



Reading Colonial Cultural Transactions: Depiction of Nineteenth-Century European Singer-Songwriter in Plays Written in Bengali

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Abstract

Antony Firingi, a European *kabiyal* of early nineteenth-century Calcutta gained attention from the Bengali audience for his participation in a folk song popularly known as *kabigan*. Adopting Indian culture and practicing them was not something new in British India, and the theme of ‘crossing cultures’ or ‘going native’ was commonly found in the writings produced during the colonial period. However, in this paper attempt will be to work at the intersection of literature and history so as to have a broader understanding of the Bengali plays which are written on Antony Firingi by the twentieth and twenty-first century Bengali playwrights. This would help to address the reasons behind the continuous depiction of this European *kabiyal* in Bengali popular culture. Therefore, by critically analysing the plays, screenplay, newspaper reports, memoirs, and an interview conducted with one of the recent writers of the play would help to reconstruct the significance of a poet and singer-songwriter, Antony Firingi to the cultural milieu not just of his age but of following ages as well.

Keywords

Antony Firingi, polycoloniality, *pathure praman*, depiction, plays

Introduction

A European adopting Indian culture was not something new in British India, and this theme is found repetitively in the works of many writers in the colonial period. The most famous example in the English language might well be Rudyard Kipling's novel, *Kim* (1901) which is about an English boy brought up as an Indian, learns the language and the culture, and saves the country because of his status as both an insider and an outsider. The depiction of a white person becoming acculturated into Bengali culture in the colonial period was also common to Bengali novels and fictions such as Tagore's famous novel, *Gora* (1910) where the central character is a Bengali, and Indian in his life and actions but is revealed to be of Irish origin. Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's *Saptapadi* (1958) is also a story of a Bengali boy who converts to Christianity to marry a Christian girl who later comes to know about her biological mother's identity that is, Indian. Apart from Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's novel, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's short story, *Nilganjer Falman Saheb*, too, reflects the theme of identity and cultural transactions through the character of Falman Saheb. It tells the story of a *saheb* named Falman, and he too, was so influenced by Bengali culture that he changed his European attire and dialect to look and speak like a Bengali.

Historically too, if we look at the situation of nineteenth-century Bengal, we find that some Anglo-Indians and expatriates had already created a place for themselves in Indian society by adopting Eastern customs and culture. Major General Charles Hindoo Stuart (1758-1828) is one such figure who was so deeply influenced by Hindu culture that he changed his European habits and started performing Hindu rituals. He also had Indian *bibi* – the Hindi word for 'wife' – and often appointed Brahmins to perform rituals at his house as he believed their presence would purify him and his Hindu family's food (Dalrymple 36). William Dalrymple's *White Mughals* (2002) hence gives us detailed account of the Europeans such as James Achilles Kirkpatrick who worked as Ambassador at the court of Hyderabad, Sir David Ochterlony, a British officer, William Hawkins who was the first English envoy, Francis Gillanders, a British tax-collector to reflect on their personalities that had undergone changes when they visited and settled in various parts of India. Hence, India became a site for different cultural exchanges where the distinctions between the two cultures – East and West – could hardly be made.

Therefore, these cultural transactions, refashioning of identities and proliferation of cosmopolitan European figures are comprehensively studied and discussed by Saugata Bhaduri in his recently published book, *Polycoloniality* (2020) where he mentions Antony Firingi's contribution in influencing the Bengal Renaissance along with three other figures. He writes:

Hensman Anthony represents the true spirit of polycoloniality – of hybridity, of pluralism, of mutual respect, of tolerance, of syncretism – and he translated it all into the popular cultural domain of the then Bengali. (208)

The term 'polycoloniality' as stated by Saugata Bhaduri indicates the role of all the European colonial powers – not just the English – in establishing their settlements in Bengal from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The European colonial powers include the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the Danish, the Germans, the Swedish and

the Greeks whose settlements in various parts of Bengal have influenced the local culture and lifestyle. According to Saugata Bhaduri, this has paved the way for Bengal's literary modernity, and hence resulted in the emergence of Bengal Renaissance. The three figures, as mentioned by Bhaduri, are the Russian polymath Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev (1749-1817), Antony Firingi (?-1836), and Derozio (1809-1831), and according to him, they are the true examples of polycoloniality. Antony Firingi's involvement with the folk song of Bengal, *kabigan* reflects this "possibility of mutual cohabitation and tolerance between the two religions", and when that cultural involvement gets translated in his performances then it shapes his identity (Bhaduri 208).

The cosmopolitan figures of early nineteenth-century Bengal such as Antony Firingi and Derozio are also depicted in Bengali films and plays; for instance, we have a film made on Derozio named *Jhar*. This film was made in 1979 and directed by Utpal Dutt. There are also some memorable films and plays made on Antony Firingi in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We, however, have noticed that whenever the figure of Antony Firingi is discussed, the film *Antony Firingi* (1967) by Sunil Banerjee always becomes a major part of that discussion. We cannot ignore the fact that the figure of Antony Firingi has been immortalised through the acting of Uttam Kumar who played the lead role in the 1967 Bengali film but what is here more striking to note is the presence of plays such as *Firingi Kabi* (1960) by Umanath Bhattacharya, *Antony Kabiyal* (1966) by Bidhayak Bhattacharya and *Antony Soudamini* (2013) by Ujjwal Chattopadhyay – that, too, dramatized the story of Antony Firingi.

Attempt, therefore, shall be made to focus on the plays, and explore the reasons behind the making of them by looking at the background details of the productions as they are available in the form of newspaper reports and memoirs. Interview with the writer of the most recent production was also conducted to focus on the manner in which the character of Antony Firingi, along with some other characters, has been portrayed. By critically analysing the plays and screenplays which are available in textual form would help in understanding this figure who has found a place in Bengali popular culture, and how he has been able to generate such broad appeal among the Bengalis even today.

Antony Firingi in Search of history

পৃথিবী একবারই পায় তাকে / পায় নাকো আর [1]

– জীবনানন্দ দাশ (quoted in Mitra 8)

[The world receives such a one, just once / and never again[.]

– Jibanananda Das]¹

The quotation mentioned above is to be found at the start of Soumitra Mitra's edited book, *Kabi Antony Saheb* (2013). The line that serves as the epigraph of the book is borrowed from Jibanananda Das's poem, '*Shankhamala*' which talks about the beauty, sexuality, and the power of women who often become victims of different social hurdles but never bow down before them. Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) uses imagery to express his ideas in his poems, and this skill is also used in his other poems such as '*Shyamali*' and '*Suranjana*'. In '*Shankhamala*', he addresses the line mentioned above to all those women who are victims of *sati*, where the fire of *sati* not only burns them physically but all their desires and dreams, too, perish in that fire. Jibanananda Das believes that if given

a chance then these women, too, can bring change in society, and so the world must understand their importance or will lose them forever. If we relate the ending line of Jibanananda Das's poem to the story of Indian/European *kabiyal* (performing singer-songwriter) of Bengal, we see that Soumitra Mitra, the editor, seems to acknowledge the significance of the *kabiyal*'s life who overcame cultural barriers to shape the musical ambience of nineteenth-century Bengal. Such a figure, the line seems to suggest, comes only once never to reappear – hinting at the unique confluence of time and history in the cultural landscape of early colonial Bengal that produced such a remarkable phenomenon as Antony Firingi.

