

LEBEDEV AND HIS BENGALLY THEATRE

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Abstract

The British introduced theatres in Calcutta and needless to say, they performed in English. Lebedev, a Russian, came to Calcutta in 1787 as a musician. He mastered Bengali and Sanskrit and translated two English plays into Bengali. He established the Bengally Theatre where these plays would be staged by both male and female artistes. The theatre however managed to stage only two plays during a period of four months. The British suspected Lebedev of being a Russian spy. However they did not have any proof and so could not charge him directly. They hatched a conspiracy and so persecuted Lebedev that he left Calcutta at his own will. This article tries to throw some light on the life of Lebedev, till he left India and his opening of the Bengally Theatre. It also discusses the events leading to the closure of this theatre. It shows that the closure was not due to the jealousy of the Calcutta Theatre, but due to the British fear of having a spy in the city.

Key words: Lebedev, the Bengally Theatre, the Calcutta Theatre.

A little before 1756, the first English Theatre was opened in Calcutta. The history of the modern Bengali stage, however, begins with Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev, a Russian, who opened the Bengally Theatre in November 1795. This theatre presented only two shows in a span of four months. This paper aims at bringing out a picture of the life of Lebedev, besides discussing the reason behind his engaging himself with a foreign language. It shows how the Russian happened to be the first person to open a public theatre in Bengal, almost hundred years before the public theatre of Bengal began staging plays on a regular basis. However as already mentioned, the theatre was forced to close soon after opening. The paper also discusses the politics behind this closure.

Very little is known about the personal life of Lebedev, the main reason being lack of proper documentation. The fact that a good portion of whatever information exists is

in Russian adds to the woes of a research scholar not knowing this language. For example, just because Arun Sanyal was not familiar with Russian, he presented a wrong picture of Lebedev's life, specially his life in India (Mamood 2). Hayat Mamood, on account of his knowledge of Russian, could gather some more information, while rectifying the mistakes of the earlier scholars.

Lebedev was born in 1749¹, not in Ukraine² but in the town of Yaroslavl. It was commonly believed that he was born in a family of peasants. But Lebedev himself wrote in his only book published in Russian in 1805 that he was born in the family of a clergyman. The service record of Lebedev, after he joined Government service on his return to Russia, also mentions the same. From the scanty information that is available, Hayat Mamood draws the conclusion that his father was the clergyman in the private chapel of some rich landlord and that Count Andrei Kirillvich Razumovski might have been the first master (69). The nature of his job compelled Lebedev's father to stay away from his family and therefore his son did not receive a proper education. The latter joined his father in St. Petersburg at the age of fifteen and was trained in music. His talent in music drew the attention of Count Razumovski, who took him to Italy. The latter was himself a composer, an expert on violin and a close friend of Hayden, Mozart and Beethoven³. If such a person felt attracted towards Lebedev's talent, it really speaks to the credit of the latter. The Count meant to introduce Lebedev to the broader world of European music.

In 1777, Lebedev left Russia as a part of the envoy to Naples with Count Razumovski. However they could not reach Naples. Austria and Prussia were then engaged in a battle over Bavaria. Since Russia was diplomatically on good terms with Austria, the Count did not think it wise to cross the border during the war. Therefore Razumovski halted at Vienna, where they stayed for almost a year. During this period Lebedev learnt violoncello. He gained so much proficiency in music that he could use it to financially support himself. That was why he decided to leave that place.

After visiting London and Paris, Lebedev boarded a ship for Madras in early 1785 and landed there on July 27, 1785. He came to this city as a bandmaster and was hired by the East India Company or personally by

the Mayor of the town on a contractual basis for two years. He left the city after two years in July 1887. About his reason behind leaving Madras, Lebedev writes in *Memorandum*:

Those two years thus pleasingly employed, and most harmonically Expiring, Infatuated by the general report that Bengal was a more Diffusive Theatre for the animated action of the bolder Race of Adventures than Madras [...] and stung also by the Emulation [sic] of enlarging my Scale of Knowledge in respect to things, as well as Men - I at once Determined on visiting that Country - not without an honest view at the same time that I will confess, of improving my finances also in a Prolific / Spot where it was said that innumerable Sojourners most of all nations had rapidly acquired Competent fortune (qtd. Mamood 77-78).

Lebedev was believed to have reached Calcutta in August, 1787. But he must have arrived in the city later. In those days it took about six weeks to reach Calcutta from Madras by sea. Dennis Kincaid writes: 'Even if the voyage was only from Madras to Calcutta it was well to prepare for long sojourn on board. That journey might take six weeks [...]' (83). The *Calcutta Gazette* writes on September 13, 1787: 'We are also happy to announce the arrival of a Gentleman in the Settlement, celebrated for his musical powers, which, we are pleased to find, he means to favour the public, shortly, with a specimen of' (qtd. Mamood 79). Though the name of this 'Gentleman' is not mentioned, in all possibility, he might have been Lebedev. An advertisement given in the *Indian Gazette* on December 24, 1787 shows that Lebedev indeed used musical performances to earn his livelihood. Lebedev gave several performances and was very popular.

