

PEOPLE, PASSIONS

**A**cross the Subarnarekha, where the road ends and rolling fields spread out against the sky, is a sleepy Santhal village called Borotalpada. On the penultimate Saturday of this year, the remote adivasi village in West Midnapore district was buzzing with activity. For, it was the Night of Theatre.

A theatre with home-grown actors. A theatre of the soil. A contemporary theatre, directed by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, a French professor (of theatre and philosophy) who has made Kolkata his home since 2008. A theatre called Bachchader Experimentum — “a theatre experiment written and performed by eight Santhal children”.

Chevallier's is a theatre of the present, where life will be presented, not represented; theatre where life unfolds as life as we experience it. “We are doing a type of theatre that viewers in Kolkata don't see. In Bengal, theatre is still classical. It's all about storytelling. For me, theatre is about working with the mind. I want it to be a deep, inner-body experience,” says Chevallier, who is so at home with Bangla that his English is often punctuated with Bangla words.

His efforts remind one of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre, where theatre broke out of walls to reach the courtyard and stressed on direct communication with the audience.

At Borotalpada, theatre neither plays out on a stage as we know it, nor are there props. Here, theatre blends with nature. The village children are the actors. They come up with ideas, think

# Mind Theatre

*A unique experiment with drama conducted by a Frenchman with children of a remote West Midnapore village is breaking boundaries, both literally and metaphorically, reports Rakhi Chakrabarty*



of a cultural centre, with the consent of the village headmen, on a piece of land given by Motilal Hansda. “John da was building for the village. So, we joined in. We worked to build a thatched structure to house the cultural centre bit by bit,” Motilal says. Then came Cyclone Phailin in October 2013. “It blew away the centre's roof. We thought we were finished,” Chevallier says. Gradually, they started rebuilding. Now, the centre has a more stable tin roof around which the children experiment with theatre.

Experts from Latin America and Chevallier's students have come down to Borotalpada and conducted workshops. One of the first workshops was by Yazel Parra Nahmenes from Barcelona Theatre Institute, along with Chevallier and Bar. Classes were held for about 10 teenagers and youth in art analysis and cultural project planning, voice training and speech construction in front of a microphone, sensibility to sound and



Pics: Sandip Roy



**STAGE SET:** (Clockwise from top) Jean-Frédéric Chevallier matches dance steps with children of Borotalpada village; village kids climb trees as part of the experiment; moments from the performance; and children gather to watch the performance

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**JEAN-FRÉDÉRIC CHEVALLIER** | PROFESSOR, THEATRE AND PHILOSOPHY



up dialogues and handle lights and the projector. Chevallier puts it all together. He brushes up their innate talent, trains them in keeping time, synchronises their movements with music and strings their acts into sequence.

The villagers fondly call him ‘Jean (pronounced John) da’. As dusk falls, the village children, 70-year-old Basanta Soren, Chevallier and his Bengali wife Sukla Bar have climbed atop a mound. Hand in hand, they dance a Santhal dance with recorded Western music. “When the music plays, the villagers won't stay at home. They love music and dance. They are blessed with natural rhythm,” Sukla remarks.

The audience comprises villagers and a motley group of guests from Kolkata, about 240km away from Borotalpada. As it grows darker, strains of a lilting song wafts in through the clumps of trees around the mound. A skinny boy of Class IV, Dulal Hansda, emerges out of the dark with a clay lamp in hand and motions the crowd to follow him. He leads the way to a pit beyond the trees where Chintamani Hansda, a girl in her early teens wearing a yellow frock, sways to a Santhali-Bengali song.

“Chhoto nadi, chhoto machh/Boro nadi, boro machh/Subarnarekha shudhu baali/Shudhu poon-ti machh (Small river, small fish/Big river, big fish/There's only sand in the Subarnarekha/And only poon-ti fish),” she recites, the simple lines sounding dreamlike in the dying light.

The dry pit on the edge of the village has transformed into a stage by dark. Throughout the 70-minute play, the audience, led by the child actors, crosses different spaces of the village. The theatre moves through three spaces. Barring a few electric lights, the ‘stage’



is lit up by torch lights that the children shine, kerosene lamps and clay lamps lit by oil extracted from mahua.

The children dance, climb trees, relate their day's experiences in Santhali. The out-of-town audience and a French man do not understand the language, but the rhythm and movements of the actors keep their interest alive.

A sudden power cut shortens the play by about

10 minutes. But it ends on a rather surreal note in a room of the cultural centre. Dulal and Surajmani dance to recorded Western music. They plunge their palms in pots of colour and smear it all over the wall. Other children joined them. Then, one by one, they jump out of the window and melt into the darkness.

Right from the time the viewers from Kolkata land in Borotalpada, they, too, have been drawn into an experience. The afternoon is spent on a tour of the village, the fields and forests, guided by the children.

Chevallier and Sukla, a social worker, have set

up Trimukhi Platform, a not-for-profit organization. Eighteen families from Borotalpada joined them to found the platform, which aims to work for contemporary art, projection of thought and social action. “Art and thought need to be produced by all strata of society so there is not only a diversity of propositions but also relevance and accuracy,” Chevallier says. Trimukhi Platform offers such an opportunity, a space with immense possibilities of doing and inspiring to do.

