

GERASIM LEBEDEV
ON CONTEMPORARY BENGALI STAGE:
THE PLAY 'LEBEDEPH' BY MAMUNUR RASHID

Gerasim Lebedev, a Russian musician, travelled half the world giving successful performances and then arrived in India to spend here more than 12 years (1785–1797) exploring the country's philosophical and literary estate. In Russia he is considered to be the first Indologist for his works on Indian languages and culture, and in South Asia he is well-known as the father of Bengali stage theatre. Following the successful visits to India of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and increasing interest in the history of Indo-Russian relations, scholars began to explore Lebedev's heritage and details of his biography, while fiction writers concentrated their efforts on interpretation of his motivation and personal life. The two novels were written in Russian, "An Indian dreamer" (1956) by E.L. Steinberg and "Gerasim Lebedev" (1959) by V.A. Smirnova-Rakitina. The Bengali novel "Lebedepher Raṅgini" (Lebedev's Heroine) (1965) by P.C. Chunder was later re-written as a play "Lebedeff" and staged by Tarun Roy¹ and then translated into Hindi as "Lebedev kī nāyikā" and screened as a TV series, directed and produced by Rakesh Shrivastava. Lebedev's life story was also staged twice: first in the Moscow Young Generation Theatre ("India... my dream" by E. Radzinskiy (1958)) in Russian and then "Lebedeph" (staged 1995, published in 1997) by a Bangladeshi playwright Mamunur Rashid in Bengali.

Although all literary works rely upon a number (not so huge by then) of almost the same sources and scientific researches and are filled with deepest sympathy towards the main protagonist, his personal features, as well as his relations with Indians and the British colonial administration, considerably vary. Thus, South Asian works focus predominantly on Lebedev's relations with his Bengali companions and friends, while the novels of the Soviet time underline his supposed participation in the freedom fight of Indians. Having chosen the play by Mamunur Rashid as an example, in this paper I will attempt to demonstrate how the author's goals, his political and social views and the chosen genre predetermined the way he portrays Lebedev.

The play "Lebedeph" was written by a famous actor, director and playwright Mamunur Rashid and performed by the *Bangla theatre group* in the Russian Cultural Center of Dhaka. The premiere show ran on the 27th of November, 1995 and was occasioned with the bicentennial celebration of *Bangla nāṭak* (stage drama). Following the initiative of the *Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation*, a seminar "Re-evaluation of Lebedev's contribution to the history of Bengali stage drama" was held those days, and the play was shown at the closing session of this seminar (Group Theatre Federation). Although there seems to be no recording of the play, it was published as a book two years later.

¹ The author of the play is Dhananjay Bairagi, which is Tarun Roy's pen name.

Mamunur Rashid, who is sometimes referred to as the *Utpal Dutt* of East Bengal, was born in 1948 in Bhabandatta village, Tangail, East Pakistan. In 1963 he moved to Dhaka and began to write plays for TV on family issues. After the Liberation war of 1971, during which he worked for the Free Bengal Radio Centre in India, he returned to Bangladesh and founded the *Aranyak* theater group. In 1982 M. Rashid was granted Bangla Academy literary award (drama), and in 2012 he was given Ekushey Padak as recognition of his contribution in the field of culture. In 2019, during the eleven-day international theatre festival *Baṭṭalā Raṅgamela 2019* Mamunur Rashid received lifetime achievement award “for his immense contribution to the country’s cultural arena as a renowned theatre activist” (Mamunur Rashid receives lifetime honour).

Being a member of the *Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation*, M. Rashid strongly believes in its goals and makes every effort to bring to life its program, including, among others, the following key points:

- to develop drama;
- to mobilize public opinion against laws violating fundamental rights;
- to inform drama with social purpose;
- to publish materials related to drama (Group Theatre).

Most of his plays and directorial works focus on social issues, such as problems of tribal population (*Rarang*), status of women (*Ebong Bidyasagar*), plights of the people during the partition (*Bangabhanga*), implementation of revolutionary ideas (*Che’r cycle*) etc. Although set in the 18th century Calcutta, the play *Lebedeph* is not an exception to this rule, as it raises a number of social problems typical not only of the British India, but also of the present-day South Asia: the drawbacks of the caste system, drug addiction, ecological problems, hunger, women’s rights, religious fundamentalism etc.

