

CONVERSATION WITH
THE MAESTROS

KALPANA BISWAS

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BIJAN BHATTACHARYA
RITWIK KUMAR GHATAK
SALIL CHOWDHURY

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CONTEXT is designed as collection of texts and documents, essentially as study material for the members, participants and other associates of CONTEXT REGROUP— a non-profit organisation engaged in recording the history of our own time, as well as retracing, restoring and reinstating the texts and documents from the past.

To publish CONTEXT is a part of a larger project, so at present it will be published irregularly, only as and when required.

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CONTEXT REGROUP

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D-9/5 Karunamoyee Housing Estate,
Salt Lake, Kolkata 700 091
Phone 94331-28555, 84209-29111, 94334-12682
e-mail : contextregroup@yahoo.co.in

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All these conversations were held between the maestros and Ms Kalpana Biswas during the period of 1976-78.

Kalpana Biswas is an independent filmmaker based in Pittsburgh and is Board Chairperson of Women in Film & Media, Pittsburgh, an organization dedicated to the education and support of, and advocacy for, women in the film and media industries. Prior to filmmaking she had a long career in research based work in the US and India.

She personally gave her consent to publish these conversations for Context.

We hope to publish more works by her in future. We convey our best regards to her.

BIJAN BHATTACHARYA

I feel an urge to start a Crusade

Tell something about your childhood.

I was born in East Bengal, East Bengal with all the characteristics typical to the East Bengal side— that virile river, the Padma, the virile people who stood the onslaught of the Pakistanis: I came from that quarter of the soil to West Bengal. My father was a headmaster, taking up jobs here, there and everywhere, and wherever he went, my schooling was there.

During those days, because I was an impetuous boy, I used to go about the villages and meet with the people, and see life as it was, together with them, associating myself with the rituals— dancing and merrymaking and singing, and always associating myself with the people. This is the base.

I had no idea that I would come to write dramas and I would be a dramatist. Nothing. I had no idea. I was just a kid. Then I came to Calcutta... But then there was the student movement in Calcutta. I threw myself into that movement. My study was stopped, because I took the movement very very honestly and whole-heartedly.

And during my school days, when I was 12-13 years old, Gandhiji started his Non-cooperation Movement— salt Civil-disobedience Movement— and thousand of

students were going to those parts and they were being arrested. I was also one of them. At the age of twelve or thirteen.

You were arrested?

No, I followed them up to the jails. I was not included in the movement, but— they threw me out— but still I had the occasion to meet Gandhiji once— a secular visit, on a lone platform standing all day from the morning till the evening. Gandhiji was going to Faridpur to attend the conference. I met him. I said, 'Are you Gandhiji?' He laughed through the glass partition and nodded. I assumed, yes, and nodded. This face resembled with the pictures, he must be Gandhiji, so I approached him. Naturally there was no conversation with him, he just smiled and nodded. My life got filled with tremendous grace. Gradually the days were succeeded by Civil disobedience Movement etc. I had actively participated in some of them, canvassing and organizing things and burning clothes from Manchester. I plunged myself into the 'Reject British clothes Movement' and got involved in many things. We used to snatch foreign cigarettes from the elder people, had a feeling of bravado.

In course of time I came to Calcutta. These are personal tit-bits of life. In Calcutta, then, I had taken to journalism, and was associating myself with all the student movements and political movements here. And I was restless like any other boy. These activities told upon my health so much that it started deteriorating I got infected with tuberculosis. I scored a cavity in my lung.

How old were you then?

Twenty-twenty two.

Prior to that— I had heard— you were Bengal No. 1 or India No. 1! Your physique was so...

India no. 1?— There are so many things I can't

reveal— they are too private. Associating myself with political parties I had to...

No, I had heard it from Ritwikda (Ritwik Ghatak). He used to say, 'You are not lucky enough to see him. I have seen him.'

