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Rehearsals for a Revolution: The Political Theater of Utpal Dutt

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During the mid-1960s, when communist politics were beginning to gain significant ground in Bengal, the playwright, actor, and director Utpal Dutt উৎপল দত্ত (1924–93) experimented with theatrical forms in the hope of creating a political theater and fomenting a proletarian social revolution. This essay examines his concept of the “revolutionary theater” and its underlying elements, which include traditional forms of theater like *jatra* and both Piscatorian and Brechtian techniques.

Utpal Dutt উৎপল দত্ত (1924–93) is one of the best known and most respected figures in the history of modern Bengali theater. A committed leftist, Dutt wrote, directed, and acted in commercially successful and politically challenging plays during a career of nearly fifty years from the early 1940s until his death in 1993. During this long career, political challenges and controversies were a constant. This essay will consider some of the landmarks of Dutt’s career and evaluate his role in shaping modern Bengali theater as we know it today.

Dutt’s Early Years

Utpal Dutt was born on March 29, 1929, to a middle-class family of Hindu Kayastha caste.¹ The family lived in Barisal, in what is now Bangladesh. He was sent to missionary schools and received an English education. He began his studies at St. Edmund’s School in Barisal. In 1945, he entered St. Xavier’s Collegiate School, Calcutta (now Kolkata), a highly respected Jesuit school. Dutt went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in English Literature from St. Xavier’s College in 1949. Dutt’s foray into theater began during his schooling at St. Xavier’s in Kolkata. There he was introduced to Shakespeare and the European classics. In an interview with the eminent theater critic and scholar Samik Bandyopadhyay, Dutt acknowledged that performing Shakespeare early in school and later during his college years influenced his decision to take up theater (Dutt 1989, 9–21). Dutt joined Geoffrey Kendall’s Shakespeareana Theater Company in 1947 and toured

the Indian subcontinent performing Shakespeare in the courts of Indian princedoms. He went on tour again with the same company when it returned to the subcontinent in 1953–54. This experience taught Dutt the kind of discipline required to run a professional theater company. At the same time, the political activist in Dutt was growing impatient with this kind of theater. He realized that English theater was totally disconnected from the tremendous social changes affecting the newly formed country. He felt his theater catered to the minority still bound to the legacy of the Raj and failed to connect to the masses.

Stint with the IPTA

In 1950, Dutt joined the Bengal branch of the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA), which was the cultural front of the Communist Party of India (Bharucha 1983, 57). He was soon disillusioned with the brand of political theater that the IPTA was creating. Although the group included noted directors, musicians, and actors, Dutt felt that the IPTA was not producing what he considered revolutionary theater. He points to the bourgeois impulses that continued to pervade the IPTA's work, explaining that the proletarian hero of the IPTA's productions seemed like "a superhuman Captain Marvel without a blemish in his character, advocating war or peace according to the current party-line. . . . And one comes to the conclusion: this man is not even subject to sexual desires or a cough or cold. He does not even fart. He is, therefore, a walking tribute to the bourgeois society which has produced such perfections" (1982, 17–18). Although he realized that the IPTA had the resources to create the mass-appeal theater that he was aiming for, Dutt refused to bow to such semi-bourgeois standards. In his view, the stainless proletarian hero of the IPTA's productions implied that a successful revolution had already taken place, which was not the case. Hoping to see the workers take up arms against the oppressive forces of society, he considered it crucial to depict the ruling class as a ruthless enemy and to emphasize the urgent need for revolution. It was necessary, then, to create a flesh-and-blood hero who suffers and rises in revolt. The proletarian hero had to be aware of the failings of society, but also aware of his own human failings, such as drinking and gambling. Dutt did not believe in artistic compromise of any sort and his stint with the IPTA ended after ten months and a single production of Tagore's *Bisarjan* *বিসর্জন* (*The Sacrifice*). Although critically acclaimed, this production failed to impress the IPTA brass, who considered it reactionary (Bharucha 1983, 58). Under such circumstances, Dutt returned to his own Little Theater Group (LTG) and convinced the members to help him create his own vernacular theater.