Lebedev wanted to learn Bengali, Hindustani and Sanskrit because without the knowledge of these languages it would be difficult for a wanderer like him to acquire accurate knowledge about the places. However finding a teacher was not easy. Mikhail Medvedev writes: 'It took many years to find an Indian who would care to decipher to a white man the letters of ancient Sanskrit - the "golden key" that unlocked the door to the priceless treasures of oriental science and knowledge' (qtd.

Sanyal 113). When he was on the verge of dropping the plan altogether, an acquaintance introduced him to Goloknath Das, who was a school teacher. It was an interesting coincidence that he was no less eager to learn music from Lebedev, than the latter was to learn the Indian languages.

Lebedev began learning the Indian languages under Goloknath Das. The former did not stop here. He wanted himself to be examined to get an idea of the depth of his newly acquired knowledge. He writes in the Preface to his *Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects*: ‘... I candidly submitted my labour to some of the distinguished Pundits [...] who to my entire satisfaction applauded my zeal in disclosing an object hitherto unknown to Europeans’ (qtd. Mamood 92). Besides composing this book, he also translated ‘[...] a short but useful dictionary, wrote several dialogues, and a part of the calendar (3 months) from which many facts are known, including the four initial processes of arithmetic. I also translated from book extracts of heroic poetry written by Bharat Chandra Ray [...]’ (qtd. Sanyal 117).

Lebedev then set about translating two English plays into Bengali. One was Jodrell’s *The Disguise* and the other was *Love is the Best Doctor*, an adaptation of Moliere’s *L’Amour Medecin*. He was clever enough to observe that ‘[...] the Indians preferred mimicry and drollery to plain grave solid sense, however purely expressed – I therefore fixed on those plays [...]’ (qtd. Das Gupta 226). Having noticed that the Bengalis loved songs, he set to music the words of the famous Bengali poet Bharatchandra Ray.

Lebedev invited several scholars to read the translations closely. After receiving their approbation, it was his linguist Goloknath Das who proposed that if Lebedev wanted public presentation of the play, he could provide him with actors of both sexes from among the Indians. The former immediately agreed and solicited the Governor General Sir John Shore for a regular license. Once it was granted, Lebedev built his own theatre at Domtollah⁴, in the house of Jagannath Gangopadhyay which he took on a rental basis. The theatre was to accommodate about three hundred people. In a letter to a clergyman, Andrei Afanasevich Simbarski, Lebedev complained that he had hard work training a group of uninterested, deceitful and uncivilized Bengalis (Mamood 107). The

performers included three women and ten men. There is nothing surprising in the presence of the female performers. The Calcutta Theatre was in full reputation with artistes of both sexes. It is but natural that Lebedev would not want to lag behind. He therefore introduced women on his stage.

While these preparations were going on, Lebedev gave out an advertisement that announced the opening of a new theatre shortly. Carey quotes it:

By permission of the Honourable Governor General, Mr. Lebedeff's New Theatre in Doomtullah, decorated in the Bengalee style, will be opened very shortly, with a play called *The Disguise*; the characters to be supported by performers of both sexes. To commence with vocal and instrumental music called *The Indian Serenade*. To those musical instruments, which are held in esteem by the Bengalees, will be added European. The words of the much admired Poet Shree Bharot Chondro Ray are set to music. Between the acts some amusing curiosities will be introduced"(134).

Lebedev gave out another advertisement in the *Calcutta Gazette* on November 26, 1795 for the first performance.

BENGALLY THEATRE

No. 25, DOOMTULLAH

MR. LEBEDEFF

Has the honour to acquaint the Ladies and Gentlemen of the
Settlement,

THAT HIS

THEATRE

WILL BE OPENED

TO-MORROW, FRIDAY, 27th Inst.

WITH A COMEDY

CALLED

THE DISGUISE

The play to commence at 8 o' Clock precisely.

Tickets to be had at his Theatre

| | | | | |
|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| Boxes and Pit | ... | ... | ... | Sa. Rs. 8 |
| Gallery | ... | ... | ... | Sa. Rs. 4 |

(qtd. Bandyopadhyay 15-16).