Once I had gone to Darjeeling— no, it was Kalimpong, I was thrown off a horse and fell into a ditch. But I didn't let go the horse. The horse belonged to some Mr Williams who was there. I don't know what he was over there. I could manage to hold the rein of the horse, but that monster fell on my chest, and perhaps that ruptured my lung, I don't know. I had a big healthy body, and took his horse. I was coming from 10 miles to... then everything was measured by miles, isn't it?— As I was coming, the horse slipped and fell into a ditch. I was tremendously hurt. I stretched out my hand but nobody helped me. I decided to hold on the rein, because the horse belonged to the Englishman and I have had to return it to him. If I had left it there— as the horse was severely hurt and got too nervous— it could have got lost to nowhere and I would have earned a bad name. Where should I have had searched the horse in that hilly region?

Anyway— may be for this reason, or for restlessness or for my work... I was sort of sentimental and religious-minded. I started visiting Ramakrishna Mission at Dakshineswar for three or four days a week. I used to stay there for days. I can't explain what I got there, but a strange kind of restlessness. Nothing seemed to be pleasant to me then. I roamed over the city in the night listening to the hydrants. Strange music— the sound of flowing water— listening to the hydrants. Can they give out something, a new notation? I didn't get anything. Listening to the storm, rain, people. I encountered many beggars who used to tell me strange incidents. I can

remember a Madrasi beggar. I pulled him and asked— at about 2 AM— what are you doing here? He replied in English... I was flabbergasted— a beggar, speaking in English!— and correctly. He was from Madras, South India. He started saying— look, I was once a very rich man and I'm still rich. Still rich: I have not disowned my property and riches which I own. But I didn't make any Will, I didn't give to anything to anybody, I have just fled away from my family. My wife doesn't love me, my sons can't tolerate me anymore. They all love my riches, so when I sensed this I decamped from my house. So everything is lying in South India, and I am here a beggar, decrepit. Now suffering from cold and fever— and he was not less than 80. When I held his rag he exclaimed, 'I am very hungry.' I took him to my home and offered food. And the next night— I expected more to hear from him. I looked for him for a long time, perhaps he can give out some secret of life. Perhaps he can say something illuminating. I had this habit. But I didn't find him. I had the notion, those who are old, those who have lived their lives, they can give out their experiences. I have listened to many many people, but hardly do I get anything. Thus a feeling of nonchalance grows and irritation aggravates. I grow restless. Restlessness covers me up like clouds and I go about the city. Then... I got sick and I was admitted to the Jadavpur Tuberculosis Hospital and there I lived for one and a half year. For one and a half year I was an exhibit of the doctors because of my health. There I did dramas, there I started the patients' recreation club and a Union of patients. There was no communication between males and females there. I wanted to break the code. We had an assistant superintendent. Taking permission from him I went to the female ward and after

canvassing door-to-door collected some female cadres for theatre.

Prior to that some incidents happened at the Jadavpur Tuberculosis Hospital. The dejection there was at its lowest ebb. There you find the dungeons of dejection, because we are given to die.

At that time, it was about 1937-38, that incident suddenly happened. A boy used to love a girl and the girl also loved that boy. I don't know the details of their case history but this was their story. Both of them were sick. They were permitted to sit on the benches in the afternoon. They used to sit there and chat. Thus they knew each other and fell in love, knowing fully well that the girl would die and the boy would die. There was a small water body in the vicinity. One day they went there and ended their life.

This gave me a rude shock. This I thought arose out of isolation which I tried to break through theatre. I also created much trouble for the authorities demanding milk and other amenities for the patients. There were old abandoned buses near the hospital, like bus route no. 3 etc, where convalescing patients used to live. The nearby locality was full of jungles. A little distance away was the graveyard and at night we patients could hear the howling of dogs and foxes, and beggars fighting over the beddings and rags of the dead patients which used to be thrown out there.

I was a thoracto-plastic patient. Eight of my ribs had been cut and my lung had collapsed. I was very popular with the patients and unpopular with the authorities. My play was called 'PWD', based on a story by Parashuram. In 1939 I wrote articles on all these as a journalist.