Antony Firingi was the name given to a *kabiyal* or singer-songwriter of Calcutta who was born in the late eighteenth century and died in 1836.² Reputedly the son of a Portuguese father, it is known that he came to the French principality of Chandannagar (also known as Farasdanga) and lived at Gaurhati or Goretty; later accounts say he lived there with a Brahmin widow. Regarding the name and existence of this Brahmin widow there are many speculations made by the scholars. Rajnarain Basu in his book, *Se Kaal Aar E Kaal* (1874) and Sibnath Sastri in his book, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj* (1909) have mentioned nothing about this Brahmin woman, whereas scholars such as Dinesh Chandra Sen in his book, *Banga Bhasa O Sahitya* (1896), Brajasundar Sanyal in his article, “Kabiwala (5)”, 1312 BE (1905 CE), and Harimohan Mukhopadhyay in his book, *Bangabhasar Lekhak* (Vol. 1, 1904) have written few lines about her.

Purnochandra De, however, is the only person to mention the name of this Brahmin woman who stayed with Antony Firingi. Purnochandra De's article, “Kabi Antony Saheb” that was edited by Soumitra Mitra and published in book form in 2013 mentions that Soudamini was the name of that woman who lived at Gaurhati with Antony Firingi. There are no archival sources or physical records of the existence of such a woman in Antony Firingi's life, as might be expected, and it seems from the secondary sources that the legend of the Brahmin widow was nothing but a later accretion. The story of Antony Firingi's relation with the Brahmin widow seems to add to the romance of the figure of Antony Firingi, and thus helps this legend to thrive and prosper in the popular imagination.

As we can see from the discussion above, while many scholars have mentioned Antony Firingi's story but there are hardly any substantive discussions made on him. Most of the historical and scholarly discussions were made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but interestingly in the mid-twentieth century a popular interest was fuelled by stage and screen adaptations. We have seen that it is through these popular depictions, and the songs attributed to him helped Antony Firingi to create a place for himself in the memory of Bengali audiences. Hence, by examining the secondary literatures that are available on Antony Firingi will help to understand how the local narratives were being repeatedly used as archival sources till the stories began to be treated as historical records, and the boundaries between the two kept on blurring, leading to the emergence of a hybrid narrative that presented Antony Firingi as a popular figure who is still fondly remembered by the Bengali audience through popular culture.

Plays Written on Antony Firingi:

- **Umanath Bhattacharya's Play: *Firingi Kabi* (1960)**

Umanath Bhattacharya is a late twentieth-century writer and an actor who played several roles in Bengali plays. In the book, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres 1753-1980*, it is mentioned that Umanath Bhattacharya received the attention of the Bengali public when he played on the role of Nandi and Jagneswar in the plays, *Chhayanat* and *Angar* respectively (332). His participation in the theatre of Calcutta in the 1960s opened new avenues for Bengali drama as it started focusing on the theme of 'low life'. He is also said to have influenced by Maxim Gorky, a Russian writer whose most famous play, *The Lower Depths* inspired Umanath Bhattacharya to stage a play in Bengali, *Neecher Mahal*. Apart from *Firingi Kabi* (1960), his other plays include *Ghurni*, *Jol* and *Sesh Sangbad*, and he is also credited for writing a novel, *Narak*.

When the play, *Firingi Kabi* was published, Umanath Bhattacharya, however, mentioned nothing about the name of the actors and theatre house where this play was staged. In the Introduction to this play, the playwright, Umanath Bhattacharya writes:

‘ফিরিঙ্গী কবি’ মৌলিক রচনা। কবিবর এন্টনী ফিরিঙ্গীর জীবনকে কেন্দ্র করে ঊনবিংশ শতকের বাঙালী সমাজের খানিকটাও যদি চিত্রিত করতে পেরে থাকি তাহলে শ্রম সার্থক জানব।

ইতিপূর্বে শ্রীমদন বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় ‘এন্টনী ফিরিঙ্গী’ (উপন্যাস) লিখেছেন। তাঁকে আমার শ্রদ্ধা জানাই। কারণ, ইতিহাস বিচারে এবং ইতিহাস নিয়ে কাহিনী রচনার দৃষ্টিভঙ্গীর পার্থক্য সত্ত্বেও, তিনি আমার পূর্বসূরী। নাটকের সর্বস্বত্ত্ব নাট্যকারের। (N.pag.)

[‘Firingi Kabi’ is an original composition. If I could create a picture of nineteenth-century Bengali society by focusing on the life of Kabibar Antony Firingi then I would believe my hard work has paid off.

Before this Shri Madan Bandyopadhyay has written ‘Antony Firingi’ (novel). I express my gratitude to him. Because, despite our differences in judging history and in our vision of how to create a story out of history, he is my predecessor. The playwright has the copyright of the play.]

When Umanath Bhattacharya says, “ ‘ফিরিঙ্গী কবি’ মৌলিক রচনা” [‘Firingi Kabi’ is an original composition] he means that the dialogues, scene settings, structure and design of the play are all written by him. He has also expressed his regards to his predecessor Madan Bandyopadhyay (1923-1964), the writer of the novel *Kabiyal Antony Firingi* (1957) before writing his play. Umanath Bhattacharya, however, has followed his own imagination and belief while recreating the story of this *firingi kabi*. It is indeed a challenging task for any writer or scholar to work on figures who hold a position that is mostly conflictual and debatable. A similar situation may be observed if we compare the figure of Antony Firingi to a martyred Turkic-Indian warrior known as Ghazi Miyan who is said to have born in 1009 in Ajmer but he still survives in folklore and books. What has intrigued the historian Shahid Amin the writer of the book, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*, is the narrative gap that exists in the story of Ghazi Miyan. On the one hand, Ghazi Miyan was famous for his military exploits and on the other hand, he is still remembered by thousands of pilgrims who visit his shrine every year. In this context, Amin writes:

All I wish to do is to create a space for encounter, clash and conquest as necessary elements of the conflictual prehistory of such cultic sites as that of Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, and Nizamuddin Auliya, medieval and modern Delhi's greatest Sufi saint. Wrathful, hypostatical, miraculous events and encounters, I am suggesting, not a simple, longstanding Indian spirit of accommodation, go into the making of India's vaunted syncretism. Or, to put it sharply: accommodation is predicated, necessarily in such stories, on a prior clash of two opposing wills. The hermetically cloistered figures of rosary-fondling Sufis [saints] and saber-rattling *ghazis* [warriors], even when yoked to the cause of good pluralistic politics, produce bad history. Not History with a capital 'H', but the representation and recollection of their exploits outside proper, verifiable, contemporary medieval archives are some of the elements of a new history that we should strive towards. (6)

