

## Theatre Mementos: Reading Bengali Theatre Playbills from the 1940s

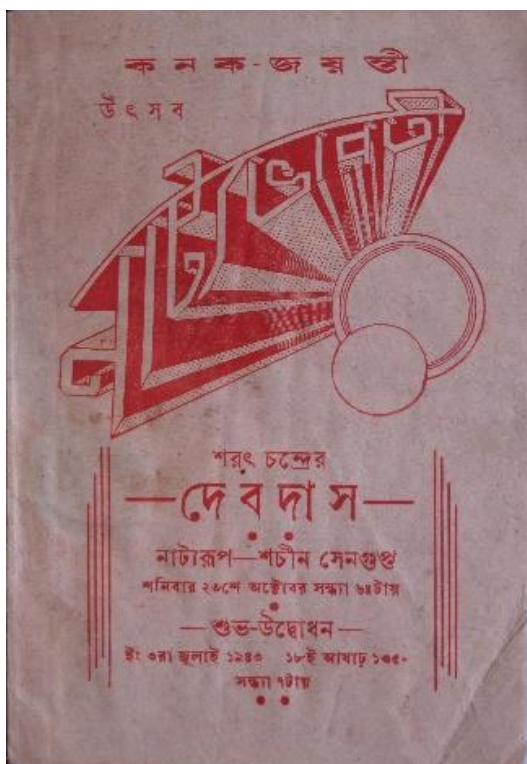
Amreeta Das

In the nascent days of American cinema, trailers were seldom faithful to the films they promoted. They had false plot developments and dialogues, extra shots, and sometimes spectacular features like crashes and explosions. This infidelity of the advertisement towards the product was also true of commercial theatre in Bengal, especially in the first half of the 20th century.

But what can the ‘trailers’ of plays be? The action that transpires on stage resists mechanical reproduction—a recording of a play is *essentially* different from the experience of a spectator. Some scholars have even argued that theatre is an ontologically ephemeral art form, and that something of its essence is lost in an attempt to preserve it. [1] Notwithstanding these theoretical limitations, old commercial theatre houses in Bengal attempted to offer their patrons ‘trailers’, that is, previews to their productions, in the form of playbills—pamphlets handed out to spectators at the halls. Like movie trailers, these playbills emphasized “the studio star machinery [...] hyperbolic titles and narrations enjoining audiences not to miss the film, visual and graphic linkages between romantic storylines and exotic settings, and identifications of cast members reminding audiences of stars.” [2]

But the more interesting resemblance between trailers and these playbills is that, like the former, the latter did not bear close fidelity to the narrative coherence of the plays represented. On the other hand, unlike trailers and other anticipatory promotional material, these pamphlets would be consulted before, during and after a play.

To demonstrate the peculiarity of such theatre ephemera in this article, I will discuss a series of playbills produced around 1940-1941 by the theatre company Natyabharati, which set up shop in the Alfred Theatre in Calcutta at the beginning of the Second World War.



Figs. 1 and 2. Playbill covers of *Devdas* (1943) and *Sangram o Shanti* (1940).

Depending on the coffers of the theatre house and the promotional ethics of the producer, playbills differed vastly in their appearance and content. For instance, the publications of the Rung-Mahal Magazine Programme of the eponymous company did not merely contain promotional material about the next play. It also welcomed articles on the theatre world at large, often featuring short humorous anecdotes about actors and spectators. Thus, their multiple uses and protean appearances across theatre houses make playbills a difficult but intriguing form to classify and decode.

