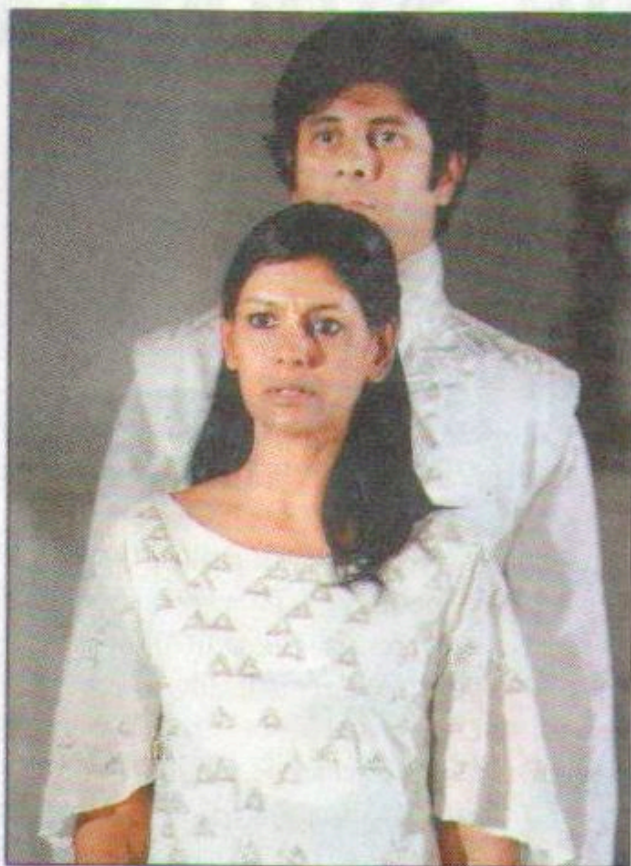


Indo-French alliance revives Duras' India



Nandita Das, Suhaas Ahuja in *Gates to India Song*

RAGINI BHUYAN

"Battambang! Battambang!"

As the word resonates within a sparsely furnished room in the French Embassy, I am struck by its musicality. Battambang is the place from where the beggar girl, a haunting presence in *India Song*, comes from and longs to go back to. Apart from a wooden desk, a chair, a green lamp and a Raza on the wall, there are no other props. This is not proscenium theatre. Instead, when the play begins, Nandita Das, Subodh Mascara, Suhaas Ahuja, Neeraj Kabi, Jim Sarbh, read out the introductions to Marguerite Duras's two works — *The Vice Consul* and *India Song*, on which the play, *Gates to India Song* is based, before inviting the audience to step indoors. Throughout, the scene of performance keeps shifting. The actors invite the audience from one room to another, providing some relief from an other-

wise abstruse, emotionally wrenching work.

Translating Duras onto stage is a tough act, and going by the unfavourable reviews the performance has received so far, I gather critics have not taken kindly to its esoteric nature. *Gates To India Song* harbours only the faintest outlines of a plot. This is the story of a depressed Vice Consul who, at a reception in the French Embassy in Calcutta, screams out his love for Anne Marie Stretter, the beautiful wife of the French Ambassador.

At the start, I found it all too self-consciously avant-garde, as the actors repeat the introductions. If the attempt is to enhance the theatricality of the play, then the act falls flat. And yet later, as John Kaced's music rises to a crescendo and falls, as Das points to the horizon describing the arduous journey undertaken by the beggar girl from Cambodia to Calcutta, I am entranced. Here, Calcutta and Lahore are metaphors that speak of what I can only describe via a clichéd phrase — the human condition. The colonial context, 1930s British India, lends the work to Conradian comparisons. There seems to be something about the subcontinent itself that brings out the worst in the characters, especially the Vice Consul.

Suhaas Ahuja, last seen on the big screen in *Talaash*, plays the mentally disturbed Vice Consul. He could have benefited from better direction, for speaking in a monotonous staccato need not be the only way to communicate dysfunctionality. Das, anchors the play effectively, sometimes playing a narrator describing the wanderings of the pregnant beggar girl, and essaying Stretter at other times.

Later, the director, Eric Vignier, explained some aspects of the performance. "In *India Song*, you really don't have much acting. Instead, it's just actors commenting on action. That's what you saw in the last scene of the play — everyone slips out of character and comments on a supine Anne," he said. Brecht would approve, I think.