Just as Shahid Amin is striving to produce a 'new history' that is mostly present outside 'proper' and 'verifiable' 'History with a capital H', in the case of Antony Firingi, too, we need to focus more on the discontinuities that exists in the narrative than try to resolve them. These discontinuities open up many new dimensions which shift our focus from 'verifiable' History to the history that remains in the domain of 'representation and recollection' that is, in the field of stories recounted about the figure rather than on scientific evidence that is considered so indispensable to history writing from the nineteenth century onward. The tension between textual evidences and local legends is a common phenomenon, and this subject is broadly discussed in the writings of the late nineteenth-century eminent scholars such as Haraprasad Sastri (1853-1931) and Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay (1885-1930). The term *pathure praman* or 'stony evidence' was first popularised by Haraprasad Sastri to focus on the nature of history writing that depended on rock inscriptions, copperplate edicts and memorial tablets to establish its authenticity. This obsession with evidentiary facts and dates seemed reliable and legitimate way of judging the historical truth of an object, monument or site. Discussing this debate Rosinka Chaudhuri, the contemporary scholar writes:

History, it seems, has to attain a degree of scientificity before it can be called history. This scientificity is resident in the truth-value of its narrative, which then distinguishes it from the purely literary or the purely political. (238)

If we follow the debate concerning history writing in late nineteenth-century Bengal, the figure of Antony Firingi would not fit into this academic discipline as most of the information about him are based on hearsay which lack 'a degree of scientificity', the phrase mentioned in the above quote and very few on textual evidences. In case of Antony Firingi the boundary between the local narratives and the archival sources keeps on blurring so instead of focusing on the scholars' identification of some historical references about Antony Firingi's existence, what is here relevant to note is his depiction in Bengali popular culture by the playwrights. When this figure enters the realm of popular culture then the question of authenticity or verifiability – the premises upon which the history of a character may be read – do not count.

The playwright, Umanath Bhattacharya, thus, in his play, *Firingi Kabi* seemed less interested in exploring the question of authenticity and more focused on pursuing his creative skill while depicting the figure of Antony Firingi. Instead of giving importance to the historical references and following his predecessor, Madan Bandyopadhyay, he chose to concentrate on the social practices such as *sati* that was prevalent during the nineteenth century in Bengal. The story is set in early nineteenth-century Bengal which also saw the emergence of eminent personalities, and Rammohan Roy was one such personality who was pleading for social justice by publishing tracts. One such tract was *Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females* that was published in 1822. In the play, *Firingi Kabi* we find Soudamini, one of the central characters, who was saved from *sati*, and the scenes concerning this social issue were, however, elaborately discussed by the playwright to highlight the seriousness of that practice. Umanath Bhattacharya instead of focusing only on the journey of Antony Firingi he seems to discuss elaborately the social agendas that dominated Bengal during nineteenth century. Hence, regarding the aims and intentions Umanath Bhattacharya has already mentioned in the Introduction to his play that he seems to highlight his creative skills in sketching the characters rather than identifying the historical inaccuracies to verify the existence and authenticity of a figure.

- **Bidhayak Bhattacharya's Play: *Antony Kabiya* (1966)**

After Umanath Bhattacharya, the playwright who dramatized the story of Antony Firingi was Bidhayak Bhattacharya. Bidhayak Bhattacharya (1907-1986) was a theatre personality whose play, *Antony Kabiya*, was first performed at Kasi Viswanath Mancha on October 26, 1966. He was introduced to Bengali theatre in the late 1930s, and his plays were appreciated by the Bengali audience not only for depicting the contemporary issues prevalent during that time but also for dramatizing the stories written by the famous Bengali writers, and one such writer was Saratchandra Chatterjee. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, in his book, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, has comprehensively discussed the theatre houses and playwrights of Calcutta, and among them he has also mentioned the contribution of Bidhayak Bhattacharya. He writes:

Devoted exclusively to the writing of social plays, Bidhayak Bhattacharyya, rightly hailed as a writer of fine dialogues, has contributed substantially to the cause of Bengali drama and theatre for three decades. His first public theatre play is *Meghmukti* (1938). He came into prominence with his next piece *Matir Ghar* (1939), played at Rungmahal. His last was *Nati Binodini* (1969), a drama on the life of the legendary actress of the Bengali theatre, played at Kasi Viswanath Mancha. Bidhayak depicts the urban middle class society of the 1930s and 1940s when quick changes were taking place in the life of the community and the individual, thanks to the spread of education and freedom among Bengali women, a change in their lifestyle, a clash between the old and the new ideas regarding marital and sex relationships, etc. – all giving rise to domestic and individual problems. (563-564)

Bidhayak Bhattacharya's plays reflect various issues of urban middle-class society such as the portrayal of husband-wife relationships as shown in the play, *Meghamukti* (1938); the story of a father and his three daughters in the play, *Matir Ghar* (1939); a father's tragic tale of his lost daughter in an unknown society as seen in the play, *Mala Roy* (1940); the portrayal of social problems such as unemployment, poverty and misery in the play, *Kshudha* (1957); and the tragic life of the celebrated artist during her initial years at the theatres that is presented in the play, *Nati Binodini* (1969). His penultimate play, written just before the last play, *Nati Binodini*, was on the journey of a European *kabiyal* of the nineteenth-century Bengal named *Antony Kabiyal* (1966).

Apart from presenting these relevant scenes Bidhayak Bhattacharya also staged plays that were humorous and satiric in nature such as *Tumi-O-Ami* (1941) and *Ataeb* (1966). He also dramatized well-known fictional stories such as *Bipradas* (1943), *Baikunther Will* (1944), *Pandit Moshai* (1951), and *Biraj Bou* (1968) all of which were dramatizations of popular works written by Saratchandra Chatterjee. Bidhayak Bhattacharya therefore remains a significant figure in the world of Bengali theatre because of his art of characterisation, and this artistic potential also gets reflected in *Antony Kabiyal*, a play based on a figure who is almost erased from history but survives in popular memory. Bidhayak Bhattacharya shares his thoughts in the Introduction to the play where he mentions that very limited information is available on Antony Firingi to us so his story basically relies on his imagination. Hence, he writes:

এন্টনী কবিয়াল অবশ্যই ইতিহাসের মানুষ। কিন্তু তাঁর সম্বন্ধে ইতিহাস বিশদ কিছু বলে না। ফলে নাটক লিখতে গিয়ে কল্পনাশ্রয়ী হতে হয়েছে। নানাজনের নানা কথা শুনি, নিজের মনের কথা শুনেছি। মন বলেছে - এখানে এমনটি হলে বেশ হয়, সেখানে তেমনটিই করেছি। (6)

[Antony Kabiyal is definitely a historical figure. But History elucidates nothing much about him. As a result, while writing the play I have to use my faculty of imagination. I did not listen to the different views of the people rather I followed my heart. When my heart said – it would better if it were a certain way, there I have followed my feelings.]

Thus, we find that the playwrights who have recreated plays on Antony Firingi have followed the popular legends, and at the same time have added episodes to suit the taste of that era. We need to understand that Antony Firingi's story is a part of fragmented narrative where there are many loose ends, and therefore in a story like this, the role of a playwright becomes significant. Through his creativity he ties up all the loose ends to form a story that reflects the culture of nineteenth-century Bengal, and have successfully created a broad appeal among the Bengalis during that time and even today. Hence, we can say that Bidhayak Bhattacharya has tried to rearrange a fragmented narrative to recreate the story of Antony Firingi along with other important characters such as Bhola Moira, a famous *kabiyal* and also one of Antony Firingi's contemporaries, and Soudamini, Antony Firingi's wife to add an element of originality and freshness to the play.