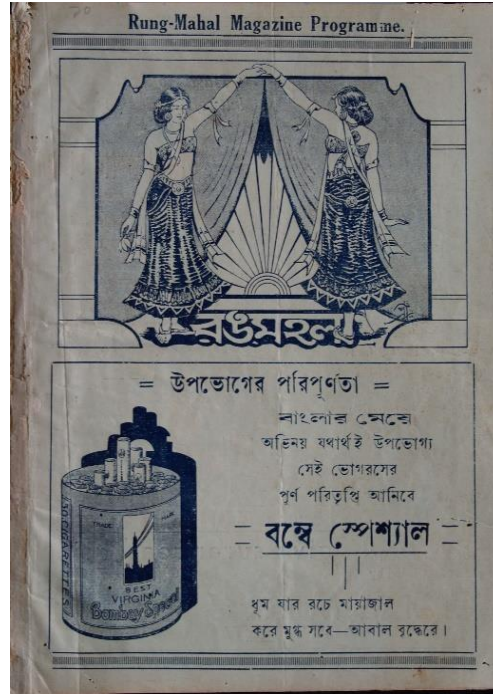


Fig. 3. Playbill cover of *Banglar Meye* (1941).



Figs. 4 and 5. From the playbill of *Bhola Master* (1942).

But what relationship did the playbill bear to the world of the play? Let us look at a particularly representative example (figure 6). The playbill in question advertises the special pujo performance of Mahendra Gupta's popular play, *Kankabatir Ghat* (Kankabati's Ghat). [3]

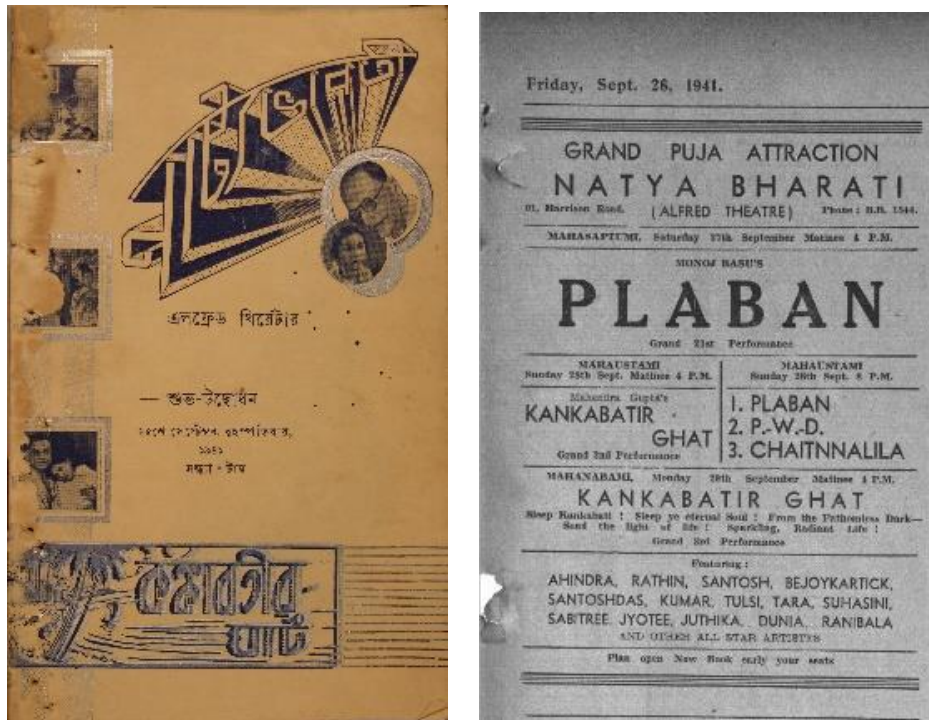


Fig. 6. Playbill cover of *Kankabatir Ghat*, performed on September 25, 1941.

Fig. 7. Advertisement for *Kankabatir Ghat* and other plays produced by Natyabharati. From *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, September 26, 1941, p. 3.

Theatre historian Dipak Chandra writes that Gupta consciously built an anti-modern image of himself through his plays, which seemed to champion an older 19th-century sexual and moral ethos. [4] But to characterize Gupta as someone who arrived belatedly in the theatre scene and lived in a world of antiquated values would be to reductively succumb to Gupta's romantic self-projection. [5] Rather, reading the play against the grain of this dominant

understanding reveals the porous membrane between the colonial metropolis and the supposedly apolitical world of Gupta's play.