The Disguise was presented on November 27, but only in one act. This was so because only a few Europeans could follow Bengali and a lengthy act might be boring for them. Lebedev says that there was so much of rush that only a theatre house thrice as large as his Domtollah Theatre could accommodate all the people. The success of the first show inspired Lebedev to come up with another presentation, which was partly in original and partly in translation. Tickets were now to be had on payment of a gold *mohar*. Lebedev says that on this occasion too the house was full and thanks his audience in an advertisement in the *Calcutta Gazette* on March 24, 1796.

Subir Raychowdhury argues that the audiences consisted of the British who were not acquainted with the Bengali style and that the mention of the 'Bengalee Style' is just an advertisement stunt. He justifies his point by arguing that, firstly, the tickets were too costly for the ordinary Bengali spectators. On the first night tickets were priced at 8 sicca Rs. for the box and 4 sicca Rs. for the gallery. For the second night all tickets were uniformly priced at one gold mohur. Though such tickets were out of reach for the Bengalis, it was not so for the audiences of the British who bought tickets at 16 sicca Rs. for the box, 12 sicca Rs. for the upper box and 8 sicca Rs. for the gallery in the English theatres (7). The price thus suggests that even if Bengalis came to Lebedev's theatre, they were not responsible for the 'overflowing house'. The other reason that makes Subir Raychowdhury believe that the audiences were

mainly British is the stiff Bengali of Lebedev. The Bengali audience would not feel comfortable with such a language⁵.

Many like Hemendranath Das Gupta, Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, Sisirkumar Das and others believe that Goloknath Das, and not Lebedev, was responsible for the translation. They however do not give any evidence in support of their argument (Mamood 276-278). On the other hand, Lebedev writes in the *Memorandum* and also in his Preface to his *Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects* about having translated *The Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor*. There is no reason why we should not believe Lebedev. More so when he says that it was Goloknath Das who first suggested the idea of staging *The Disguise*. Had he been responsible for the translation, Lebedev would have surely mentioned that. Goloknath might have helped him with the meanings of difficult words and idioms and also have selected the songs that could be introduced in the play.

As the language of the Bengali version of *The Disguise* shows, the translation was indeed the work of some foreigner. Sukumar Sen says that Lebedev's knowledge of Bengali was praise-worthy only because it was possessed by a foreigner. Lebedev's Bengali was indeed stiff and incomprehensible (Mamood 279-280). Such a language and that too with numerous spelling mistakes and at places two spellings for the same word can never be the work of a Bengali, leave apart a Bengali teacher⁶. It also proves that no correction was done in Lebedev's translations. His acknowledging the scholars might be simply showing courtesy and gratitude. Indeed none but Lebedev can be responsible for the translation.

In spite of having an overflowing house, Lebedev wrote that the performances returned only half of what he had actually spent. He wanted to spend the whole of it once more in hope of making profit. He therefore sought the permission of the Governor General for giving performances in both English and Bengali and was granted. He then advertised for a show where only Indians would be allowed. Mrs. Antonova refers to an advertisement that was written but may or may not have been ultimately published where Lebedev intended 'to invite the Asiatic Inhabitants only, at and in the Vicinity of Calcutta' (qtd. Mamood

94). However Lebedev could never again stage another show. Apparently this may seem to be due to the jealousy of the Calcutta Theatre. But the latter actually did not have much to fear because both the theatres were staging plays in two different languages and more so when Lebedev managed to stage only two shows in a span of four months. The Calcutta Theatre did not have any problem when the Wheeler Theatre was founded in 1797 (Mamood 97).

Hayat Mamood says that though there is an absence of sufficient proof, it seems that the British did not trust Lebedev in the least. They feared him to be a Russian spy. They did not have any proof of espionage and therefore could not take any legal action against him. But they were desperate to get him out of Calcutta. In 1795, there were two more Russians, other than Lebedev, in Calcutta. Nothing is known about what Esaie Taron did, but John Holst who was in Calcutta for the last ten years was an 'Asst. in the Secret Deptt' (qtd. Mamood 103). This made Lebedev's case even more sensitive.

There seemed to be a cold war between England and Russia even in the eighteenth century. Peter the Great (1682 - 1725) dreamt of extending his empire to India when the English and French East India Companies were contesting for political and economic supremacy in the country. Still the Anglo-Russian relation was running smoothly. Friction came during the rule of Catherine the Great (1762 - 1796) when England felt threatened by the policy of southward expansion and feared it would disturb the balance of power that existed in Europe. When England made an unsuccessful attempt to have Russia give up the Ochakov fortress to Turkey, Russia in turn contemplated threatening the British position in India. Paul and Napoleon together planned an invasion of India which added to the 'Russophobia' of the British⁷. It is true that all the countries realized that the strongest blow could be struck at England in India. Thus the over-curiosity of the Russian embassy in London towards the Indian affairs made the British feel unsafe. The Russian embassy could get better information once Lebedev arrived in Calcutta. Again, in a letter to Simbarski, Lebedev also mentions his hope of reward from the successors of the Queen Mother Ekterina Alexievna for his mission in foreign lands under hostile conditions (Mamood 104-105). Though there is no direct evidence against Lebedev, yet the British fear towards this

Russian seems justified. At last they were compelled to hatch a conspiracy against him so that Lebedev would leave Calcutta at his own will.