The admiration that Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play received was also because of the outstanding performances of the actors and actresses who played the lead roles. The experience of the playwright and the details related to the outcome of the staging of play

are all mentioned in the Introduction. He writes in the Introduction to his play, *Antony Kabiyaal*:

অত্যন্ত অসুস্থ অবস্থায় আট দিনে এই নাটক লিখে দিয়েছিলাম। মনে যথেষ্ট সন্দেহ ছিল যে খালধারের ওই মঞ্চতে আদৌ লোকজন আসবে কিনা! কিন্তু জগদম্বার ইচ্ছা - আমাদের হিসাব-নিকাশের পথ ধরে চলে না, এই মহাসত্য আর একবার প্রত্যক্ষ করলাম।
শ্রীমান সবিতাব্রতর 'এন্টনী কবিয়াল', শ্রীমতী কেতকীর 'সৌদামিনী' ও শ্রীযুক্ত জহর গাঙ্গুলীর 'ভোলা ময়রা' - অবিস্মরণীয় সৃষ্টি। এই তিনজনের অভিনয় এবং গান বহুকাল মনে রাখবে বাঙ্গালী দর্শক। গান গুলিতে সুরারোপ করেছেন সুরমায়াকর শ্রী অনিল বাগচী। (7)

[I was extremely ill when I wrote this play within a period of eight days. I was very doubtful whether anybody would even come to this theatre located by the pond! But it was Jagadambha's wish – which does not work according to our calculations and plans, once more I have perceived this great truth.

Sriman Sabitabrata as 'Antony Kabiyaal', Srimati Ketaki as 'Soudamini' and Srijukta Jahar Ganguly as 'Bhola Moira' – were unforgettable creations. The acting and singing of these three characters will be remembered by the Bengali audience for a long period of time. The magician of melody, Sri Anil Bagchi, has directed the music.]

We find that the play, *Antony Kabiyaal* was performed by actors and actresses who were all popular during the nineteen forties and fifties. As mentioned in the quote the role of Antony Firingi was performed by Sabitabrata Dutta (1934-1995), the role of Soudamini was played by Ketaki Dutta (1934-2003), the famous Jahar Ganguly (1904-1969) played the role of Bhola Moira, and Anil Bagchi (1908-1977), the renowned musician directed the music of the play.

Apart from giving us the details of the main performers and composer, the first two lines of the quote above draw our attention. It says, “অত্যন্ত অসুস্থ অবস্থায় আট দিনে এই নাটক লিখে দিয়েছিলাম। মনে যথেষ্ট সন্দেহ ছিল যে খালধারের ওই মঞ্চতে আদৌ লোকজন আসবে কিনা!” (7) [I was extremely ill when I wrote this play within a period of eight days. I was very doubtful whether anybody would even come to this theatre located by the pond!] The background to these details, provided by Bidhayak Bhattacharya, was further elucidated by his son, Bimochan Bhattacharya in his memoir, *Tomar Parash Ase* which was published in 2017. In the memoir Bimochan Bhattacharya mentions one of the incidents that led to the birth of the play, *Antony Kabiyaal*. Bimochan Bhattacharya mentions that the year 1966 was a tough one for his father, Bidhayak Bhattacharya, and their family as his father was asked to leave the Biswaroopa Theatre where he mostly staged his plays. According to Bimochan Bhattacharya's memoir, it was Ketaki Dutta, the actress who helped Bidhayak Bhattacharya to re-establish his career by asking him to write a play on Antony Kabiyaal. By accepting this offer a major change took place in the career of the playwright and the theatre house in which the play, *Antony Kabiyaal* was staged as the play turned out to be a great success. He writes:

একদিন হঠাৎ বাড়িতে এলেন একজন মানুষ। জহর রায়। রংমহল থিয়েটার নিয়েছেন। বাবাকে বললেন, "দাদা একটি হাসির নাটক চাই।" বাবা লিখে দিলেন "অতএব, একটি হাসির নাটক। একই সময় কিছুদিন পর এলেন কেতকী দত্ত। বাবাকে কাকা বলতেন। সেই

সূত্রে আমাদের দিদি। বললেন, 'কাশী বিশ্বনাথ' মঞ্চ নিয়েছেন। অ্যান্টনি কবিয়ালকে নিয়ে নাটক লিখতে হবে। একটি চিঠি বই দিয়ে গেলেন। সেইটে পড়ে বাবা লিখলেন 'অ্যান্টনি কবিয়াল' নাটক। সংশয় ছিল। মানিকতলার খালপাড়ের জরাজীর্ণ একটি থিয়েটার হল, সেখানে এই নাটক চলবে তো? অ্যান্টনি করবেন সবিতাব্রত দত্ত। সৌদামিনী কেতকীদি নিজেই। তথাকথিত স্টার বলতে জহর গাঙ্গুলি করবেন ভোলা ময়রা। সুরকার অনিল বাগচী আর বাবা। প্রথম বিজ্ঞাপনে এই তিনজনেরই নাম ছিল। শুধু চললই না অ্যান্টনি কবিয়াল। টানা চলল। থিয়েটারের ক্ষেত্রে এশিয়ান রেকর্ড করল। (51)

[Suddenly, one day a man came to our home. Jahar Ray. Said he had taken the Rangmahal theatre. Told my father, "Brother I want a comedy." Father wrote 'Ataeb', a comedy. At that same time, a few days later came Ketaki Dutta. [She used to] call my father uncle. In that respect she was our elder sister. She said she had rented the Kasi Viswanath Mancha. 'You have to write a play on *Antony Kabiyaal*' [she said]. [She] gave him a slim book. After reading it [my] father wrote the play 'Antony Kabiyaal'. There were doubts. This was a dilapidated theatre in Maniktala located next to a pond [khal], would the play succeed? Antony would be played by Sabitabrata Dutta. Soudamini, Ketakidi herself. The 'star' (as he was called) Jahar Ganguly would play Bhola Moira. Music directors [would be] Anil Bagchi and my father. In the first advertisement there were the names of only these three. *Antony Kabiyaal* was played for a long time. In the domain of theatre, it set a record in Asia.]

The 'slim book' mentioned in the quote seems to be Madan Bandyopadhyay's novel, *Kabiyaal Antony Firingi* (1957) as the storyline of Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play is quite similar to that of Madan Bandyopadhyay's novel. There are, no doubt, about the changes made in the name and role of some characters because in the novel characters such as Bhabataran and Natabar who play the role of Antony Firingi's friends are all missing in Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play, and the European lady who is named Josephine in the novel is present in Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play but with a different name, that is, Linda. Madan Bandyopadhyay, however, had not created any character like Mamababu which is one of the unique creations of Bidhayak Bhattacharya, and here, too, the novelist and the playwright part ways. However, the names of some characters in Madan Bandyopadhyay's novel and Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play may differ but what connects novel, *Kabiyaal Antony Firingi* and the play, *Antony Kabiyaal* is the storyline, and also the ending where we find Bhola Moira accepting Antony Firingi's invitation by attending the inauguration ceremony performed at Firingi Kali temple. Thus, we may say that the 'slim book' given by Ketaki Dutta to Bidhayak Bhattacharya to write the play, *Antony Kabiyaal* was Madan Bandyopadhyay's novel, *Kabiyaal Antony Firingi*.