In his preface to the play text of *Kankabatir Ghat*, Gupta describes the production as his first attempt at writing a "social drama". [6] The story begins with Kankabati, the virtuous wife of a degenerate artist referred to as Mr Mukherjee, who is having an affair with the 'fallen woman' Chameli. One day, as the ailing Mukherjee nearly succumbs to death, Kankabati sacrifices herself in the nearby river in an attempt to propitiate the gods and save her husband. For the rest of the play, her tale becomes a symbol of unwavering uxorial devotion and her *sindoor* (vermilion), *sankha* (shell bangles) and *pala* (sacred thread) attain the status of religious relics. After her death, Mukherjee leaves the village, entrusting his infant daughter Uma to Chameli's care. However, the next morning, Chameli claims that Uma was stolen while she was asleep and instead hands over to Mukherjee another infant, named Shila, whom she claims is their daughter out of wedlock. We later learn that this was a ruse for Chameli to hand back Uma to the undiscerning Mukherjee, with a false identity imposed on the infant. The deception is orchestrated by Chameli to *claim* Uma, to raise her like a *bhodromohila* (lady), a privilege she was denied, and ultimately to use her to ensnare a wealthy man. All of this unfolds at the expense of the real child born out of wedlock—her son Nandua—who is abandoned, since sons could not provide her with easy opportunities.

Years later, Probir, a zamindar's son, falls in love with Shila (Uma), and they sanctify their relationship with what both consider to be a marriage ritual. However, when Probir discovers Chameli's troubled past, he abandons a pregnant Shila and marries Mrinal, a chaste Kankabati-like figure. A devastated Shila separates from her mother and raises her infant son Khoka in poverty. The story continues with a series of intrigues, revelations and recognitions. Ultimately, the play concludes with Shila emulating her mother's sacrifice by drowning

herself in the same river that contains the remains of Kankabati, to save the life of her dying estranged lover, Probir.

As this synopsis indicates, characters in *Kankabatir Ghat* mirror each other across generations: Kankabati/Shila, Probiric/Khoka, Shila/Mrinal. Using a succession of photographic stills (in some cases, scenes not present in the play), the playbill emphasizes these mirrorings and at times compels us to reconsider our impressions of the characters. Rather than being mere promotional material, these ephemera come to be used as hermeneutic tools.

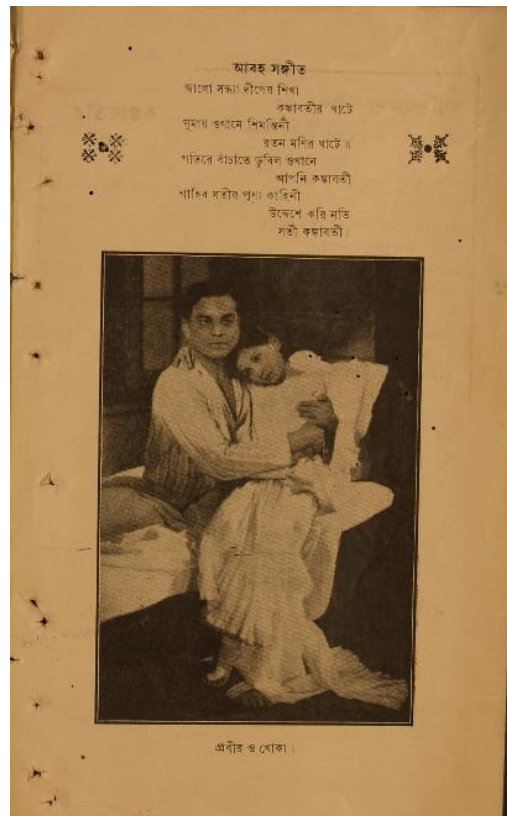


Fig 8. Probir cradling Khoka. From the playbill of *Kankabatir Ghat*.

The first photograph (figure 8) in the booklet shows Probir holding a seemingly lifeless Khoka. However, this scene never features in the play. Father and son only appear together

after Khoka narrowly escapes being hit by Probir's car. The child is then saved and cared for by Probir's wife, Mrinal. In fact, the one time Probir offers to take the child in his arms, Khoka refuses and makes evident that he is from "a poor family". [7] The impact of the photograph in the playbill is intensified by Khoka's corpse-like appearance, reminiscent of Victorian death photography. Rather than a mere still from a scene, this image is a symbol of the complex father-son relationship.