The most pressing are the issues of social inequality, features of character and lifestyle preventing Bengalis from becoming a leading nation and the poor status of women. Although little is known about Lebedev’s relations with women (and probably due to this fact), speculations on the sorry lot of women inevitably penetrate into any literary interpretation of Lebedev’s biography. Thus P.C. Chunder’s story winds around the actresses Lebedev hired to participate in his play: a naïve and open-hearted relative of his teacher Golaknāth Dās, who fell victim to an evil-minded Englishman and a *tawaiif* (a prostitute), who fled from her husband’s house to avoid the ceremony of *sati* (self-burning). M. Rashid’s party of female characters includes not only actresses Tarubala and Sukhmayi, who bravely fight for their right to work, to love and be respected, but also Mrs. Kid, who is depicted as a thoughtful person of fine taste, but still helpless and bound by the severe rules of the colonial society and in this way not so different from uneducated and poor village-girls.

Using his play as an educational tool, M. Rashid introduces into it minor lectures on the history of Bengali and European drama (Raśīd 1997: 24, 27). The text of M. Rashid’s play also marks all the milestones of Lebedev’s 10-year long stay in Bengal: his arrival in Calcutta, success with the British public, lessons with Golaknāth Dās, translation of “*Vidyāsundar*” by Bharatcandra Rāy from Bengali into Russian and of “*The Disguise*” from English into Bengali, rehearsals and the first performance of the play, Joseph Battle’s betrayal, destruction of the Bengali theater, legal prosecution and final departure.

It becomes evident that the author had studied much on the topic as he mentions some niceties, such as the name of the ship Lebedev travels by, the exact address of the apartment he rents etc. and raises the controversial questions discussed in articles and monographs on Lebedev.

It may be interesting to notice that all the dramatic personae (about 30) besides Lebedev are introduced by their first names, while the main character is not only listed but also addressed by his surname spelled as "Lebedeph". It is not a mere coincidence or the result of the author's neglect of the Russian naming system; on the contrary, M. Rashid includes in his play the long-running dispute on which way of representation of Lebedev's name by means of Bengali script is the most correct (see [Māmud 1985, chapter 1]). The first dialogue between Lebedev and Kid opens with Lebedev's introducing himself:

Alexander: Who are you?

Lebedef: I am Gerasim.

Alexander: Herasim Stepanobhij Libideb?

Lebedef: No. Gerasim Stepanobhich Lebedef.

(Raśid 1997: 17).

When talking to Goluknath Das, the hero also suggests that the teacher use his surname instead of the full name — "Gerasim Stepanobhich Lebedef. You can call me just Lebedev". (Raśid 1997: 23) In order to avoid further misunderstanding, Lebedev's full name is not mentioned later.

Another crucial issue is the number of manuscripts of "*Kālpanik sañbadal*", Lebedev's translation of "The Disguise" by R.P. Jodrell. While H. Mamud discusses the difference between the so called "Moscow" and "Petersburg" versions of the play and the reasons which might have led to this difference (Māmud 1985: 219–222), M. Rashid's Lebedev also leaves a hint to this discussion, when he tells his opponents that although the second copy of the play was burned together with the theatre building, he still had the third copy of the text (J. Battle would than insist that the manuscript be handed over to him as he would like to stage the play himself) (Raśid 1997: 64).

Enough attention is paid to the seemingly strange choice of the source play to be staged (even the British characters of the play don't know the name of R.P. Jodrell or any of his writings). Lebedev discusses the difficulties of choosing a play that would be well-perceived by the Bengali audience with both his protector A. Kid (Raśid 1997: 27) and the "scene painter" J. Battle (Raśid 1997: 37). In both cases they conclude that it is impossible to stage a play by a Frenchman Moliere in a British colony and Shakespeare's plays are too difficult to translate.

Rowarth and Battle's conspiracy against Lebedev becomes one of the key points of the play. Here again some facts of Lebedev's biography come to the light, e.g. his corresponding with Russian princes. Rowarth accuses Lebedev of being a spy and even of the intention to organize his own East-Indian Company (Raśid 1997: 47–50).