An article published in *Bartaman* newspaper in 2019, however, draws our attention towards the popularity of Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play, *Antony Kabiyaal*. From the report we come to know that important personalities of that time such as the former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, the former Chief Minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, the cinema star Uttam Kumar, legendary actress Kanan Devi, and playback singer Kishore Kumar – all came to watch the play, *Antony Kabiyaal*. Dr. Shankar Ghosh in his article published in the newspaper, *Bartaman* reports:

‘অ্যান্টনী কবিয়াল’ সেই সময়ে কে না দেখেছেন। সবার আগে উল্লেখ করার মতো নাম প্রাক্তন প্রধানমন্ত্রী ইন্দিরা গান্ধী। তিনি এলেন। তাঁকে সংবর্ধিত করা হল। দেখলেন এ নাটক। তাঁর সঙ্গে ছিলেন তৎকালীন পশ্চিমবঙ্গের মুখ্যমন্ত্রী সিদ্ধার্থশঙ্কর রায়। ইন্দিরা গান্ধী এই নাটক দেখতে আসার একটা বড় বাঁধানো ছবি টিকিট কাউন্টারের বিপরীত দিকের দেওয়ালে ঝোলানো ছিল বহুদিন। শুধু ইন্দিরা গান্ধী কেন? উত্তমকুমার, কিশোরকুমার, কানন দেবী, তৎকালীন রাজ্যপাল ধরমবীর, বেলুড় মঠের অধ্যক্ষ স্বামী রঙ্গনাথানন্দজি প্রমুখ স্মরণীয় মানুষেরা এ নাটক দেখতে এসেছেন বা পুরস্কার বিতরণী অনুষ্ঠানে অংশ নিয়েছেন।

[During that time who did not watch ‘Antony Kabiyal’? At first, we need to mention the name of the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She came. She was felicitated. (She) watched this play. She was accompanied by the Chief Minister of West Bengal of that time, Siddhartha Shankar Ray. A large bound picture of Indira Gandhi watching the play was hung on the opposite wall of the ticket counter for many days. Why only Indira Gandhi? Uttam Kumar, Kishore Kumar, Kanan Devi, former Governor Dharamveer, the Head of Belur Math Swami Ranganathanandaji etc.- many memorable people came to watch this play or participated in the award ceremony.]

Thus, from the report we can understand the craze that the audience had for the play. This also focuses on Bidhayak Bhattacharya’s writing skill, and his art of presenting the figure of Antony Firingi who was later played by Uttam Kumar in Sunil Banerjee’s film, *Antony Firingi* (1967). Uttam Kumar was also one of the personalities who came to watch this play, and from here we can assume that the story must have inspired him to play the character of Antony Firingi in the film.

Dramatizing the story of a Bengali folk singer or a *kabiyal* however, was not something new in the theatres of Calcutta, especially during the twentieth century. The story of the late eighteenth-century *kabiyal*, Netai Bairagi was also staged in 1957, and the name of that play was *Kabi*. Sushil Kumar Mukherjee’s comprehensive discussion in his book on the theatres of Calcutta includes information about the play, *Kabi* where he mentions:

On 12 June 1957 Tarasankar Banerjee’s *Kabi* appeared on the Rungmahal stage and continued till 15 December of the same year, giving a total performance of 128 nights. Birendra Krishna Bhadra proved his class in the direction of this moving drama from the pen of one of the leading writers of the time and Rabin Mazumdar gave one of his best performances in the role of Netai Kabial. The veteran Anil Bagchi directed the music of *Kabi*. (310)

From this information we may assume that the plays on the *kabiyals* were frequently staged. Apart from Netai Bairagi and Antony Firingi, the next *kabiyal* whose story was dramatized was Bhola Moira. The play, *Bhola Moira* was performed at Ram Mohan Mancha in the year 1975, and it did so well at the theatre that the play was staged again in that same year at Rangmahal theatre. In this context Sushil Kumar Mukherjee writes:

Almost a parallel piece to *Antony Kabial*, played at Kasi Viswanath Mancha, *Bhola Moira* had its central character a Calcutta *Kabial*, an

impromptu composer and singer, belonging to Baghbazar. Tara Bhattacharya appeared as Bhola Moira and sang with his usual competence. This play was later brought to Rungmahal (6.12.75). (343)

The three plays, *Kabi* (1957), *Antony Kabiyal* (1966), and *Bhola Moira* (1975) deal with the story of *kabiyals* but what makes the play, *Antony Kabiyal* different from the other two plays is the involvement and the participation of a European figure in a culture that is different from his own. However, the staging of plays on the life of Antony Firingi did not end in the twentieth century but his story continued to be dramatized even in the twenty-first century, and discussion on the play is made in the succeeding paragraph.

- **Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's Play: *Antony Soudamini* (2013)**

After Bidhayak Bhattacharya's 1966 play, the play that was staged on the life of Antony Firingi quite recently was Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's *Antony Soudamini* (2013). Apart from writing plays Ujjwal Chattopadhyay (1960-) is also serving as Associate Professor of Economics at Maulana Azad College in Kolkata. He is a theatre personality who is credited for writing several plays, and one such play is *Antony Soudamini* (2013). His recently published works include such as *Tinti Ujjwal Natok* (2017), a collection of three dramas, and *Abar Sahajpath* (2017), a book of poetry that also establishes him as a poet. An article that was published on November 15, 2018 in *The Times of India* reports:

Ujjwal Chattopadhyay is an eminent Bengali playwright. By the early half of the 1990's, the professional theatre circuit of Bengal witnessed the coming of a new stream of textured playwriting with Ujjwal's 'Akarik', 'Munna', 'Antarahal', 'Asathbimbo'. He changed his style and execution of themes in plays like 'Dhritavanasi', 'Dhrobotara', and 'Shopno Ujan'. He adapted texts like Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', Chekov's 'Three Sisters', and Tagore's 'Notir Puja', 'Bidushak' among others. His directorial venture 'Arabya Rajani' is a dystopic rendition of the violence of our time. He portrayed Swami Vivekananda's life in 'Biley' and explored Girish Ghosh's mind in 'Ek Mancha Ek Jiban'. Directed by Bratya Basu, his 'Adya Sesh Rajani' sketched Asim Chakraborty's fight against cultural mediocrity. Ujjwal's plays owe their success to directors like Bratya Basu, Koushik Sen, Pankaj Mushi, Megnad Bhattacharya, Bibhash Chakraborty, Soumitra Mitra and others.