Translating & Staging Classics

The LTG produced translations of European classics like *Macbeth* and took them on tour of rural villages. Dutt was convinced that spectacle and entertainment had to be significant features of a political theater in order to communicate with the masses and stir the spirit of revolt. The group also revived historical plays by Girish Chandra Ghosh গিরিশচন্দ্র ঘোষ (1844–1912), notably *Siraj-ud-daula* *সিরাজদৌলা*, a play named after and about a Nawab of Bengal whom the English defeated in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 (Bharucha 1983, 63). These historical plays had been disregarded by purists as melodramatic and historically inaccurate. However, as Rustom Bharucha observes, Dutt responded “to those very elements of Ghosh’s dramaturgy: the random structure of action, the accumulation of tense episodes, the series of climaxes, the vast canvas of historical figures, the treatment of heroes and villains as archetypes, the patriotic sentiments, the unabashed emotionalism” (1983, 63). Dutt had already realized that the political theater in India could not blindly follow its Western counterpart. This early work demonstrates his keen understanding of his audience, an understanding that would prove helpful when he later developed his idea of the revolutionary theater. Dutt writes, “The Siraj-ud-daula myth fired the imagination of the revolutionary youth. What the historians could never do, the playwright [Ghosh] did almost overnight: he created a focal point for the revolutionary patriotic fervor of the Bengali masses” (1982, 140). This success reinforced Dutt’s fundamental belief that political theater must provide entertainment, which Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) once described as that “business which gives [theater] its particular dignity” (Brecht 1964, 180).

Western Influences for an Indian Context

Dutt was a careful student of political theater movements in the West. He borrowed extensively from the conventions of both Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) and Brecht, but at the same time he was careful to contextualize their influence for the Indian audience. His theater echoed some of Piscator’s basic ideas on political theater. Like his German predecessor, Dutt wanted to reach a mass audience, believed in stage spectacle, and favored extended runs (Piscator 1971). The motive was to gauge public response, turn public opinion, and ultimately incite revolution against the bourgeois ruling class. Like Brecht, Dutt wanted his audience to think about what they were seeing and reflect on their own social situations. Dutt realized, however, that he would have to adapt Brechtian techniques in order to sway local audiences. Dutt writes,

The Brechtian style interferes with our people's responses because they are used to another kind of theater, and all forms must come from the people's understanding. . . . As I understand it, epic structure advances the action to a certain point and then halts, cuts it entirely and proceeds with another episode, or with the same episode in a different light. This directly contradicts our people's expectations. They're accustomed to the dramatic atmosphere getting thicker and thicker, until it becomes almost unbearable. (1971, 236)

His plays, notably *Ajeya Vietnam* অজেয় ভিয়েতনাম (*Unconquered Vietnam*), *Angar অঙ্গার* (*Coal*), *Ferari Fauj ফেরারী ফৌজ* (*The Runaway Soldier*), and *Kallol কল্লোল* (*Waves*) are all intensely dramatic and entertaining. Critics have often called the climactic scenes melodramatic and over-emotional, though admitting in the same breath that it is precisely these qualities that make Dutt's plays resonate with his audience. Packaged in this way, the political assault on the bourgeois government in New Delhi and West Bengal becomes unmistakable, and the audience realizes that the oppression depicted on stage is a feature of their own lives even to this day. The rulers have changed but their tactics have not. By emphasizing the need for a popular communist uprising, Dutt demonstrates the possibility of escaping this oppressive regime. Like his heroes, who are ordinary human beings with extraordinary zeal, the common man must become angry enough to force a change in circumstances. Bharucha writes, "Dutt's theater is most true to its revolutionary principles when it is also blatantly theatrical" (1983, 121). Dutt's plays often refer to historical and political events that were still relatively fresh in people's memories. Reacting to the more immediate oppression of the Congress governments of West Bengal, for example, he cloaked his critique in depictions of the Naval Mutiny of 1946 (*Kallol*) and the Scottsboro trials of 1931 (*Manusher Adhikarey* মানুষের অধিকারে, or *The Rights of Man*). Audiences obviously caught the message, as did the authorities. Critic Sumanta Banerjee comments that the reaction of the ruling Congress Party was a form of tribute to Dutt's heroic attempts to create a popular revolutionary theatre (1993, 1848). *Kallol* was extremely critical of the Congress government of 1965 and Dutt was immediately arrested and imprisoned in the Presidency Jail without trial. Disruptive elements were planted in the Minerva Theatre on several occasions and goons of the Congress Party threatened performers with dire consequences if they did not withdraw from the productions. Dutt was also arrested and imprisoned for six months in 1966 under the Defence of India Rules.² In 1971, Dutt's production *Tiner Talowar* টিনের তলোয়ার (*The Tin Sword*) paid fitting tribute to Girish Chandra Ghosh and his theatre. This production was a runaway commercial hit and is considered by many his *tour de force*. Even while tipping the hat to an erstwhile great of the Bengali stage, Dutt did not lose his political focus. *Tiner Talowar* is still remembered for its

hair-raising final speech in which the hero Kapten Babu কাপ্তেন বাবু (Mr. Captain) lifts the tin sword of the play's title to announce a war against the British colonial forces. Dutt's criticism was of course directed against the oppressive Congress governments, but he cleverly used the historical context to mask his political intent. In 1975, Dutt responded to the internal emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi's Congress central government, producing three powerful plays, *Barricade*, *Duswapner Nagari* দুঃস্বপ্নের নগরী (*City of Nightmares*), and *Ebar Rajar Pala* এবার রাজার পালা (*Enter the King*), that criticized the government for restricting civil liberties and trying to restrict free speech. The Congress-led state government officially banned the plays, but they continued to draw large crowds.