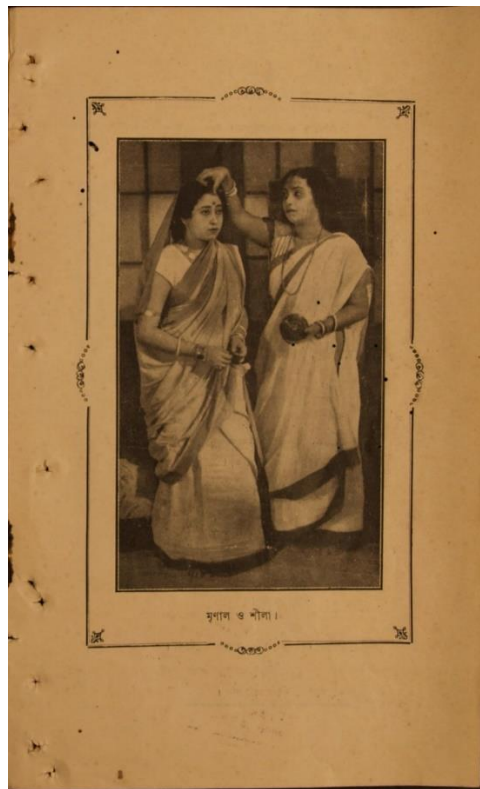


Fig. 9. Mrinal and Shila. From the playbill of *Kankabatir Ghat*.

Another photograph, depicting Shila applying *sindoor* on Mrinal's forehead (figure 9), is striking for what it consciously excludes. This poignant moment takes place towards the end of the play, where Probir's imminent demise parallels that of his father-in-law Mr Mukherjee. Shila then meets Mrinal and presents to her Kankabati's sacred *sindoor* case, with the talismanic properties of the *sindoor* promising to elevate the ordinary Mrinal to a divine

status. Here, Shila and Mrinal, who have met earlier in the play and connected through a bond of empathy, almost merge in their unwavering dedication to Probir. The photograph captures this moment of profound kinship and the intricate web of relationships that connect these women. But the playbill omits the mutuality of the gesture as staged in the play, where Mrinal also smears Shila with *sindoor*, and together they perform an impossible marriage ritual.

It is telling that feminine intimacy recurs across other Natyabharati playbills produced at this time. While male actors usually appear in action poses or as delivering a dialogue, women are framed within a range of representations—from seductive poses to gestures of filial chastity—that tap into a variety of emotions, including sexual titillation, intrigue, repulsion and moral outrage.



Fig. 10. Japanese hooch den. From the playbill of *Kankabatir Ghat*.





Fig. 11. Japanese girls. From the playbill of *Kankabatir Ghat*.

The next two photographs (figures 10 and 11) are peculiar in the peripheral, marginal subjects they emphasize. The presence of these Japanese characters refers back to the complex sexual and moral world of the play text. Figure 10 features a Japanese hooch den in the background. The scene, otherwise quite insignificant in the story, plays on contemporary exotic stereotypes and represents an iron merchant (Lalmohan Adhya) drinking in a racialized climate. This scene gathers together a number of currents of the colonial metropolis: the politically ambiguous status of the Japanese community in the city just before the Pearl Harbour attacks; the undefined location of the Japanese hooch den; and more subtly, the desperation and incompetency of the iron merchant (these businessmen were often regarded

as morally bankrupt due to their involvement in the arms trade during the war years, and were negatively stereotyped in contemporary literature).

Figure 11 is a close-up of Japanese ballet girls standing on an ornamental bridge. I use the term “ballet girls” loosely, since they are not identified as such in the playbill. But in contemporary theatre vocabulary, the term referred to female dancers who performed during the play or in entertainment interludes. Rimli Bhattacharya writes that “Most actresses debuted either as *sakhis* or ballet girls, alongside playing androgynous males in *bhakti-rasa* plays, sometimes well into their mature years.” [8] Moreover, some of them were Anglo-Indian or came from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Much of this cosmopolitan world of performance has been erased from Bengali theatre history. The stories of these women only survive in a few memoirs, authored by male actors, where they are framed between sexual fascination and disgust.