Then on the 3rd September came the declaration of war against Fascist Germany. Those were terrible days.

The Britishers were shooting everybody down, the entire chaotic situation augmented by the clash of Congress leaders with the British. Then there was the Great Famine when many people died. The fields were full of grain, but there was nobody to reap them. Everything converged to generate an explosive situation. People cried, smiled, went mad, not knowing what to do. One day I saw some foreign soldiers being thrown into a fire (everything was burning all around), because they were shooting us down. There were vultures flying all over the city. The only sound was the sound of military trucks roaring past one after the other.

This famine was man-made. There was struggle— 'Do or Die' movement, food was there but starvation was at large and people died en masse... It was madness. Everything was manipulated through the connivance of the Imperialists and our merchants and industrialists. It was a land of blackmarketeers. One could hear a chorus of wailing in every street, in every corner of the city— give us rice, give us bread, give us food. But there was no amelioration either from the side of the Government or from any other source.

Then there was the tidal wave. A column of water rose in Puri and swept over Midnapore. In the first few hours the sea itself went dry. The sea— it was as if it had drunk all the water it contained and then burst forth as a column of water high up in the sky. And the column moved from Puri to Midnapore where it burst forth on the land inundating thousands of acres. Thousands lost their lives and there were many disasters. All this happened after (19)40— '41 or '42.

Leftist Theatre is supposed to awaken the consciousness of the people, but most groups do drama for reasons other than this. What do you think? Also, who are the

people who must be made conscious? And finally, is drama really going to help social revolution?

That is what is to be assessed. But first of all, since I am a dramatist and run a troupe, I have my own way of looking at things and I am not going to criticize the others. If the tree is in your soil, do what suits the tree. Communism is a social philosophy born out of your own morass, your own soil and people and life and experience. So it must be given shape and colour accordingly. All for what? For the people, the sons of the soil. The philosophy must suit the people.

The message and philosophy is important, so whether it is propagated through the image of Kali itself is of no consequence. If the projection of Mao or Stalin is not effective but that of Ramakrishna is, we must use Ramakrishna. Would you agree?

No, that is opportunism. It must be scientific. You must not hoodwink the people. All these— Kali or Ramakrishna— these are temporary. You can use it for your purpose, but here also a sense of opportunism is working.

But if the people are thorough believers?

The people believe many things which they should not believe any more. You must try that.

But before that they must be indoctrinated. One cannot just go in and say, discard this, all these are trashes.

No, no, not at all. All these are inclusive of tradition and tradition is always from experience. So far as experience teaches you to carve out some slice from the heritage, do it. But in as much as it is not required, throw it out.

The message is the most important. If we, initially, use these traditions as props to explain things to the people, don't you think they will realize themselves, later on, that this is superfluous?

For that you will have to understand the problem of culture— how things should be propagated. What means make literature or a piece of art a piece of culture, how it is integrated with the total life of the people.

What were the socio-political reasons behind your joining IPTA?

The movement as a movement was primarily launched by PC Joshi, then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India— the undivided Party. He had the visualization of starting a movement like the IPTA. We in our own way started the drama movement here in Bengal. Once I was a member of the Communist Party, and since I was a culturist and an artist and a writer, it suited me most.

Did PC Joshi ask you to join the movement?

No, no, no. It was voluntary. What else could I do? I could dance, I could sing, I could act, I could react, I could love. But whom to love and what to love and how to love? That made me an artist.

Theatre has a limitation— the number of people one can show it to. As people dedicated to give an awareness, should directors not try more to train up more people in this medium...

True. Very true.

...rather than confining everything to their own particular groups?