From the article it can be said that Ujjwal Chattopadhyay had also associated with the contemporary theatre directors, and this experience has further helped him to expand his knowledge on writing plays, and adapting texts written by great storytellers such as Shakespeare, Chekov, and Tagore. This draws our attention towards his interest in representing the Western stories before Bengali audiences by adding an element of the local narratives to them. His play, *Antony Soudamini* was directed and edited by Soumitra Mitra who is the director of the theatre group, *Purba Paschim*. The play, *Antony Soudamini* was first staged at Madhusudan Mancha on August 8, 2013, and an article published on August 4, 2013 in *The Telegraph* reports:

Antony Firingee, the 19th century Indo-Portuguese *kabiyal*, and his wife Soudamini will take centre stage with *Antony Soudamini* at Madhusudan

Mancha on August 8. Theatre group Purba Paschim is producing the two-hour play.

Directed by Soumitra Mitra, *Antony Soudamini* traces the journey of the talented poet-singer (made famous by Uttam Kumar in the film *Antony Firingee*) who left a mark with his evocative folk compositions in Bengali. While Anirban Bhattacharjee plays Antony, Gargi Roy Chowdhury will give him company as wife Soudamini.

Music is an important component of the production. Theatre enthusiasts can look forward to 18 songs during the “musical play”, scripted by Ujjwal Chattopadhyay.

The playwright Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, we find, has attempted to rewrite the journey of Antony Firingi by giving more importance to his performances, and this has garnered positive response from the audience but at the same time the play was criticized for not following certain dramaturgical codes. It is also important to mention the writer, Ujjwal Chattopadhyay’s humble act of sharing the screenplay with me so that my work proceeds smoothly without any difficulties.

To know the reason behind the staging of the figure of Antony Firingi in 2013 after such a long gap, and other relevant details related to the play, interviewed with Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, the playwright was conducted at Maulana Azad College, Kolkata on March 04, 2020. The conversation that took place between Ujjwal Chattopadhyay (interviewee) and me (interviewer) is mentioned below:

Interviewer: কেন আপনি ২০১৩ এন্টনী কে ফিরে আনলেন স্টেজে?

Interviewee: এটার আমি এক্সাক্ট (exact) কোন কারণ দিতে পারবনা। আমার বহু দিন ধরে মনে হত এই বাংলা কবিগান নিয়ে আমি কাজ করব। বাংলা কবিগান নিয়ে আমার কাজ করতে গেলে আমার রিপ্রেজেন্টেটিভ (representative) মানুষ দরকার। তখন আমি এমন একটা মানুষের কথা নিলাম যে মানুষের কথা লোকেরা জানে। তখন ওই সিনেমা দেখতাম আর মনে হত শেষটা আমি পাল্টে দেব। শেষটা আমি মিলনাস্তক করব। এবং আমি থিয়েটারে জার্নি অফ এন আর্টিস্ট এইটা করব। জার্নি অফ এ সিঙ্গার নয়। আমার যেটা মনে হয়েছিল আমরা বিলিতি – ওয়েস্টার্ন কনসেপ্ট অফ লাভ - তার কাহিনী আছে যেমন রোমিও জুলিয়েট -এই রকম কাহিনী অনেক আছেতো?- আমার মনে হয়েছে আমাদের বাঙালি কিছু কাহিনী থাকতে পারে এই রকম যেটা একুয়াল (equal)। সেই জায়গা থেকে আমার প্রজেক্ট শুরু হয়। তখন আমি এন্টনী সৌদামিনী লিখি। আমি একটা প্রাচ্য ভাবধারায় আধুনিক প্রেমের কাহিনী লিখব যার মানুষগুলো পুরোনো এবং যেটা মিউজিক্যাল।

[Interviewer: Why did you bring back Antony again on stage in 2013?

Interviewee: For this I won’t be able to give an exact reason. For quite a long time I wanted to work on Bengali kabigan. To work on Bengali kabigan I need a representative figure. Then I thought of a person about whom people knew. I used to watch the film, and think of changing the end. At the end I would show union. And I would show in theatre the journey of an artist. Not the journey of a singer. What I thought was, there was foreign – Western concept of love – having stories like Romeo Juliet – were there not so many stories like this? – What I thought was we, too, should have a story like this that would be equal. From that context I

started my project. Then I wrote Antony Soudamini. I wanted to write a modern love story by following oriental style whose characters would be old and that would be a musical.]

From the interview we understand that Ujjwal Chattopadhyay had in mind the story of *Romeo and Juliet* while writing his play, and if we direct our attention towards the concluding line of the interview of Ujjwal Chattopadhyay that is mentioned above, we find that he wanted to focus on the love story of Antony Firingi and Soudamini but at the same time he wanted to make it ‘musical.’ He says, “আমি একটা প্রাচ্য ভাবধারায় আধুনিক প্রেমের কাহিনী লিখব যার মানুষগুলো পুরোনো এবং যেটা মিউজিক্যাল।” [I wanted to write a modern love story by following oriental style, and whose characters would be old and the story would be musical.] It seems that the playwright wants to focus on the connection between the old and new, between modernity and tradition, and this has been aptly depicted through the figure of Antony Firingi and Soudamini in his play.

Depiction of Antony Firingi in Plays

On a broader level the story of Antony Firingi as told by the three playwrights seems to reflect the same narrative but after textually reading the plays, we find some episodes are incorporated. Hence, to do so discussions on some relevant excerpts from the plays, *Firingi Kabi*, *Antony Kabiya*, and *Antony Soudamini* have been made to map the development of the figure of Antony Firingi in the plays.

Umanath Bhattacharya’s play, *Firingi Kabi* (1960) seems to reflect upon a different issue and follow an altogether different storyline which makes his play quite refreshing. To add some social commentary on the prejudices of the orthodox Hindus, Umanath Bhattacharya makes a vital change at the ending by not allowing Antony Firingi to enter the temple. No other playwright has incorporated this episode except Umanath Bhattacharya. An excerpt, mentioned below, from the play, *Firingi Kabi* will help us to understand the scene and the reaction of Antony Firingi when he was denied entry in the temple:

এন্টনী।। নটবর, অ্যাদ্দিন যা চেয়েছিলাম, - সব গোলমাল করে দিয়ে এসেছি। জান, আমার মন্দিরে আমায় ঢুকতে দিল না যবন বলে। ওকে বলল, ওর জাত নেই, তাই সংকল্প হতে পারবে না। রায়েদের লেঠেল মন্দির ঘিরে রইল। কিন্তু ফিরে আসার সময় আমি নিজের কানে শুনে এসেছি; লোকে বলছে - ফিরিঙ্গীর কালীবাড়ি। হাঃ, এইটাই তো চেয়েছিলাম। খ্রীষ্টান ফিরিঙ্গীর নামের সঙ্গে কালী নামটা জড়িয়ে দিতে পারলে তোমার কালীও আর কালী থাকে না, যীশুর ভক্তও আর খ্রীষ্টান থাকে না... (Bhattacharya 158)

[Antony. Natabar, [I have done] all that I wanted to for so long, - I have created confusion on all sides. Do you know, they did not allow me to enter my temple because I am a non-Hindu. They told her, he has no caste, so they were determined not to allow us. The guards of the Rai family surrounded the temple. But while returning I heard people calling the temple Firingi Kalibari with my own ears. Hah, this is exactly what I wanted. If one could connect the name of a Christian Firingi with Kali then your Kali, too, no longer

remains Kali, and the devotee of Jesus, too, no longer remains Christian.]