These photographs highlight other aspects of the relation of actresses to the world of theatre. Bhattacharya has highlighted how actresses playing certain roles—like Binodini Dasi’s famous enactment of Chaitanya—had complex filiations with their biography: “the criteria of impersonation, as to who may legitimately impersonate whom, continued to be an integral part of the conflict between religious ideology and social reality, particularly as it was embodied in the actress.” [9] The reception of their performances was closely linked to the way their life was presented in contemporary periodicals and magazines. Unlike male actors, their opaque origins in lowly poverty always haunted their life on stage.

The actress Ranibala, who plays the chaste Shila, was biographed using the same tropes that characterized the stories of actresses across the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a young girl, she was turned away repeatedly by directors, since she did not fit the conventional

aesthetic template. It was only when an older actress took pity on her and insisted on her being cast that she bagged her first stage appearance. [10] The patriarchal anxiety that defines a character like Shila, who protects the idea of chastity at her own life's cost, frames the 'autobiographical' writings of several actresses, where the labours of their profession both denigrated and ennobled them. Much like Shila, who stands for contradictory anxieties—sexual repulsion and pity, devotion and licentiousness—actresses' stories were caught in a double bind. The mirroring of images in the play text and playbill of *Kankabatir Ghat* thereby generates a dizzying range of associations that mediate life, literature and the material world.

One must bear in mind that the period under discussion was the worst of times. The turbulent 1930s ended with the start of the Second World War. Rural Bengal had been convulsed by a series of climate catastrophes since 1938. Political incompetence and apathy snowballed into the man-made Bengal Famine, and, by December 1942, the city was bombarded with Japanese air raids just as thousands of starving refugees arrived in search of food and shelter. During these years, as the ordinary citizen was alienated from the private world and was consumed by political developments, public theatre served an escapist function, dissolving tensions and providing distractions through pure entertainment. The stage proffered the promise of a refuge that people travelled to -- a pilgrimage. [11] However, while the contemporary world of wars and famines was excised from the theatre, it left its vestiges in the playbills, posters, placards and other paratexts produced by commercial theatre houses. These ephemera continue to serve as portals to the lesser-known contributions of numerous invisible technicians, artists and labourers of that period.

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### **Figure Acknowledgements**

All photographs in this essay, except figure 7, are of playbills from Dr Devajit Bandyopadhyay's private collection, digitized by the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, and available on the British Library's website. See "Devajit Bandyopadhyay Collection of Theatre Booklets (c. 1925–2005)," Endangered Archives Programme (<https://eap.bl.uk/collection/EAP127-3>).

### **Endnotes**

[1] Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2017 [1993]), 146-166.

[2] Lisa Kernan, "Trailers: A Cinema of Coming Attractions," in *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 26.

[3] Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres, 1753-1980* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1980), 261, <https://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.16549>.

[4] Dipak Chandra, "Mahendra Gupta," in *Bangla Nataka Adhunikata o Ganachetana (1923-1940)* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1985), 143-163.

[5] See Mahendranath Gupta, *Hey Atit Katha Kao* (Calcutta: Sri Guru Library, 1959).

[6] Mahendranath Gupta, Preface to *Kankabatir Ghat*, 3rd Edition (Calcutta: Sri Guru Library, 1945), <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.354032>. Translation is mine.

[7] Gupta, *Kankabatir Ghat*, 85. Translation is mine.

[8] Rimli Bhattacharya, Postscript to *Public Women in British India: Icons and the Urban Stage* (London: Routledge, 2018), 291-327.

[9] Bhattacharya, “Benediction in Performance: Playing the Saint and Meeting the Saint: 1880s-90s,” in *Public Women in British India*, 106.

[10] Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Baganati* (Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, 2004).

[11] From the playbill of *Bhola Master* (1942), published by Rung-Mahal, British Library, Endangered Archives Programme, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP127-3-18>.

All online links were accessed on July 10, 2023.