This is not... As you see, I've been cornered. Together with the cultural movement I've been cornered. Because it doesn't suit them. I have been declared almost a dead horse. This is my position. And it suits them. Now it is for the people to salvage me. I have done something for the people, and if the people are not interested in me, I go down. I don't care. Now the fact is that much has not been done to the credit of the people so much as culture

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is concerned. I have written this much and lived this much, all that I have done for them. Yes, you have done, but not enough for the people. The people are not that much conscious and aware as to salvage you like a sheep. So that way my contribution is not proportionate to their becoming what they should be today. I just strive and strive and strive, but I will not shift my position.

Do you mean ideologically or technically?

If you shift ideologically you lose your perspective.

But there is another— the evolution of the dramatic medium.

Drama is for what?

To reach people.

But how to reach and what to reach? You cannot reach them by grappling them by the neck, but you must grapple their heart, their awareness. Grappling them by their neck and bringing them into my fold is not the criterion. The approach should be through their awareness, their conscious (intelligence).

We see today that you are producing fewer plays than what most other groups are doing. Why is that?

Because in their own way they are very strong, very prolific, very rich, very enterprising. They are enterprising— in their own way. But it doesn't suit me to be enterprising that way.

How, specifically do you mean 'that way'?

There are two ways— objectively and subjectively. You must consider one thing: all we have done here for the first 30 or 33 years, we did not (cater) to the petit bourgeoisie. The electorate that go by the name of people in our country— 'People'— they are all white collar. They are commercial people, government service holders and in mercantile firms. It doesn't cross the fringes of the urban city. It doesn't touch the peasants or workers. Who

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patronise these theatres? Workers don't patronize them. Workers don't come out in files and patronize them. Who are the patrons on whom the business rests? This is a demand and supply question. Tickets must be sold.

There are two factors here. The expense of the theatre hall is one...

Of course.

But apart from that, the success of a group is also a factor to be considered and that is based primarily on its efficiency.

But, of course.

Now, commanding the efficiency of the group becomes difficult because a person who achieves a certain standard is attracted away by more successful groups or the cinema. So if the troupe is not dedicated...

Yes, here comes the question of dedication.

For example, a pretty girl is put on stage to attract audiences...

Yes, and the girl also wants to sell herself. If you pay her Rs 100 or 200 she will even come to your house. She has no dedication. That goes for everybody, everybody.

Well, the artistes who joined the IPTA are said to have had that dedication. Then what exactly caused the break-up?

That is a foolish question. The struggle for existence tired them out. There was no real dedication. The earnestness rested with them for some time. When the situation became otherwise they just petered out, pulled out, because they were opportunists.

...Many artists also joined the IPTA movement—Nirode Majumdar and Abedin among others. Abedin sketched a crow sitting on a dustbin which spoke of the malevolence of our times. Distressed times! In all that we did we were fumbling for thoughts, in the shape of a

crow or dustbin or anything that sprouted in the mind. Every one of us. There were singers and composers, composing ballads... We had read and heard about the Cultural Revolution in China and other parallel movements and were much inspired by the writings of Lu Hsun and others.

...I believe that it is up to the writers and artists to ignite the lamp of awareness. Artists are also human beings. Awareness is not a bundle of... Awareness of life is something that is carried into their minds, to the unwilling caverns of their heart, their cells, brain cells. The thing must occur in a peculiar way. It is not a morsel of food to be taken and given.

Which is why theatre is such an important medium for this kind of thing?

Yes, it is an important medium for proper men and proper artists with an awareness to fuse it into the hearts of the people. The leaders must be aware of their existence. They must put their thoughts into proper vehicles to carry their message to the people through the medium of art forms— music, dramas, ballads, jatras. We have many such art forms.

Some serious attempts have been made to bring theatre away from the expensive proscenium tradition on to the streets to be closer to the people. We have had some street theatre etc. without any props or production expenses. Don't you think that that is an effective technique?

Yes, that could be effective but that would be all clichés. Here we do 'in-Broadway', 'Out-of-Broadway', 'Off-Broadway' theatre, and in America, in New York they hold streetcorner dramas. That is much in vogue. But in our country we needn't show it on the pavements of Calcutta. You can go out to the villages and look for yourself and there to die and starve— because people