The playwright by inserting this scene in the play directs the readers' attention to the question of caste and religion that was prevalent in Indian society. Resistance that is offered by the villagers is the result of Antony Firingi's identity and the occupation that he wished to choose. Antony Firingi expressed his interest for *kabigan* which is a part of Bengali folk culture. So, it is in the public cultural sphere of the '*kabigan*' that we need to locate the figure of Antony Firingi, and '*kabigan*' as we know was considered to be a part of the 'street' culture which was quite popular during the early nineteenth century. Hence, a European trying to be a part of it was not something that the people unexpected. Regarding this high culture and the low culture – the parlour and the street – Sumanta Banerjee in his book, *The Parlour and the Street* makes a significant discussion. He writes:

The two main trends in Bengali culture prior to the advent of the British were represented first by a host of folk songs, rituals, poetry, verse-plays which had developed through social and occupational customs of the labouring classes as well as through popular beliefs; and secondly, by lyrics and songs of a classical nature composed in Sanskrit or highly Sanskritized Bengali, patronized by the royalty. (78)

Considering the case of Antony Firingi, we, however, cannot separate the parlour from the street. This is because Antony Firingi who was a European and is said to be the son of a merchant participated in '*kabigan*' that also involved the participation of the lower caste people of Bengal. Antony Firingi was of European origin but Bengali by choice so, it is because of the presence of such figures like Antony Firingi in the new colonial urban environs of Bengal that the boundaries between the high culture and low culture become blurred and uncertain. But in the play, the playwright tries to believe that the distinction between the two cultures can hardly be erased, and people like Antony Firingi during nineteenth century would always find difficulty in entering Indian society. Therefore, the playwright tries to follow a realistic approach by inserting this scene in his play.

In Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play, *Antony Kabiya*, however, we find no such scene but what is important to note in Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play is his art of characterisation. By creating the character of Mama Babu, on whom the character of Antony Firingi is shown to rely, throws light on the playwright's artistic sense. Bidhayak Bhattacharya while mentioning the list of characters describes the character of Mama Babu as “এন্টনির প্রেরণা-দাতা” which means the person who inspires Antony Firingi. Hence, we may say that the development of the character of Antony Firingi in the play depends on the character of Mama Babu whom this playwright has introduced.

Interestingly, the role of Mama Babu was played by the writer, Bidhayak Bhattacharya himself, and indirectly the playwright's presence is felt throughout the play. To understand the art of characterisation some excerpts from the play have been discussed. In one of the conversations, we see how Mama Babu expresses his desire of establishing Antony Firingi as a *kabiya*, and envisages his future. One of the conversations that take place among the characters is as follows:

ত্রিলোচন - জান মামা, সাহেব অনেকগুলো বাংলা গান শিখে ফেলেছে।

ভজহরি - হ্যাঁ গো মামা! এমন টপ্ টপ করে শিখেছে যে রীতিমত অবাক লেগে যায়।

ভাবছি, ওকে মাঝখানে রেখে একটা দাঁড়া কবির দল খুললে কেমন হয়?

মামা - আহা-হা! সে তো অতি উত্তম কথা ভজহরি। এন্টনীকে যদি কবিয়াল করে তুলতে

পারো- তবে তো ইতিহাসে জায়গা পেলে হে! পর্তুগালের ছেলে, গরদের ধুতী চাদর

পরে, কপালে চন্দন চর্চা করে কবির আসরে দাঁড়িয়ে রাম স্বর্ণকার - ভোলা ময়রার

সঙ্গে পাল্লা দিচ্ছে, এ তো চোখে দেখাও মহাপূণ্য। হ্যাঁ গৌরবরণ! (6-7)

[Trilochan – You know, Mama, Saheb has learnt so many Bengali songs.

Bhajahari – Yes, Mama! How quickly he learns them – one feels

surprised. I was thinking, how would it be if I could arrange a

group of *danra kabi* with him at the centre?

Mama – Aha! That is a great idea Bhajahari. If we could make Antony a

kabiyal – then only he could create a place in history! This son of

Portugal, wearing a silk dhoti and chadar, with sandalwood paste

on his forehead, will stand on the stage to perform a duel against

Ram Swarnakar - Bholo Moira, it is an auspicious sight for the

eyes. Yes, white-skinned!]

Bidhayak Bhattacharya has created the characters of Trilochan and Bhajahari who are Antony Firingi's childhood friends, and these roles were played by the actors, Tarun Ghoshal and Kalipada Chakraborty respectively. In the quote mentioned above, we find Mama Babu visualizing Antony Firingi in Bengali attire facing a poetical duel with Ram Swarnakar and Bholo Moira. His encouraging words give Antony Firingi the strength to go beyond the social dictums that often create hindrances for people like him who wants to pursue goals that are meant for certain group of people. In the play, Mama Babu is shown as a father figure who always guides Antony Firingi to take decisions that shape his singing career which is, no doubt, full of challenges. These challenges, he advises, can be overcome by shedding all kinds of distractions which may come on his way in the form of hatred, shame, and fear. In one of their conversations Antony Firingi says:

এন্টনী - আমি পারবোনা মামা। আমার ভারী ভয় করছে।

মামা - আরে - দাঁড়া কবি হ'তে গেলে লজ্জা ঘৃণা ভয়, তিনটেই জন্মের মত বিসর্জন দিতে

হবে। এসো এসো। দাঁড়াও এখানে। আয় ভজহরি। কেপ্টা ওঠ্ ঢোল নিয়ে। ওঁ

সর্বমঙ্গল্যে শিবে সর্বার্থ সাধিকে, শরণ্যে ত্র্যম্বকে গৌরী নারায়ণী নমোহস্তুতে। মা -

ত্রিনয়নী - আজ যে নতুন কবির জন্ম হল - তাকে তুমি রক্ষা করো, তাকে

আর্শীবাদ করো,- তার মান রাখো মা! অয়মারম্ভঃ শুভায় ভবতু! (মালা পরিয়ে

দিলেন) ধরো বাংলাদেশের নতুন দাঁড়াকবি এন্টনী কবিয়াল! গান ধরো।

সই, কেন অঙ্গ অবশো হইল / সুধা বরষিলো শ্রবণে। (22-23)

[Antony – I won't be able to, Mama. I am feeling very afraid.

Mama – Hey - to be a *danra kabi*, shyness, hatred, fear, these three have

to be sacrificed forever. Come, come. Stand here. Come,

Bhajahari. Keshta, get up with the drum. *Om sarvamangalye shibe*

sarbartha sadhike, sarannye tryambike gauri narayani namastute.

Mother – three eyed deity – today a new poet is born – protect him,

bestow blessings on him – protect his honour, Mother!

Ayomarambho shubhai bhobutu! (Garlands him.) Start, O new *danra kabi* of Bangladesh Antony Kabiya! Start the song.