The Search for Other Forms & Audiences

While he was making waves with his political theater in urban Kolkata, Dutt increasingly felt that he needed to reach an even bigger audience and began to consider other forms of theater. Disgruntled with what he called his "private revolutionary theater" and alienated from India's other leftist political groups because of his initial support for the Naxal movement,³ which he had hoped would generate a mass audience for his political theater, Dutt turned to the traditional performance form of *jatra* যাত্রা for new structural devices and modes of communication. *Jatra* is a traditional form of Bengali theater. It is very popular with rural audiences, who flock to performances by the thousands (Ghose 2004, 171–73). "Jatra" means "traveling," an allusion to the itinerant performers who traditionally traveled through the countryside performing as many as three shows per day. The political possibilities of *jatra* had already been explored by Mukunda Das মুকুন্দ দাস (1878–1934). Das was the first playwright from Bengal to adopt *jatra* as a modern theatrical form, realizing that dramatic narratives did not have to borrow from the epics or the *puranas* পুরাণ (Bharucha 1983, 90–91). Attempting to preach nationalism to villagers, Das heavily relied on the structure of the *jatra*—its operatic conventions, melodramatic gestures, and hypnotic songs, "all of which unfailingly captivated a rural audience" (Bharucha 1983, 90). Das perceived that the structure of the *jatra* was flexible enough to incorporate modern subject matter and a contemporary idiom. Bharucha observes:

Topical political figures and situations gradually crept into the mythological framework of the *jatra*. The gods and goddesses became freedom fighters and patriots. The devils and villains were transformed into members of the ruling class. The chorus continued to sing devotional songs but for different reasons. Theirs was a political litany rather than a meditation on the cosmos. (1983, 91)

Jatra continues to thrive in rural areas even six decades after Indian independence, and villagers are now quite accustomed to seeing political figures appear in the exalted roles of the heroes.

Politicizing *Jatra*

Dutt played a pioneering role in the politicization of *jatra*. He intimately understood the mechanics of the art form. They appealed to his fascination with the conventions of the Elizabethan stage, which was devoid of unnecessary props and technical devices, and invited the actor-performer to display his art in its essence. At the same time, Dutt did away with some of the more traditional *jatra* conventions like the use of female impersonators instead of female actresses.

Jatra performances were traditionally overnight events encompassing as many as twenty-five songs. Since most of his audience were workers who had to report for morning shifts in factories, Dutt was forced to shorten the performances from their customary length of twelve hours. This reduced the prominence of the *vivek* বিবেক, a moralizing character who functions as the conscience of the play, reflecting on the action and raising appropriate questions. Dutt nonetheless attached great importance to the *vivek* as well as to the *juri* জুড়ি, a chorus that sits beside the stage and bursts into song following certain cues. The songs comment on the action and pronounce the fate of the characters. For example, the *juri* might sing a song that warns the villain of inevitable punishment for the injustices he has perpetrated against the hero. The *vivek* and *juri* function as primitive Brechtian alienation devices, but they had been deemphasized in the modern *jatra* because they impede the flow of the narrative. By reviving these roles, albeit in a limited manner, Dutt tried to reinforce the mock-trial aspect of *jatra*, with the *vivek* and *juri* acting as judges and the audience functioning as jury.

It is impossible to remain an isolated individual at a *jatra* performance. The atmosphere is rife with excitement as events unfold on stage and twenty-thousand people react in unison. It helps that the form is so deeply rooted in traditional folklore and speaks to the people in such a familiar voice. Dutt marveled at the way *jatra* reflected the political impulses of the present while evoking the historical resonances of the past. This, Dutt believed, made *jatra* the true people's theater. His production of *Sanyasir Tarabari* সন্ন্যাসীর তরবারী (*The Crusade of the Monk*), for example, dramatizes the anti-British Sanyasi Rebellion of the eighteenth century. He was amazed how easily the audience grasped the contemporary political implications of the work while reacting to the misrule of the Warren Hastings administration.⁴ The crushing of the Sanyasi rebellion and the Naxalite movement in Bengal were not historically remote events for his

audience; they understood the parallel being drawn and reacted accordingly. Dutt believed that this play would not have had the same effect if it had been staged in a proscenium setting; it was the timeless, mythical quality of the *jatra* that gave the performance its particular immediacy.

