government at the center, may eventually acquire the status of the ‘national’ language and thus marginalize other state or community languages. Consequently, theatres of minor ethnolinguistic communities are undermined and
plays written and/or performed in the ‘national’ language prioritized. For the same reason/s, this ‘official’ language also becomes the target language for translation of plays written in (other) regional languages. The book does not aim to cover the theatre and performance of every linguistic community of a country or from each of its regions – not only because of the unfeasibility of the very idea but also because the book does not aspire to be encyclopedic at all. Exploring the interactive, often reciprocal, relationship between contemporary South Asia’s theatre and sociopolitical history, the book can possibly afford to be critically selective as much about historical signposts as about the genres and locations of theatre with lesser attention to the primary language of a play. Yet I sincerely regret the absence of many South Asian theatre subgenres from the study, which nonetheless bear on the plurality and complexity of a country’s history and culture, and crave the reader’s indulgence under the familiar ‘pretext’ of ‘space constraints.’

Furthermore, when it comes to an audience (within the same country) whose language is not the same as the primary language of the play in question or any of the other regional languages it has been translated into, translations in English may act as an effective link between such a play and its readers/audiences across linguistic communities. Especially since the 1960s English as the language of translation, as Dharwadker notes, ‘has been instrumental in making [ . . . ] theatre available as a readable, watchable, teachable, discussable, and shareable subject in India and around the world.’ But in a South Asian country, most of such translations are more read in academies than performed in the theatre because English-language theatre has a smaller audience here and therefore suffers its own marginality outside urban enclaves. As regards English translations of plays in South Asian countries other than India, the picture is still less flattering. Few contemporary Nepali or Bangladeshi plays have been translated into English or even into any of the other South Asian languages. Yet, interestingly, a regional-language drama, once translated into English, has sometimes prompted its further translation into other regional languages, and English here serves as a mediator between the source and the target regional language.

South Asian plays originally written in English are again rare, and still rarer are those performed in that language. ‘It is important to note this circumstance,’ as Dharwadker observes, because ‘most other postcolonial theatres (in Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia, for example) are predominantly Europhone/Anglophone.’ There are some exceptions still. The Pakistan government has promoted since 2002 a new brand of English-language musicals as if to counter the ‘lowly’ Punjabi popular
theatre. There is some visibility of English-language theatre in postwar Sri Lanka which, in contrast to its earlier ‘frivolous’ character, addresses political issues and provokes critical reactions. India has witnessed a steady growth of English-language drama since the 1980s, in print as well as in performance, which has been acclaimed across the world for its thematic and stylistic distinctiveness. What should also be noted in this respect is that the varieties of English in which contemporary South Asian plays are written do not in most cases conform to the Euro-American standard but are appropriated, localized ‘englishes’ with their hybridized syntax and idioms. The essays on Indian and Pakistani theatre include some theatre in English; but this subgenre of South Asian theatre is absent from the other essays either because of its near invisibility in other countries or due to space crunch.

The task for the theatre scholar is easier when her own language is the same as the language of the primary work and her language of theatre criticism. But the role of the scholar is critical when her language is different from that of the primary work and/or from the language of her discourse, which is often the case in a multilingual theatre culture and criticism. What Dharwadker says of Indian theatre studies is much true of South Asian theatre studies as a whole: ‘[T]he scholar has to bridge the gap between her own language/s and the language/s of the primary works in question and function as a virtual ethnographer, interpreting unfamiliar cultural phenomena for a potentially global audience of readers, spectators, teachers, students, scholars, artists, and theatre enthusiasts.’ Language, literally, is not the issue in this sense for all contributors to the volume. But each has done a wonderful job as ‘a virtual ethnographer’ where cultural translation for a wider readership is concerned. Thanks to their deep involvement in both theatre practice and criticism, the apparently intimidating task of editing a book on such a vast and complex subject has not only been possible but thoroughly enjoyable.

Notes and references

3. Lohar Lutze, ed., Drama in Contemporary South Asia: Varieties and Settings (Heidelberg: South Asia Institute, Department of Indology, Heidelberg University, 1984).


12. A random search for books in English on the theatres of the five South Asian countries makes it clear.

13. See Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, ‘Hurry up please it’s time: introducing the contemporary,’ in Luckhurst and Marks, eds., *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present* (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 1999), 3. 1–12.

14. Steve Connor, ‘The impossibility of the present: or, from the contemporary to the contemporal,’ in Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, eds., *Literature and the Contemporary*, 30. 15–35. This paragraph is inspired and influenced by Connor’s and Luckhurst and Mark’s essays.


16. Steve Connor, ‘The impossibility of the present,’ 30; Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, ‘Hurry up please it’s time,’ 3.

17. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, ‘Hurry up please it’s time,’ 7.