Sai [friend], why are my limbs numb / Nectar pours in what I hear.]³

Hence, Bidhayak Bhattacharya by introducing the character of Mama Babu for the first time has garnered positive responses from the audience. Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, however, in his play, *Antony Soudamini* has borrowed the character of Mama Babu from Bidhayak Bhattacharya's play but at the same time he has also tried to depict the character of Soudamini, the Brahmin woman with whom Antony Firingi stayed, in such a manner that the audience also acknowledges her contribution in shaping the musical career of Antony Firingi. About her character and the title of the play, *Antony Soudamini* Ujjwal Chattopadhyay shares his views in the interview. He mentions:

গানের লড়াই হয় এবং তখন ভোলা ময়রা এন্টনী হারিয়ে দিচ্ছিলো, সেই সময় তাকে তার স্ত্রী সৌদামিনী যাকে তার সত্যি করে দুর্গা মনে হয় – যে মানুষকে বাঁচায় – সেভিয়ার (saviour) - সেভিয়ারের কনসেপ্ট (saviour's concept) টা আসছে। এই সেভিয়ারের কনসেপ্টের জায়গা থেকে আর ট্রাজেডি (tragedy) আসতে পারেনা। আমি সৌদামিনীকে এজ (as) এন্টনীর একটা আবরণ হিসেবে তৈরী করেছি – শেল (shell) - যার মধ্যে থাকে। সিনেমায় এটা একটা লাভ রিলেশনশিপ (love relationship) যেই লাভ রিলেশনশিপের শেষে একজন পৃথিবীতে না থাকলে এম্প্যাথি (empathy) - একটা দুঃখ তৈরী হয় – সরোও (sorrow) তৈরী হয় যেই সরোও সেলেবল (saleable)। ফিল্মের একটা সেলের (sale) ব্যাপার আছে। এবার তার জন্যে ওদের সম্পর্কটা এমন ভাবে বাঁধা হয়েছে যে দুজন প্রেমিক প্রেমিকা পরস্পরের সঙ্গে মগ্ন এই প্রেমিক প্রেমিকার সম্পর্কের মধ্যে গানকে খোঁজা এবং বাংলা গানকে খোঁজা যে একটা ইস্যু (issue) সেটা ফিল্মে নেই।...সিনেমার নাম ছিল 'এন্টনী ফিরিঙ্গী' আর নাটকের নাম 'এন্টনী কবিয়াল' তাহলে 'এন্টনী ফিরিঙ্গী' কি প্রকাশ করছে? যে ও আমাদের নয় অন্য মানুষ আর 'এন্টনী কবিয়াল' হচ্ছে যে অন্য গান গায়। আর আমি সৌদামিনী নামটা ইউজ (use) করলাম মূলত ওই রোমিও জুলিয়েট, হীর রানঝা ওই ডুওটা (duo) তৈরী করার জন্য... সৌদামিনী ইস দা কোর পয়েন্ট (Soudamini is the core point) - ইস দা পিভটল পয়েন্ট হোয়াই হি ওয়েন্ট থ্রু দিস প্রসেস (-is the pivotal point why he went through this process)...

[A poetical duel was taking place, and when Bhola Moira was going to defeat Antony, at that time his wife, Soudamini whom he considered to be Durga, who saves men's lives – [is a] saviour – the concept of saviour comes here, and from this concept of saviour tragedy cannot proceed. I have created Soudamini as Antony's shield – shell – which protects him. In cinema it is [shown as] a love relationship, and at the end of this relationship if one of them does not live then an empathy – sadness is formed – sorrow is created and that sorrow is saleable. In film there is an element of sale that works. For that reason their relationship has been woven in such a way that two lovers are immersed in each other deeply but the film does not search for songs, Bengali songs, within that – it is not an issue in the film...The title of the film is 'Antony Firingi' and the title of the play is 'Antony Kabiya' then what does the title 'Antony Firingi' reveal? That he is not one of us, he is other, and 'Antony Kabiya' is about someone who sings a different song. And I used the name Soudamini to

basically create a duo like Romeo Juliet, Heer Ranjha - to create that duo effect...Soudamini is the core point – is the pivotal point why he went through this process...]

Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, hence, wants to present the character of Soudamini as a strong woman who is never afraid of raising her voice, and she is constantly supporting Antony Firingi in all his endeavours. In the play, we find that she, too, has a good understanding of the Bengali songs, and if given a chance she would have established herself as a *kabiyal* but unfortunately, her dreams are something else. At the end of Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's play we find two interesting scenes taking place – one is Soudamini's participation in '*kabigan*' to help Antony Firingi to win the poetical duel against Bhola Moira, and the other is the inauguration ceremony of the Kali temple that was supposed to be performed by a priest but was performed by Soudamini herself upon Antony Firingi's insistence. The latter scene that is inserted in the play requires discussion as this role reversal seem quite idealistic but if we consider the setting and the time frame in which the play was set, it would not have been possible for women to think of taking such steps. This kind of addition in the play, however, may seem romantic but in nineteenth-century Bengal such things hardly happened, and were next to impossible.

Conclusion

Though there is paucity of archival sources, Antony Firingi is yet discussed along with the other *kabiyals* of his time such as Bhola Moira, Ram Basu, Ram Swarnakar, and Thakur Singha by the scholars who wrote on *kabigan*. Antony Firingi's songs are contained in books along with the songs of his contemporaries and through the continuous reconstructions in plays his existence is therefore reinforced and reclaimed. So, I made an attempt to bring back to visibility all the three plays – Umanath Bhattacharya's *Firingi Kabi* (1960), Bidhayak Bhattacharya's *Antony Kabiyal* (1966) and Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's *Antony Soudamini* (2013) – to see how the narrative changes with time thereby highlighting the embellishments and additions which were added later to romanticize the tale. By referring to the plays we find the playwrights either following their predecessors or incorporating their own artistic ideas to add originality and freshness to the plays or depicting the story of Antony Firingi and Soudamini within the framework of the Western idea of love and courtship as seen in Ujjwal Chattopadhyay's play, *Antony Soudamini*. Thus, an attempt is made to analyse the plays to see how the stories overlap and where they differ so as to arrive at an understanding of what remains behind of this popular character once the shifting of the material is completed. Hence, in spite of the discontinuous historical narrative, the story of Antony Firingi has become so popular that it still survives in this twenty-first century cultural space. So, the stage and screen adaptations help us to bring back a figure who is popular among the Bengali audience but remains elusive to and ignored by history. Reasons for his popularity may lie precisely in the story of cultural differences and cultural assimilation that form the central and the most important aspects of Antony Firingi's life, and also because the story of Antony Firingi in a way is the story of Bengali modernity – that is a narrative of cultural mixing resulting in cultural productivity.

Notes

¹ My translation. All subsequent translations from the Bengali in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated. The book, *Purnochandra De Udhbhotsagar Rachita Kabi Antony Saheb*, from where I have cited the Bangla lines does not contain any punctuation mark so I have put the punctuation mark in both the Bangla citation and English translation within square brackets.

² According to the British spelling the name Anthony contains the letter 'h'. Throughout my paper, I, however, have not followed the British spelling but the spelling that scholars such as Rajnarain Basu, Brajasundar Sanyal, Sibnath Sastri, and Purnochandra De have used, that is, Antony.

³ The first Sanskrit words are *Durga mantra* which means Goddess Durga is the most auspicious one, and she bestows upon the world her blessings. She is the mother of the three worlds who protects us all, and the second Sanskrit phrase is commonly uttered to start a new work or journey so that it may proceed without any difficulty or hindrance.

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