Toward a Revolutionary Theater

In all his activities, Dutt was stubbornly independent. This led to several controversies during his lifetime. He was spurned by contemporary leftist political groups, which rejected his brand of Trotskyism. He refused to follow the official Communist Party line, feeling that the party was not doing enough to foment popular rebellion. At the same time, he took an active part in creating and staging propaganda plays during elections, which had a significant impact on the ballot box, especially on the 1967 and 1971 general and state elections.⁵ Critics like Bharucha and Banerjee, while praising Dutt's work, have criticized his seemingly simplistic approach to revolutionary politics on the grounds that an actual popular rebellion or revolution against the class enemy is far from easy to achieve (Bharucha 1983, 122; Banerjee 1993, 1848). Dutt's initial support and subsequent participation in the Naxal movement further substantiates this claim. Speaking to theatre scholar A.J. Gunawardana in 1970, Dutt said:

In 1967, the peasants of Naxalbari in northern Bengal suddenly burst into armed revolt and guerrilla warfare of the most advanced kind, panicking the ruling classes. Plays and songs came forth almost spontaneously. *Rakter Rang রক্তের রং* [*The Color of Blood*] by Anal Gupta and my play *Teer তীর* [*Arrow*] tried to recount the daring and heroism of the peasant-guerrilla and expose the brutalities of the soldiers and policemen sent in droves to the area. But there was a hue and cry among "Marxists" and "Communists" that the leaders of the Naxalbari uprising were adventurists and therefore all references to it were taboo. We disagreed. We held that the heroism of armed peasants was important material for revolutionary theatre. (Dutt 1971, 226)

But he revised his position later. Reflecting on his involvement with the Naxal movement, Dutt wrote in 1982, "blind arrogance drove me further and further into petty-bourgeois adventurism, without my listening to advice and caution from my closest comrades" (87). This demonstrates that although he had idealist tendencies he was familiar with the realities of his time. It would seem that his idealism stemmed from his strong confidence in his own art and the revolutionary potential of his audience. Such a conviction was no doubt subjective and to an extent romantic. However, the popular appeal and political ramifications of his work suggest the possibilities of revolutionary theater. At the very least, his theater made the Congress-led governments at both the federal and the state levels sit up and take notice as it garnered popular support for leftist politics in West Bengal.

Dutt was the last great political theater activist who was also commercially successful. In spite of his commercial success, Dutt was always steadfast in his theory of the revolutionary theater. Even if he was not able to incite an actual social revolution, he did create a politically subversive theater of a kind that was previously unseen and unheard in Bengal.

Notes

¹Kayastha कायस्थ is both a caste and community of Hindus originating in India. The word comes from the Sanskrit word for scribe, which is the traditional role of the members of the community. Highly educated, they are placed second in the caste hierarchy after the Brahmins. In modern times members of the community have attained success in politics and other professional fields.

²The Defence of India Rules, adopted in 1962, was a legislative measure adopted by the Government of India to protect the country from aggressive elements that threatened internal security. The rules were often improperly invoked by the Congress administration against dissident voices from within the country.

³The Naxalbari Movement was a 1967 peasant uprising. It was centered in Naxalbari, a village in North Bengal, and involved an armed guerrilla struggle launched by the proletariat against the land-owning class. The movement captured the imagination of the students in various colleges across Bengal and several of them took to arms. Members of the movement were trying to overturn the state machinery, not just resist it. The Congress government launched a repressive campaign and several students were jailed or shot. The movement started fragmenting after Charu Majumdar's চরু মজুমদার (1918–72) arrest and death in Alipore Jail in 1972.

⁴Warren Hastings (1732–1818) was the first British East India Company governor-general of Bengal, from 1773 to 1784. He is credited with having extended and regularized the nascent British Raj. Hastings also launched a brutal repressive campaign against both Hindu and Muslim ascetics who were considered bandits and rogues by the Raj since they collected taxes from landowners en route to pilgrimage sites. The ascetics revolted and clashed with the company's forces on multiple occasions during the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The company was not always victorious in these campaigns. The Sanyasi rebellion is the subject of novels and patriotic songs, and it had a significant effect on the anti-British campaign during the twentieth century.

⁵Both general and state elections for the state of West Bengal were held in 1967 and 1971. The Communist Party of India, which had been a banned organization a decade earlier, with all its major leaders behind bars, emerged as a major party in the state of West Bengal and did relatively well in the seats that it contested for the Indian Parliament.

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