However, despite the precise description of the events, M. Rashid's Lebedev does not come across to the reader as a real person, a Russian musician living in Calcutta of the late 18th century.

First, Lebedev's personality looks rather pale and unworked against the background of vivid and colorful characters of his friends and enemies. He does not have any specific feature or a character flaw: he does not drink alcohol, has no interest in either local or British women, is absolutely selfless, plain and honest. He even lacks any national features. Of course, his behavior differs much from that of other *sahibs* as he talks to Indians politely and is neither arrogant nor cruel, but he does not possess any specific "Russian" feature that would make him distinguishable from any other non-British person. Unlike the TV series hero, who speaks Indian languages with considerable accent (unfortunately, English rather than Russian) and inserts Russian words and expressions here and there, M. Rashid's Lebedev adheres to the very polite register of standard Bengali. His Russian origin is mentioned several times: in one episode a Bengali person wonders if Russia was a part of Orissa (Rašid 1997:25); then Th. Rowarth says that Slavic people are inferior to other Europeans (Rašid 1997: 49). However, Lebedev himself does not speak of his motherland much, and even makes an error of fact (untypical of M. Rashid who is otherwise very careful with details as we have seen it before): he says that there's a river named "Nebhā" (i.e. the Neva) near his native town of "Iyāraslābh" (supposedly, Yaroslavl).

Furthermore, Lebedev, who is supposed to have spent three years in Madras before shifting to Calcutta, is absolutely unaware of the peculiarities of Indian culture. On the contrary, he acts as a typical tourist arriving in the country for the first time: he leaves his precious violoncello unattended in the hotel room, has no idea of the sacred status of cows and cow-dung, does not know why Indians repeat "Rām-Rām" and who this Rām is². These scenes add a considerable comic element to the play.

Lebedev's reasoning also belongs to some other epoch as he handles such concepts as "human rights", "freedom fight" or "nature of colonialism" and discusses the outcomes of the French revolution (1789–1799) which had not finished yet by the time Lebedev left Calcutta.

Lebedev seems to have come from nowhere and leave for nowhere: in his last monologue he notices that he does not leave for his motherland, but rather leaves his motherland (Rašid 1997: 72). Like a *sannyāsin*, he is detached from the things of this world and feels contempt for the colonial or any other kind of subordination. He changes places easily and does not care much of possible consequences of his deeds. He travels in space (and time!) and even describes the shift from the concert activity to the theatrical one as a journey of some kind (Rašid 1997: 28–29). The importance of the idea of travelling in Lebedev's life is further underlined in the epilogue to the play, a poem beginning with the line "This man indeed travelled the three worlds" and containing almost all possible words with the meaning of travelling (*yātrā*, *pariyātan*, *bhraman* etc.).

The key to such interpretation of Lebedev's personality can be found in one of M. Rashid's interviews. On being asked if Bengali drama was a thousand years old or two centuries old, he pointed out the difference between *bañlā nāṭya* and *bañlā nāṭak*, i.e. the dramatic art and the drama as a fixed play. M. Rashid says that although Lebedev's staging

² M. Rashid makes the homophony of Rām and "rum" play twice: first in the beginning of the story it appears in the dialogue between the protagonists, Lebedev and Kid (17), and closer to the dramatic climax it is mirrored in the talk of the two antagonists, Battle and Rowarth (47).

of a translated play was just a small incident in the long history of Bengali dramatic art, this incident proved to be a turning point, a landmark from which the documented, well-proved history of Bengali drama began. He also appreciates Lebedev's devoted attitude towards his Bengali theatre and usage of Hindustani music in the play, his love for Bengali and Indian culture, knowledge of grammar and making of the "Indian Press" to print his works. "So, from that point of view I think the man is also an interesting character in the play", he adds (Janmadiner aḍḍāy 2000). It is evident that M. Rashid is impressed by Lebedev's extraordinary deeds and achievements, hence the desire to acquaint his audience with them. At the same time, we can see that the author perceives Lebedev first of all not as a living person, but as a guiding light, a force of some kind, which induced changes in the life journey and mindset of the Bengali people who had surrounded him, and gave impetus to the process of development of stage drama in Bengal.

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