The duo has been working at Borotalpada since 2008. He spends the days talking to villagers, living like they do. That spurred the setting up

music (exploration through body exercises) and the Spanish language. There are workshops on traditional Santhali dance forms and folk music.

Chevallier had tried out similar experiments with theatre in Mexico. “The performances there were by the middle class in the heart of the city.

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People from the not-affluent strata came to experience it,” he said. In Bengal, he is doing the reverse, turning the performer-audience dynamic on its head. “The final goal is the experience for the audience. We've never done anything like this before. So, we are taking a step at a time,” Chevallier says.

Bachchader Experimentum will be staged in Kolkata on January 10 and later in France.

CLUB CLASS

## Taste of forgotten memories

*Kolkata's clubs once offered a range of delectable delicacies that are now lost forever, writes Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey*

**O**nce upon a time, good times meant a warm ginger ale that you lovingly churned around your mouth before letting it wash your throat, as you waited for the Angels on Horseback to arrive. Good times were when you could ask the chef to rustle up a Gateau Africaine and munch away without thinking of the calories. Those days no one spoke of calories, those were the times when eating and drinking were an elaborate affair at the heritage clubs of the city.

Those who still have memories of those times will tell you that those good times are long gone, and so has the food.

All the heritage clubs of the city like Bengal Club, Saturday Club, Calcutta Club, Tollyguge Club, Calcutta Swimming Club and the Royal Calcutta Golf Club, started as British clubs where the sahibs trooped in every evening to shake off their colonial weariness to enter a make-believe world that reminded them of home.

The main attractions were food and drinks that were rustled up mostly by British cooks and Indian khansamas that the former trained. What was served was ‘propah’ English food, not the stuff that is passed off as ‘Continental’ nowadays.

Unfortunately, a large number of these old-time favourites have been



Some of the old club delicacies prepared by chef Shawn Kenworthy, which were once served at Kolkata's clubs — (clockwise from top) Fish Pie, Liver Pâté, Shepherd's Pie and Roast Beef

struck off the menu in most clubs, after the khansamas retired or died and did not pass on the techniques. The club

managements tell you that the demand for such food too has gone, as those were hardly of the ‘healthy’ type that most

people prefer now.

Those who have been club members for more than 40 years now shake their

heads at what today's generation is missing out on. “You have to taste a Beekti Newberg or a Chicken A La Derby, where baby chickens were stuffed whole with pilaf) to imagine the spread that we used to enjoy at Calcutta Club those days,” remembers Anita Mukherjee fondly. She and her husband Samir are old veterans of the club, who can still give an arm and a leg for the old, lost dishes. “There was an unending train of savouries and desserts those days, leave alone the main dishes. Take the Pate de Gras, where goose or chicken liver pâté was served on bread circles or the Vol-au-Vent, a fluffy patty with a hole in the heart that was filled with chicken or prawn in white sauce,” says Samir, who has been a member since 1958. “We used to wash those down with melon or grapefruit cocktails,” he adds.

Calcutta Swimming Club was a hot favourite with the sahibs for its crab rolls. No one else in the city served these, remembers former president A K Roy. It was only in the 70s that the club was opened to Indians but even then the British legacy continued there, especially in terms of food. “Our beef steaks and chicken pies were irresistible,” Roy remembers fondly. “True, some other clubs also served them those days, but each had a distinct signature and Swimming Club steaks, pies and rolls were a class apart. Unfortunately, we have discontinued them now.”

Almost every club had a bottling plant those days, and drinks like lemonade, ginger ale and ice-cream soda were prepared at the clubs. “Hard drinks time was charted out. The rest of the time one drank ale, lemonade or ice-cream soda in different flavours. We even bought bottles and took them back home. The fizzy colas had not filled the market then,” remembers heritage conservationist G M Kapur, who is a member of both Calcutta Club and Bengal Club.

Roast beef with Yorkshire pudding was something to die for at the Saturday Club, says Shyamal Mitra. “We have discontinued it as we have discontinued Shepherd's Pie. Our new cooks cannot



“Even to me, these dishes are some of the most precious of all time. They have the heritage romance that you associate Kolkata with. They are the ‘old-school’ dishes. I have to admit I do see them slowly slipping away into history”

**SHAWN KENWORTHY**

prepare them. Even if you are able to source the recipes from somewhere, they are so elaborate that the present generation will not even try them,” he rues, adding that even the bread and butter pudding or the caramel pudding that the club serves now cannot be compared with what cooks those days used to serve.

No matter how much you loathe the use of lollycushin or roux now, the veterans of Tolly Club still drool over the Brown Stew and the Irish Stew that were a must 60 years ago.

“You still hear them chat about the signature stews here and about the elaborate Jhalfarezi lunches, the steak kidney puddings and the beef or ham steak and onions that were famous here,” says Anil Mukherji, the club's CEO.