Bengal was first partitioned in 1905 by Lord Curzon, then viceroy of British India.


The demolition was the culmination of a campaign by the Sangh Parivar that a Hindu temple once stood at the sacred site, the birthplace of Lord Rama, and that Babar, the founder of the Mughal empire, destroyed it and constructed a mosque in its place. The mosque was pulled down by Hindu activists on 6 December 1992 to pave the way for the construction of a Hindu temple.


Aparna Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 63, 60.

Poile Sengupta is a well-known woman playwright who writes in English. She has written several short stories, too.


Robert Weimann, ‘History and the Issue of Authority in Representation,’ 450.


Robert Weimann, ‘History and the Issue of Authority in Representation,’ 450.
42. In his book, *Moving Targets: Political Theatre in a Post-political Age* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008), Ryan Reynolds employs the term to describe an age whose members are unable to think of or imagine a society fundamentally different from the present one. See p. 3.
56. Deriving its name from the place of its origin (Naxalbari in West Bengal) and beginning in 1967, it was a far-left violent uprising against the then landlords and the government to redistribute land among the landless poor.
58. It goes by the name of Ganguly’s theatre group ‘Jana Sanskriti.’
60. The Dalit Panther Movement, taking its name from the Black Panther Party in the US, was spearheaded by Namdeo Dhasal to bring the ‘lower’ castes under one umbrella in their fight for civil rights and social justice. Founded on the line of caste, the movement gradually took into its fold the exploited working class and women but started disintegrating from 1974 due to ideological differences and infighting. The movement has suffered splits ever since and is not reckoned with today. But it continues to inspire people and organizations in their fight against social inequalities in various forms.
63. A syncretic form of translated plays (originally written/produced in local/ regional languages) that adapts English to local themes or forms.


66. From the book description on the back cover of *Sight Lines: Three Contemporary Indian Plays* (Mumbai: Hachette India, 2012).


70. Abhishek Majumdar and Ramu Ramanathan have however delineated the issue subtly in their plays, *The Djinns of Eidgah* and *Kashmir Kashmir*, respectively – both set in today's Kashmir.


76. The contribution of commercial theatre to Pakistan's performance traditions cannot be ignored altogether, though – because it had ‘created a sizable enough audience to sustain the beginnings of a theatre’ and also perhaps mocked in its own way contemporary moral taboos and state censorship on cultural freedoms (Soaib Hashmi, qtd in Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage*, 3).

77. The phrase is Asma Mundrawala's, used in her essay in this book.

78. See Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage*, 76.


87. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, Modern South Asia, 155.
88. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, Modern South Asia, 155.
90. For details, see Meenakshi Sinha, Constructing Bangladesh, 124–36. The present and the preceding paragraph partly draw on information published in Uddin, 124–36.
97. US Department of State’s ‘Background Note: Nepal.’
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111. For details of the event, see Abhi Subedi, Nepali Theatre, 57.
112. For details, see Manjushree Thapa, The Lives We Have Lost: Essays and Opinions on Nepal (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), 3.
115. ‘Q&A: Sunil Pokharel: Spearheading Kachahari.’
116. Nepal’s Constituent Assembly, elected in 2008, did not succeed in drafting a new constitution and was eventually dissolved in May 2012. A new Constituent Assembly, elected in November 2013, has rekindled hope among the people of Nepal.
117. ‘Q&A: Sunil Pokharel: Spearheading Kachahari.’
118. ‘Q&A: Sunil Pokharel: Spearheading Kachahari.’
122. See Ranjini Obeyesekere, Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror.
124. A sung drama telling secular stories of war and love.
125. Ranjini Obeyesekere, Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror, 121. Nurti play is a form of Parsi theatre which made use of the Western-style stagecraft to narrate ‘exotic tales of romance and adventure’ (A.J. Gunawardana, ‘Kolam, Sokari & Nadagam Theater in Sri Lanka’).
126. Ranjini Obeyesekere, Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror, 121.
130. See Ranjini Obeyesekere, Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror, 151.
132. The activities of this theatre troupe are discussed later in this subsection.
137. James Thompson, ‘Theatre Action Group: raising the dust in a theatre at war.’
139. James Thompson, ‘Theatre Action Group: raising the dust in a theatre at war.’
140. It is important to note that the first Tamil chief minister of Northern Province, elected through the historic polls held after nearly three decades, was sworn in on 7 Oct. 2013.
141. The descriptions of the essays that follow are mostly in the words of the contributors.
142. I thank the anonymous readers whose suggestions immensely helped me revise the Introduction.
144. See Javeed Alam’s discussion of the relationship between the state and the nation in his India: Living with Modernity, 147.
146. Aparna Dharwadker, ‘India’s Theatrical Modernity,’ 427.
147. Aparna Dharwadker, ‘India’s Theatrical Modernity,’ 427.
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