Rowarth, the manager of the Calcutta Theatre was also an Assistant in the Secret Department till 1790. It cannot be said for sure whether his job at the Calcutta Theatre was to conceal his true identity. Joseph Battle was a scene-painter of the Calcutta Theatre. The conspiracy began with Battle applying to Lebedev, while pretending that ill-treatment of Rowarth compelled him to leave the Calcutta Theatre. Pitying him, the Russian employed him as a scene-painter and also made him an equal partner of the theatre. An agreement was also prepared. Battle recruited performers including two European actresses. Lebedev began paying their salaries even before they actually performed. In the name of improving the theatre house, Battle began disfiguring the theatre and spoiling the existing sceneries. He befriended those who had already betrayed Lebedev. One day, a friend of Battle left coal tar on fire within the house and it got engulfed in flames. The latter did not even feel sorry. Upon Lebedev 'remonstrating on the impropriety of his conduct and assuring him that I abruptly insisted on his performing his Contract, he absolutely departed [...] he took employment again with Thomas Rowarth [...] Still not contented, to crown all, my actresses by them were enticed away and refused to stand to their signed Contracts [...] and refused even to return' (qtd. Mamood 391) By the time the Battle-episode was over, the attorneys of the friends of Battle and others began approaching Lebedev with false claims of money. Had the aim of the conspirators laid only in destroying Lebedev's theatre, they would not have gone so far. Lebedev was so badly persecuted that he was compelled to leave Calcutta on December 3, 1797, almost a pauper.

Though Lebedev's Bengally Theatre actually staged only two plays, it was indeed a landmark in the history of Bengali public theatre. During the days of British Raj, soon after English theatres were introduced, at least a Russian could open a theatre where the local language was used. Lebedev came at a period when Bengalis had not yet developed a taste for drama. Thus there was none to carry on with performances in Bengali after Lebedev was compelled to leave India. Bengal had a long wait before its public theatre was opened. Though it cannot be said for

sure whether Lebedev was a Russian spy in Calcutta, his interest in learning Bengali, to know the land better, naturally made the British feel uncomfortable. They did not want to risk their position in India. Therefore they took all possible means of driving Lebedev out of India. It may also be noted that Lebedev did not cultivate his knowledge of Bengali after leaving India. However it cannot be denied that he did hold a special position in the history of the Bengali public theatre.

Notes

1. In his Preface to his Russian book, the title of which may be translated as 'Ways of the East Indian Brahmins: An Impartial Analysis of their Religious Practices and Established Customs', Lebedev says that he was born in 1749. This is supported by the Government records and also by Russov. But if one goes by the age mentioned on Lebedev's epitaph, he seems to have been born in 1747. Desiotovski clears this confusion by saying that it was a mistake on the part of his family.
2. Johann Christoph Adelung misguided scholars by saying that Lebedev was born in a peasant family of Ukraine. Though Lebedev never mentioned Yaroslavl as his place of birth, in a letter to Andrei Afanasevich Simbarski he mentions of his compatriot Fiodore Sovkof, native of Yaroslavl. Desiotovski is of the opinion that because Adelung was proved wrong in many places by later researches, it is wise to believe Lebedev as belonging to Yaroslavl till further evidence points to something else.
3. Beethoven had composed the Russian Melody with the help of the notations of Russian folk songs provided by Razumovski. He therefore dedicated three quartets to his Russian friend (Mamood 69-70).
4. The earlier maps of Calcutta suggest Domtollah to be a lane located between Chitpore Road and Chinabazar Lane. The identical place is located as Ezra Street in the recent maps of the city. '[...] 21 Ezra Street, or a little to the east where the Armenian Church now stands may be taken as the probable site of the Bengali [sic] Theatre. People of that locality still call that place as "Natchghar"' (Das Gupta 234).
5. See Subir Raychowdhury's *Bilati Yatra Theke Swadesi Theatre*, page 6.
6. See Hayat Mamood's *Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev*, pages 279-280 for Lebedev's Bengali.
7. For more details, see Chattar Singh Samra's *India and Anglo-Soviet Relations 1917-1947*, Vinodini Terway's *East India Company and Russia: 1800-1857* and Bernard Pares's *A History of Russia*.

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